

*Put a finger down if you've ever been
personally victimized by social media algorithms*

An exhibition of artworks

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms is a collection of critical reflections on embedded social media microaggressions reflecting acts of racism, body shaming, the glorification of mental health disorders (such as ADHD, depression, anxiety and eating disorders), as well as 'That Girl' routines, and the biased algorithms that make them tick. Using strategies such as humour and exaggeration to my advantage, I translated this digital content into hand-based methods (drawing, painting, soft sculpture, and linoleum carving) to reinterpret this seemingly playful content and to offer the viewer time to reflect on the more hateful sides of social media which are normalized by Pop Culture.

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Land Acknowledgement

As a white settler ally, I extend my deepest respect to all Indigenous peoples. In writing this thesis support paper that speaks critically of the oppression which takes place within online social spaces like TikTok, as well as proven within the architectures of these platforms, I acknowledge and understand that these same oppressions act as the foundation and building blocks of all systems that I navigate and profit from every day.

Within my research, I am speaking from a perspective that has benefited directly from the impacts of a history of settlement and colonialism. I present my personal experience and frustration with these systems while navigating its matrix of domination. These systems continue to fail at upholding empty promises of reconciliation.

The city in which I have lived during the time of this degree, as well as the University of Waterloo campus in which I was fortunate to pursue my creative studies, sits on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, Anishnaabe and the Haudenosaunee. This land on which we study is situated on the Haldimand Tract, which was promised to the Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of the Grand River – this land has never been delivered. I also benefited from growing upon the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek, within lands protected by the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850.

I share all of this to acknowledge the occupation that my ancestry has had within this country, and to reflect on my inherited privilege while

navigating these systems every day– like the inheritance of being able to scroll past certain trends and microaggressions without being harmed.

Until we take accountability for our actions of colonial violence, genocide, neglect, and racism towards Indigenous Peoples and Turtle Island is returned, we will continue to live within this hateful cycle of abuse which are perpetuated on land as well as within digital spaces.

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Figure 1. *Commitment Issues*, installation and detail shot, University of Waterloo Artery Gallery, 2021.

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in Ontario continued to constrain our movements, I adjusted my creative process so that I could create work at home. Isolated in my one-bedroom apartment, I found myself drawn to social media in order to feel connected during this time of uncertainty. Fluffy, colourful and playful rugs and videos of how they were made via rug tufting were going viral on my social media feed. Rug tufting is a slow process that can be done by hand with a punch-needle, but the use of a heavy-duty punching ‘gun’ that shoots yarn through a needle at approximately 45 times per second into fabric speeds things up. The rapid pull of the trigger, a hypnotic lure is what caught everyone’s eye. Three TikTok

tutorials and a couple hundred hours later, *Commitment Issues*, measuring twelve feet tall by two feet wide, hung from the ceiling of the student gallery. Its colourful, imperfectly tufted and unshaven body gently draped onto the ground. Yarn strands were either left hanging, or were used to connect the piece to the kitty-cornered walls. The visual matter consisted of blocks of colour, including representational renderings of leaves, hands, a frame, patterns, and slang pulled from social media and pop culture. For example, “I want to scream and shout and let it all out”¹, a quote from will.i.am’s pop songs featuring Britney Spears, is printed on fabric and pinned to the centre of the work. The random and collaged visual matter, consistently organized within blocked-off sections, unintentionally mirrored the act of scrolling through social media. *Commitment Issues* was the spark that began my ongoing exploration of social media—its influence on the ways that we communicate, the ways we represent ourselves digitally, how we connect, and how we react. It also marked the beginning of my interest in biased algorithms and how social media functions.

¹ will.i.am featuring Britney Spears, “Scream & Shout”, August 2012, track 4 on *willpower*, Interscope, 2013, Apple Music.

Introduction



Figure 2: Ashley Guenette, *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, Installation of exhibition, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, photo by Scott Lee.

Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms is a collection of generative artworks—drawings, paintings, prints, and a soft sculpture—created in response to algorithmically-determined social media content. Using TikTok, I engaged with viral trends that served as digital microaggressions, reflecting acts of racism, body shaming, the glorification of mental health disorders (such as ADHD, depression, anxiety and eating disorders), as well as 'That Girl' routines, in order to carefully curate

an endless stream of content.² Using strategies such as humour and exaggeration, this digital content was then translated into hand-based methods to reinterpret this seemingly playful content, exposing viewers to the more hateful sides of social media which are normalized vis-a-vis pop culture.

The goal of this support paper is to contextualize this body of work, revealing the negative impacts of this content on women-identified and BIPOC individuals, as well as other marginalized groups. As such, I see these works as critical reflections on embedded social media microaggressions and the biased algorithms that make them tick. Informed by theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Safiya Umoja Noble, Sasha Costanza-Chock, among others, and following Ahmed's strict citation policy: "I do not cite any white [cis-gendered] men",³ I have made it a priority to give space to research done by feminist, woman-identified and BIPOC individuals. As Ahmed explains in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, by citing women and BIPOC individuals, who have repeatedly been cast aside within institutions, we give way to those willful enough to lead us on less clear routes.⁴ Unfortunately, the history of art continues to favour white cis-gendered men, therefore all those who must be

² 'That Girl' routines, is a trending topic on social media platforms such as TikTok, where an influencer creates a video sampling their daily routines, including: makeup routines, workout routines, eating routines, etc.

³ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

⁴ Ibid, 15.

referenced within my work have been placed within footnotes. As Ahmed has said, “citation is feminist memory.”⁵

The title of my exhibition and support paper is based on a scene from the film *Mean Girls* where the character of Miss Norbury (played by Tina Fey) consults the girls at the high school about “girl on girl crime”⁶ after the release of the ‘Burn Book’. The book, handmade by the popular girls, including Regina George played by Rachel McAdams and Cady Heron played by Lindsay Lohan, documents hateful, bullying content about numerous girls. After Regina states that there isn’t a bullying problem at their high school, Miss Norbury asks the crowd to “Raise your hand if you’ve ever been personally victimized by Regina George.”⁷ In response, everyone in the room, including the teachers and staff, raises their hand. The scene is a memorable, relatable and humorous part of the popular 2004 movie, and the line has become a trend with a life of its own.

#putafingerdownchallenge⁸ was also an inspiration for the title, taken from a trending challenge, which is an activity where a TikTok content creator asks you to put a finger down if you have participated in a set of transgressions. If you have a certain amount of fingers down by the end, then

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 26.

⁶ Water, Mark, director. 2004. *Mean Girls*. Lorne Michaels Productions.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ #putafingerdownchallenge is a trending hashtag and challenge on TikTok.

you earn a particular status or title. An example of the challenge is attached to a sound track called “Put a finger down: psycho bitch edition”⁹. In this version, the viewer puts a finger down if they have driven by their boyfriend’s house to make sure he was home, broken into his phone to read his text messages, checked his snapchat score, has checked to see if he liked a certain girl’s posts on Instagram, along with a few other situations. If the viewer puts more than five fingers down, then they are a ‘psycho bitch’. Thus the title addresses how these social media algorithms function, the impact of mean girls like Regina George, along with my primary inspiration—current TikTok trends.

⁹ “Put a finger down: psycho bitch edition” is a soundtrack which was coupled with the #putafingerdownchallenge hashtag and challenge on TikTok.

Part 1: Algorithms and Social Media as Mean Girls¹⁰

Social media platforms are programs designed for users to connect and communicate within a network of economic strategies, allowing users to access reactive-media such as text, images, and videos, which are largely dictated by algorithmic processes.¹¹ They allow us (their users) to create personalized virtual spaces to express ourselves creatively and freely. They also connect us with other users who may have larger followings such as influencers and celebrities, who likely have paid commercial partners, which we may decide to align with socially. Platforms such as TikTok are subversive examples of this phenomenon, as they allow influential advertisements to join the stream of videos without disturbing the flow.

Thanks to the algorithms that generate the content we see, social networks can be uplifting, inviting, and helpful spaces; but one too many taps, likes, or shares of certain content, and our search results quickly turn

¹⁰ In Mark Water's 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, the term 'Mean Girls', refers to the ruthless bullying that takes place between girls in high school, which is what the character of Ms. Norbury, played by Tina Fey, describes as "girl on girl crime". The term within the movie, particularly refers to the girls in high school who reign, terrorize and bully everyone who attends the school such as the 4 popular girls within the film: Regina George played by Rachel McAdams, Cady Heron played by Lindsey Lohan, Karen Smith played by Amanda Seyfried and Gretchen Wieners played by Lacey Chabert, as well as high school 'rejects' Janis Ian played by Lizzy Caplan and Damian played by Daniel Frenze.

¹¹ Viktoria Flasche, "Powerful Entanglements: Interrelationships Between Platform Architectures and Young People's Performance of Self in Social Media", *Educational Perspectives on Mediality and Subjectivation*, ed. Patrick Bettinger (Pallgrave Pivot, Cham, 2022), 91.

hateful with bullying, micro-aggressive content that glorifies everything from mental health issues, stereotypes, and unattainable goals of perfection, to unhealthy eating habits.

Algorithms are sets of rules coded within a program or platform that allow the companies that own them to track their users' engagement. The algorithm then uses this data to present the user with specific content based on that engagement. It's easy to think of social media and their algorithms as neutral, objective tools, but in reality, they are clouded by the values and opinions of the given platform's programmers and/or the companies they work for. As Safiya Umoja Noble in her article *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* states many have "openly promote[d] racism, sexism and false notions of meritocracy".¹² This is why it is important to understand the processes and functions behind features such as TikTok's FYP (also known as a For You Page)¹³.

¹² Safiya Umoja-Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 16.

¹³ TikTok is a social media platform which utilizes soundtracks, dialogues, monologues, video clips, filters and music which are then linked to a video. The user is given the choice to use trending soundtracks and also add hashtags to the post in order to get more views. Other users are then invited to like, share, and comment on these videos. This engagement influences how successful the post will be (*success* meaning more views). Visually the app is an infinite stream of vertically running short, looped videos (3 minutes maximum). Similar to other social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Vine, Pinterest), TikTok offers suggestions in a variety of personalized feeds such as the For You Page (FYP). The feed on your FYP is algorithmically organized to generate an increased level of engagement and keep the user on the app as long as possible.

In order to interrogate these systems, my thesis research used my FYP to generate subject matter which was customized by TikTok's algorithms based on my taps, likes, shares and follows. This customized aspect ensures that what is shown to one user on the app will differ from another. As Noble explains, the information that surfaces first is dependent on the user's location, their economic interests, as well as their political and social stance.¹⁴

Since November 2021, I deliberately engaged with viral trends that participated in so-called microaggressions involving body and slut shaming, the glorification of mental health disorders (such as ADHD, depression, anxiety and eating disorders), and 'That Girl' daily routines in order to curate an endless stream of such content on my FYP. In their book *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, Sasha Costanza-Chock defines microaggressions as often unintentional

[...]expressions of power and status by individuals from dominant groups, performed against individuals from marginalized groups who may also frequently experience far more severe manifestations of oppression, such as physical violence, attack, rape, or murder, as well as severe forms of institutional inequality such as discriminatory exclusion from access to employment and housing.¹⁵

¹⁴ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 69.

¹⁵ Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (London: The MIT Press, 2020), 128-129.

In the context of social media, microaggressions are found within the algorithms themselves, as well as within certain trending content associated with specific soundtracks, filters and hashtags. All of which encourage other users to hop on these trends, to recreate this same content, thereby repeating, and over time normalizing, these micro assertions of power.



Figure 3: Ashley Guenette, Nice Rack, installation as part of Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, photo by Scott Lee.

Nice Rack, both the title of an artwork and an example of a normalized micro aggressive expression, is an installation consisting of a used metal industrial clothing rack, and a number of white t-shirts. In the gallery, the piece is lit so that it casts an exaggerated shadow onto the floor. The phrase,

'Nice Rack' is an objectifying comment for women-identified bodies, specifically complimenting their breasts. Printed on the t-shirts is a hand-carved linoleum block depicting an imperfectly expressive drawn calculator with the numbers "80085" on its screen. It's a familiar image that I remember well, the numerically written BOOBS on a calculator joke—a prank often played in elementary school. Thinking back, I can only imagine the discomfort of my female teacher, who had to curtail a bunch of 12-year-olds laughing about boobs. Placed in a feminist light, the joke isn't as funny now. It exemplifies what Ahmed calls a feminist killjoy¹⁶, since our role as feminists often kills other people's joy by pointing out discomforts. Employing irony alongside the stark reality of the expression, I chose to print the punchline on unisex t-shirts that are unembodied and in many ways 'not nice', as they hang lifeless on the rack.

This sense of the 'not nice' is also evident in the inaccurately rendered, but close enough to be recognized, drawing of the calculator. My memory references the longevity of this joke - how jokes are strengthened by repetition, and if it is a microaggression, how this repeatability allows it to become normalized. Referencing this repetition, *Nice Rack* uses the strategy of the sellable multiple, a cheap trick that anyone can buy. It critiques a

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 37.

history of companies that have profited from women-identified bodies for the benefit of the male gaze. Ahmed explains how the familiarity and repetition found within these body-based microaggressions are the source of difficulty—a kind of physical “[coming] up against something that we cannot resolve.” Having multiples of *80085* (and *Thicker than a Snickers*) circulating within society is my version of what Ahmed is talking about.



Figure 4: Ashley Guenette, *Thicker Than a Snickers*, installation as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, photo by Scott Lee.

Allowing viewers to purchase the t-shirts and bring them home becomes a commentary on the transactional actions of oppression. The t-shirts were also inspired by Gillian Wearing's *Courage Calls to Courage*

Everywhere, an artwork that like *80085* has several iterations (sculpture commemorating a century of women's suffrage in the UK¹⁷, embroidered handkerchiefs, and t-shirts). Whereas Wearing's works commemorates a historical moment for women circa 1918-2018, my works reveal that there is still a long way to go.

In this paper, I have adopted the term microaggression, which originated in the context of racism, to address not only racism, but also sexism, body shaming, and slut shaming as an intersectional term.¹⁸ Intersectionality was originally coined 30 years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw which emerged from ideas debated in critical race theory¹⁹ and was later adopted by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* in the early 90s. *Black Feminist Thought* defined intersectionality as analytical frameworks

¹⁷ According to the Guggenheim's website, the small-scale sculpture which was exhibited, acted as a maquette for the large-scale public work commemorating Dame Millicent Fawcett, who was one of England's most famous suffragists. The public work became the first to be dedicated to a woman and Gillian Wearing became the first woman to be commissioned for London's Parliament Square. The selection of Fawcett was done through an online petition that gained more than 74000 signatures. The text written on Fawcett's banner, and later onto other iterations, *Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere*, are Fawcett's own words within her hands - Wearing's choice to display this text "highlights the importance of the individual and the collective voice in achieving social change."

¹⁸ Racial microaggressions are described by Sasha Costanza-Chock on pages 128-129 of their book, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* as, "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."

¹⁹ Jane Coaston, "The intersectionality wars," *Vox*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>

that “remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”²⁰ By exploring the intersectionalities within online microaggressions through the lens of my own experience as a white, cisgender person of settler decent, I hope to emphasize the larger impacts of online toxicity on the experiences of not only white, but also BIPOC women-identified individuals.²¹ As a white feminist, I am aware that I benefit from racist systems. I know that I will never understand the experience of racism, transphobia and homophobia by engaging with these trends on social media, but my goal is to understand my position of privilege within these oppressive systems and how I contribute to their continuance. I am exploring what it means to be a white Canadian woman and the privileges I have inherited – the inheritance of being able to scroll past certain trends and microaggressions without being harmed. Racism is upheld within white culture, and needs to not only be addressed by those affected but also by those who perpetuate it. Small performative acts of allyship are not enough. In order to become better white allies, we must be willing to learn, speak up and make art on these issues, and to be uncomfortable with the truth of our privileges. By exposing microaggressive and exclusive trends, I am advocating for racial justice, by exposing my own

²⁰ Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990. 103.

²¹ Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*, 69-70.

privileges with help and collaboration from women-identified BIPOC theorists in hopes to develop my own authentic accountability.

Microaggressions can be read as harmless activities, quick and catchy punchlines. However, they are often racist, and/or gender-biased, and as such can be understood as small, repetitive, performances of power.²² In the case of social media and the algorithms that run them, this power of oppression gets co-opted and disseminated further despite the original intentions of the creator. The viewer/user who sees the post “[...]is, for a brief moment, reminded of their subordinate position within the matrix of domination.”²³ *Black Feminist Thought* defines the matrix of domination as how the intersecting oppressions experienced are organized.²⁴ Microaggressions within social media networks reproduce this matrix of domination. They allow and maintain inequalities, generating climates of tension between users, and “produce physical, cognitive, and emotional shifts in [those] targeted; and, over time, reduce both quality of life and life expectancy for people from marginalized groups.”²⁵ TikTok’s endless supply of new content makes it easy to brush off these microaggressions, especially if it doesn’t directly relate to

²² Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*, 129.

²³ *Ibid*, 130.

²⁴ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 103.

²⁵ Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*, 128-129.

you. Ahmed explains that we are taught to ignore certain suffering, the suffering of strangers in particular, defining a stranger as someone you do not know as well as someone you should not know.²⁶ With TikTok, we are encouraged to move on and scroll past, and by consequence, we are taught whose suffering matters and *who* does not.²⁷ It is a distinction asserted by power and violence. Ahmed has taught me that being a feminist is learning to notice every day. Sexism and racism are relentless, and scrolling past may at times be a requirement for survival, but by doing so we allow it to be a part of our daily life, a kind of living to survive, not thrive. It is a cyclical pattern. The more we engage with microaggressions, the more they feel normal. And the more we begin to expect and relate to them, the more they either become part of who and what we are, or they become stereotypes.

Similar to jokes and norms, stereotypes are strengthened with repetition. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins speaks to these stereotypes as ideologies, defining them as groups of ideas that reflect the interests of a certain group of people.²⁸ She explains that,

Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed

²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 32.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 62.

qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression.²⁹

Stereotypes such as those described by Collins are then repetitively used within a company's advertisements due to their profitability—a profit that is often at the expense of these women. Collins continues to explain that this arrangement of “economy, polity and ideology functions as a highly effective system of oppression”³⁰ continuing to suppress the ideas of BIPOC women intellectuals with the intent of securing this aggressive cycle and its maintenance has led to the elevation of the “elite White male”³¹, as well as their ideas and interests. This historical exclusion has meant that these stereotypical and oppressive images of BIPOC and marginalized people dominate pop culture, social media, and public policy.³²

Thicker Than a Snickers began as a drawing in response to a viral

TikTok soundtrack by user @grammcracka with the lyrics:

You are thicker than a snicker,
Heavy like a Chevy,
Come here little mama let me rub up on that belly,
Ay, Ay,
Let me rub up on that belly

²⁹ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 62-63.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 63.

³¹ *Ibid*, 63.

³² *Ibid*, 64.

Users on TikTok used the soundtrack coupled with a choreographed dance that emphasized their bodily curves. “Thicker Than a Snickers” is defined by Urban Dictionary³³ as, “When a girl isn’t super skinny and has lots of curves.”³⁴ A description which aligns itself with a stereotypical body-type, that of a person of color with a long history of abuse within history, pop culture and advertising.³⁵ This led me down a rabbit hole of YouTube videos featuring Snickers chocolate bar advertisements full of innuendos and misogynistic jokes that I hadn’t noticed before (perhaps because they are short and marketed as funny or maybe I just tuned them out with a repetitive eye roll). I translated my original Snickers bar drawing to a large-scale advertisement painting, exaggerating the scale towards the grotesque to underline the vulgarity found in Snickers’ marketing.

³³ Urban Dictionary, is a crowd-sourced online dictionary for slang, where users can input their own definitions for slang words and phrases. Those definitions are then liked or disliked in accordance to if the public agrees with the definition. I chose this online forum due to its capacity to keep up with fast moving trends and slang as well as its similarity to social media, as it is filled with humor and microaggressions.

³⁴ “Thicker than a Snickers,” Urban Dictionary, last modified January 4, 2011, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=thicker%20than%20a%20snickers>

³⁵ As elaborated in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* by Sabrina Strings, this stereotypical colored ‘thick’ body-type coupled with fat phobia has been described significantly throughout Western intellectual theory for over 200 years. Strings presented historical examples such as Saartjie “Sara” Baartman whose black body was exhibited exoticized and abused for profit by a man, as well as on more current examples of publications such as the *Cosmopolitan* and *Gibson Girl*, glorifying slim white bodies, over curvy colored bodies, which became more and more common within women’s magazines by the 20th century.



Figure 5: Urban Dictionary Screen-Shot, thicker than a snickers definition by akm12345, January 4, 2011.

The work touches on the history of objectifying and over sexualising women in advertising, especially women of color. I then repurposed the drawing, carving it on linoleum to make another multiple of hand-printed t-shirts. Displaying the t-shirts next to the large painting, where they are also available for purchase. Similar to the 80085 t-shirts, *Thicker Than a Snickers* references the histories of white cis-gendered men profiting from oversexualizing women, with women as collateral damage. Once again violence and microaggressions become commonplace due to the normalization of objectifying women's bodies, all of which are hidden in trending jokes and stereotypes, along with advertisements as exemplified in Snickers.



Figure 6: Ashley Guenette, *Thicker Than a Snickers Series*, installation as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

Observing and pointing out these microaggressions within social media allows me to understand the biases written within all systems, and the impact that these biases via microaggressions have on individuals from marginalized groups within our daily encounters.³⁶ Social media is just a small fraction of the systems which tolerate daily acts of oppression. Unfortunately, these social media microaggressions reflect a much larger history of oppression within older systems, histories and structures within the matrix of

³⁶ Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice*, 130.

domination (i.e. sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia and fat-phobia).

Knowing how a network's algorithms target us with specific content and advertisements, it becomes clear that algorithms influence how we shape our online identities, and our online relationships. They also control access to information, news and advertisements. They categorize us into race, gender and class and even influence which politics we engage with.³⁷ They are tools with the main purpose of extracting behavioural data for profit. The outcome is that the content that pops up first is paid, commercial advertising, and the distinction between what is paid for and what is not is often unclear due to influencer marketing.³⁸ Algorithms distribute some content more readily because of the face behind that content. Influencer marketing takes advantage of an influencer's social media following by hiring them to make content which advertises the company's product and/or service.³⁹ Due to the influencer's persuasive brand, which feels like it's coming

³⁷ Valentin Dander and Felicitas Macgilchrist, "School of Data and Shifting Forms of Political Subjectivity" In *Educational Perspectives on Mediality and Subjectivation*, ed. Patrick Bettinger (Pallgrave Pivot, Cham,2022), 46.

³⁸ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 51.

³⁹ Nicholas. "TikTok has dramatically changed the way in which advertisers promote their products and services, although it might not be the most ethical and honest form of advertising." Debating Communities and Networks XII (blog). Debating Communities and Networks Conference XII. May, 2015.
<http://networkconference.netstudies.org/2021/2021/05/15/tiktok-has-dramatically-changed-the-way-in-which-advertisers-promote-their-products-and-services-although-it-might-not-be-the-most-ethical-and-honest-form-of-advertising/>

from a trusted source, it can be difficult to differentiate personal content from paid partnership ads. Most influencers post multiple times a day, to keep viewers updated on what they are doing and what they are interested in. This approach coupled with what Marlowe Granados describes as, TikTok's language of the front-facing camera, gives followers a sense of intimacy that increases as more time is spent on the app.⁴⁰ Granados explains that,

With the camera at point-blank range, the audience is able to become acquainted with the details and idiosyncrasies of the subject's face, and a bond forms that is much like an unrequited friendship. It is the visual equivalent of hearing someone's voice in your ear, and at a time when physical distance means health and safety, this particular intimacy can feel intoxicating.⁴¹

This is how this type of marketing profits from the influencer's ability to build a bond of trust, making marketing extremely successful—meaning large payouts. This is due to their relatable branding, something traditional celebrities lack due to their untouchable feel.⁴² Followers that trust the influencer buy their products or services since there is a desire to either become just like them, or ease a shared insecurity that they both struggle with such as weight loss or acne. Most brands or companies will target and reach out to an influencer directly based on their content and following. This

⁴⁰ Granados, Marlowe. "I Turn My Camera On: Notes on the Aesthetics of Tiktok." *The Baffler*, no. 54 (2020): 102. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975672>.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 102.

⁴² Granados, "I Turn My Camera On," 102.

is referred to as a brand deal or sponsored post.⁴³ The influencer is then compensated with pro-bono products from their brand and/or paid directly with compensation (as high as hundreds of thousands of dollars).⁴⁴ It may not be the influencer's intent to mislead their followers but this form of marketing can unintentionally become a breach in consumer law—advertising that deceives the audience.⁴⁵ TikTok's platform design and abuse of influencer marketing, similar to how Brianna Wiens and Shana MacDonald describe Instagram in their essay, *Living whose best life? An intersectional feminist interrogation of postfeminist #solidarity in #selfcare*, makes the platform an easy way to purchase “the commodities [we] need to turn [ourselves] into a commodity.”⁴⁶ Social media networks such as TikTok have become a game-changer for digital advertising companies, reaching potential consumers within a system that is almost constantly in use, but there needs to be more work done on governing these advertisements (i.e.

⁴³ Nicholas, “TikTok has dramatically changed the way in which advertisers promote their products and services, although it might not be the most ethical and honest form of advertising.”

⁴⁴ Author Nicholas, states in their blog entry that “TikTok has dramatically changed the way in which advertisers promote their products and services, although it might not be the most ethical and honest form of advertising.” An example of large payouts is that of celebrity TikToker Charli D'Amelio who “reportedly made approximately \$73,510 per sponsor post”.

⁴⁵ Nicholas, “TikTok has dramatically changed the way in which advertisers promote their products and services, although it might not be the most ethical and honest form of advertising.”

⁴⁶ Brianna Wiens, and Shana MacDonald, “Living whose best life? An intersectional feminist interrogation of postfeminist #solidarity in #selfcare,” *NECSUS_Europeans Journal of Media Studies* 10, no. 1, (2021): 220.

what kind of language, visuals and hashtags should and should not be allowed in online advertising).⁴⁷

Due to their recognisability, stereotypes are repetitively abused within these paid advertisements, which in turn influences our perception of certain bodies.⁴⁸ A situation that compounds as this type of biased system does not provide legitimate social, historical or contextual meaning to marginalized groups or individuals.⁴⁹ This is a big issue since this content is provided to youth, within a forum where they build their own identities, values and opinions.

All social media platforms function within a similar business model which focuses on profiting from increased user engagement. This increase fuels the algorithms which gather the data, providing users with personalised content and advertising. Social media companies then sell this collected data to other platforms for research purposes, where this information is used to generate new strategies that once again optimize engagement.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Nicholas. "TikTok has dramatically changed the way in which advertisers promote their products and services, although it might not be the most ethical and honest form of advertising."

⁴⁸ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 19-20.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁰ Flasche, "Powerful Entanglements: Interrelationships Between Platform Architectures and Young People's Performance of Self in Social Media", 91.

Acknowledging these biases within social media platforms allows us to identify the transactional act we have as users.



Figure 7: Ashley Guenette, *You're So Easy*, installation as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

Measuring six feet by eight feet, *You're So Easy* is an oil painting depicting a larger-than-life sketch of a Staples "That Was Easy" button. In 2003, the international office supply retailer adopted the phrase "That Was Easy" as a slogan which took material shape in 2005, appearing in advertisements as a red button with the word "Easy" written on it. In the NetworkWorld article "*Staples Easy Button gets IoT makeover*", journalist Dave Michels explains that, "The button was meant as a metaphor to

represent easy business transactions.”⁵¹ But after the button became famous, Staples' response was to produce this button as a 'stress relieving' novelty that you could purchase for your own pleasure. An Amazon description promotes:

When the button is pressed, a male voice says “That Was Easy” This great product is the perfect accessory for any desk & makes a fabulous gift! The easy button is red with the word “easy” printed in white, “Don't stress it! Press it! 2 AAA batteries included.”^{52 53}

My version began as a small sketch in my notebook, following a deep dive on social media with multiple slut-shaming encounters. The situation is all too familiar and common—when men sleep around they are praised but when a woman does it, she's called easy. After reading descriptions that described the button as a metaphor for an “easy transaction” or as a “stress relieving” novelty, I couldn't help but relate these to the act of sex: sex as an easy transaction and sex as a stress reliever. I found it particularly relevant as a novelty item meant for the office, a space that has historically and arguably continues to be male-dominated. The office is where women are often repeatedly oppressed, objectified and sexually assaulted, as documented

⁵¹ Michels, Dave. “Staples Easy Button gets IoT makeover.” NETWORKWORLD, August 28, 2017.

⁵² “Staples Talking EASY BUTTON – Complete Red/Silver,” Office Products, Amazon, last visited April 2, 2022, <https://www.amazon.ca/Staples-Talking-EASY-BUTTON-Batteries/dp/B000JMXU8>

⁵³ How humorous, a male voice addressing something as easy.

through hundreds of thousands of #metoo posts.⁵⁴ I chose to reiterate my quickly rendered drawing into a large-scale oil stick painting.

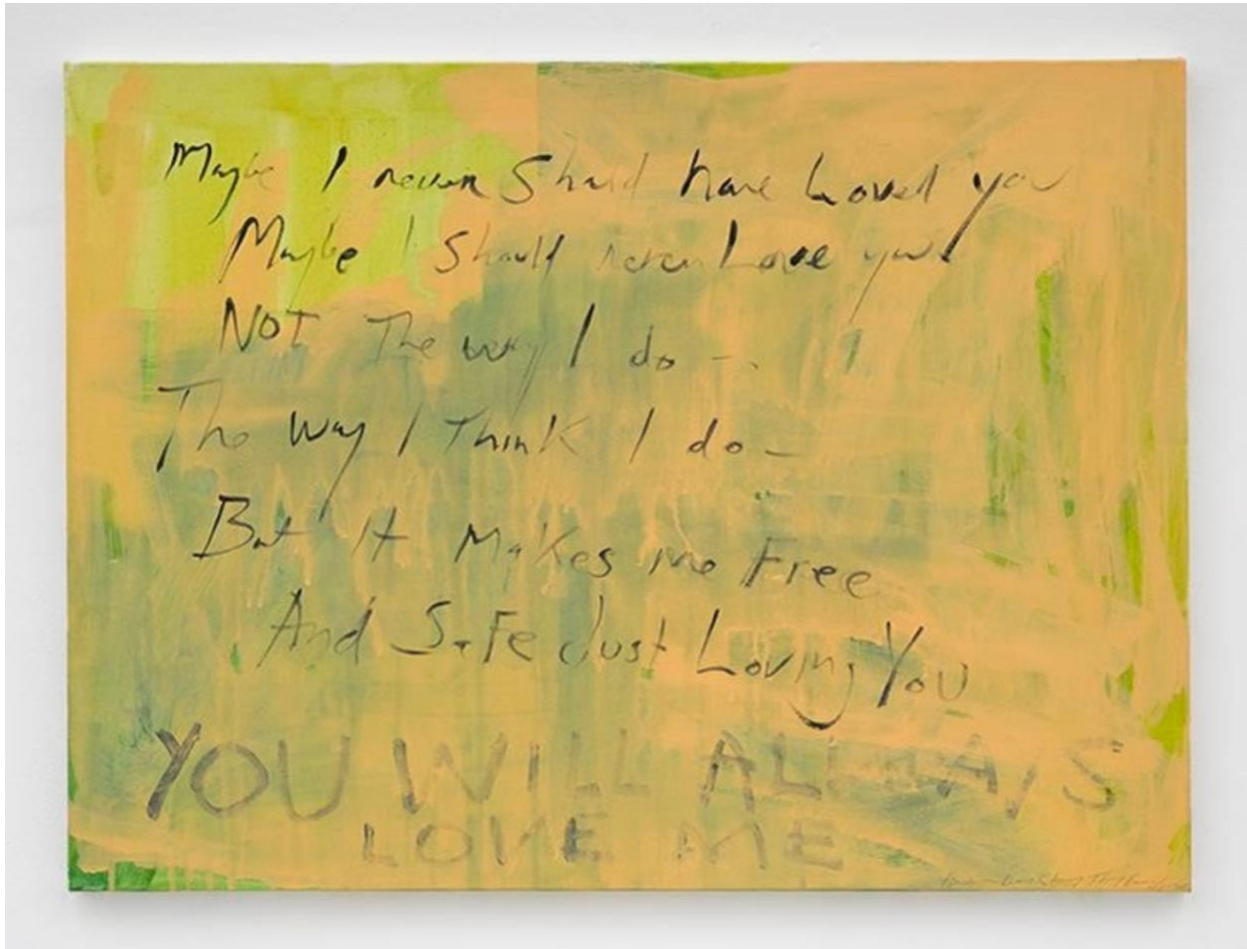


Figure 8: Tracy Emin, *Another love story*, 2011-2015, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, Photo by George Darrell.

⁵⁴ #MeToo is an online social movement which began on social media in 2006 by sexual assault survivor and activist Tarana Burke. It is a social movement against sexual abuse and harassment where people are encouraged to share their allegations of sex crimes on social media platforms with the hashtag.



Figure 9: Tracy Emin, *I tried to hold your soul*, 2015, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, Photo by George Darrell

Drawing from Tracy Emin's recent autobiographical and confessional paintings such as *Another love story* (2011-2015) and *I tried to hold your soul* (2015), I adopt her quick and immediate style, embracing her crude, messy approach to visuals and text within paint – including thin washes, gestural markings, hand writing, and spillage, within my own paintings like *You're So Easy* (as well as *Becoming 'That Girl'*).



Figure 10: Ashley Guenette, installation of *Becoming That Girl* and *You're So Easy* as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

Filling the white space surrounding the imperfectly and expressively rendered button are catchphrases featuring the word easy: *easy tiger*, *easy peasy lemon squeezy* and *easy on the eyes*. Looking at these expressions in a feminist light was like opening a can of worms. All of a sudden these playful words seemed to objectify the body, especially women-identifying bodies. I hand-painted and over-painted the text, echoing women's efforts to expose these words and men's efforts to cover them up. Ahmed explains that oftentimes women are gaslit by their male superiors as having a faulty

perception of the situation.⁵⁵ Many times, just bringing up sexism or racism, women are perceived as attempting to ruin someone's (i.e. a man or an organization's) reputation.⁵⁶ And it's situations like these that teach whose suffering matters. Simply put, women are encouraged to let things go, to endure a couple seconds of discomfort to avoid making an uncomfortable situation for someone else. Over time these short seconds of discomfort (i.e. microaggressions) add up to macro-aggressions. That is why the size of this button matters. The size references the macro-aggression, the weight that women carry while navigating these institutions. Thus the history of this painting can be observed as the history of the shrug, the history of smudged lipstick, and the history of as Ahmed says, "getting on, to get along."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

TikTok's algorithms are heavily influenced by the selection process and the user's mimetic and copy-cat desire to hop on a trend, creatively altering into their own, which is usually linked to a specific sound or hashtag. In an article entitled *What is a trending topic and how can it can be used in ecommerce?* a trend is defined as,

[...]a subject that experiences a surge in popularity on one or more social media platforms for a limited duration of time. Ecommerce businesses can check social media trends to find out what's holding consumer interest and capitalize on the current conversation.⁵⁹

This algorithmic influence can be difficult to decipher as the boundaries between the algorithm and user's creative process become blurred, making the constantly evolving algorithmic pattern part of the creative process.⁶⁰ This could lead users to participate in trends that make them feel part of TikTok's playful environment, all the while failing to recognize the negative impact these trends or ads have on certain individuals (i.e. an innocent interaction becomes an unintentional targeted aggression). Not to say that all aggressions are unintentional, there are whole sides of TikTok (and on all

⁵⁸ Water, Mark, director. 2004. *Mean Girls*. Lorne Michaels Productions.

⁵⁹ "What is a trending topic and how can it be used in ecommerce?," Ecommerce Marketing and Strategy, BigCommerce Pty. Ltd., last modified 2022. <https://www.bigcommerce.com/ecommerce-answers/what-is-trending-topic-ecommerce/#:~:text=Definition:%20A%20trending%20topic%20is,capitalize%20on%20the%20current%20conversation.>

⁶⁰ Flasche, "Powerful Entanglements", 101.

social media platforms) that users take advantage of to make intentionally aggressive content.

In online spaces, certain bodies (i.e. norms) are given more space than others. Those norms fit into what Ahmed describes as “a way of connecting with others over and around something.”⁶¹ So what makes norms, a norm? Norms are created and maintained by power structures: how people who reside within the norms treat those who do not fit. They can be produced by systems, as well as in everyday encounters. Within social media, they are created by both—via the digital content encountered daily, as well as maintained by the algorithm that circulates the content. These norms are found within the content, but also within these so-called ‘beauty filters’ made available by the app. These image and video altering tools offer a variety of creative functions, from adding makeup and animal features, to fun little games and activities. The issue with some of these filters is that they alter one’s face in favour of what author Margaret Hunter describes as a more Eurocentric and Anglo definition of beauty: the narrowing of noses or cheeks, slimming your waist, the enlarging of eyes, and the lightening of skin.⁶² This is where TikTok’s fat phobic, homophobic, transphobic, racist and male gaze fueled algorithm begins to show its true colours. And the more a filter

⁶¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 43.

⁶² Hunter, Margaret. “Technologies of Racial Capital.” *Contexts* 18, no. 4 (2019): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26853730>. 53.

surfaces, the more those who do not fit within that norm (or filter), begin to question themselves. This kind of questioning encourages women to alter their own bodies and identities in an effort to pass through. On TikTok this can be seen as users adopt beauty filters like the currently trending 'Coffee Filter', a kind of passing through online, which alters facial structures to simulate Eurocentric Anglo definitions of beauty, darkening lighter skin complexions to mimic a tan. The problem with this kind of beauty filter is that it insinuates that "To be a white woman with color is to be bronzed rather than brown."⁶³ Other less invasive attempts include makeup tutorials which have a long history of influence. Granados explains how TikTok users encourage facial alterations through makeup artistry and contouring. She explains that the "routine is shown with a cantor that makes this kind of beauty seem within reach, demystified but most importantly defined as a process that can be mastered."⁶⁴ Encouraging all girls to attempt these techniques to achieve this level of normality.

On TikTok it is common practice for 'That Girl' influencers to post their beauty routines with the hashtag #GRWM (Get Ready With Me) attached. This content ranges from makeup, eating, and skin care routines to trying on outfits. These posts can be helpful, but the problem comes back to the

⁶³ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 117.

⁶⁴ Granados, "I Turn My Camera On: Notes on the Aesthetics of TikTok.", 101.

algorithm (i.e. which #GRWM posts surface, which get censored, and which ones rely on paid partnerships). In my experience with my FYP, the majority (almost all) of the content I came across favoured slim white woman bodies.

Ahmed speaks about these encounters in relation to doors. For social media, the trend that surfaces to the top depends on who programmed the algorithm, alongside the company's values. This determines which bodies are let in and which are left out. In this case, algorithms and trends are like doors⁶⁵, and microaggressions are what happens when you are repeatedly left out. This is what Kimberlé Crenshaw means by intersectionality, a not getting in,

[...]because of how you can be seen in relation to some categories (not white, Aboriginal; not middle class), [but] being able to start up because of how you are seen in relation to others (not Aboriginal; middle class, white)[...]Intersectionality is messy and embodied.⁶⁶

Encountering something can be both a physical experience with another person as well as a digital experience with another user – it is a constant question that asks if you fit in or not, and the answer is based on the perception of the person you encounter. Normality is a power structure that functions in order to make some bodies comfortable and others uncomfortable.⁶⁷ Therefore, trends like these beauty filters, as well as 'That

⁶⁵ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 120.

⁶⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 119.

⁶⁷ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 123.

Girl' and 'Hot Girl' content become exclusive to those who inhabit that norm. When the microaggression becomes a macro-aggression, girls are subtly and not so subtly encouraged to alter their bodies in increasingly invasive ways (including: lip plumpers, lasers, razors, fillers, surgeries, fat loss tips, lashes, waist trimmers, strict eating regimes and starvation) in order to pass as this norm.



Figure 11: Ashley Guenette, selection of oil stick drawings on 11"x14" sketchbook paper as part of *What it means to be a girl* series, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

All of the works in *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms* began as small reactive oil stick drawings in my sketchbook. Following *Commitment Issues* in early 2021, I explored a variety of materials looking for the most effective ways to translate

this digital content. Colour and composition played key roles, as I adopted oil sticks because of their malleability, allowing me to mix colours directly onto the surface, with my hands. The work was quick, messy, and immediate, reflecting my initial reactions to social media content with minimal filtering. Similar to Tracy Emin's immediate and honest (almost diary-like) paintings and drawings, I expose and document my daily encounters with TikTok within these drawings, engaging with trends that expose my own sexual adventures, heartbreaks, self-consciousness, mental health issues and traumas, while simultaneously critiquing social media's contribution to these experiences.



Figure 12: Ashley Guenette, What it means to be a girl, installation of 61 oil stick drawings on 11”X14” sketchbook paper, as part of Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

The subject of the drawings mirror the problematic and hateful messages found on my FYP.⁶⁸ I employed sketchbook paper to emphasize the trend's disposability, as well as the casual tone of microaggressions. Some drawings were reiterated into other mediums (i.e. t-shirts and soft sculpture) or enlarged to engage with the public realm (i.e. large-scale paintings). I then curated a selection from the rest of the drawings which came together as an installation of 61 drawings entitled *What it means to be a girl*. The volume and repetition mimics the images, videos and microaggressions found on TikTok, an indication of the impact those repeated microaggressions have on individuals when faced with them daily. Microaggressions—they add up. Lined up along the horizon line of a wall in the gallery, and continuing around the corner onto another, the installation references the activity of scrolling through content on social media.

Becoming That Girl is an eight by six-foot oil stick painting on canvas. An imperfectly rendered yellow hand with long hot pink nails grasps a glass of green beverage resembling pressed juice, green smoothie or some sort of magical, body-transforming potion.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ My drawings reference Contemporary artist, David Shrigley's recognisable and crude drawing style, which combines humorous text with cartoonist, child-like visuals relating to everyday life, politics, social and economic issues, etc.

⁶⁹ *Becoming 'That Girl'* references Walt Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, when the Evil Queen grows jealous of her beautiful step daughter Snow White, due to the Magic Mirror admitting that there is one more fair than she (referring to Snow White), the Evil Queen hires the Huntsman to assassinate Snow White. After the failed assassination attempt,

The painting is reactive, a kind of anti-homage to the overwhelming amount of posts on TikTok attached the hashtag #WhatIEatInaDay, which is a trend that has been popping up on my FYP since December 2021. I've seen a variety of iterations from green smoothies and juices full of antioxidants that claim to detoxify your body, to comfort foods such as thick chocolate pancakes with maple syrup. The goal of the trend is to share and post your daily eating habits.

As the trend progressed, I noticed an increasing amount of specific bodies such as fitness and fashion influencers and celebrities with paid commercial partnerships jumping on the trend. The problem is that anyone can make content and attach the trending hashtag, and not everyone has an education in nutrition or is knowledgeable of healthy eating habits. In many cases, the daily menus posted supported unhealthy eating habits that glorified starvation—eating disorder behaviours masked as so-called healthy meals (i.e. leafy salads, green smoothies, green detox juices, and copious amounts of lemon water).

the Evil Queen, dedicated to ensuring she remains the fairest women in the land, drinks a disguise potion, "a formula to disguise my beauty," in order to transform herself into an old lady and attempt to assassinate Snow White, herself – as the character of Ms. Norbury from Mark Water's Mean Girls would say, a true "girl on girl crime." The Evil Queen attempts to assassinate Snow White three time, first by suffocation, second with a poisoned comb and third with a poisoned apple. Deceived by the old woman, Snow White eats the apple and is poisoned.



Figure 13: Ashley Guenette, *Becoming That Girl*, installation as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022.

No matter the intention of the creator, the message is that if you eat like me, or if you don't eat anything (like me), you'll look like me. This trend can easily escalate into something it was not meant to be. For example, a post intended as a joke, quickly becomes triggering as it is engulfed by other hashtags. The subtext of these hashtags glorifies under-eating and getting skinny—a fat phobic context backed by paid advertisements that encourage viewers to buy specific products in order to fast track their weight loss journey.



The image is a screenshot of the Urban Dictionary entry for "That Girl". The title "That Girl" is in a large, blue, serif font at the top left. To its right are social media icons for Twitter and Facebook. The definition text is in a white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background. It describes a girl who wakes up at 5am, meditates, drinks smoothies, showers, journals, eats healthy food, and goes to the gym every day. Below the definition are three lines of user-generated text: "I want to be 'that girl'", "My goals in life is to be 'that girl'", and "Oh so you think you're 'that girl'?". At the bottom left, there are buttons for "likes" (214) and "dislikes" (22). At the bottom right, there is a "FLAG" button.

That Girl

Known mostly on tiktok, "That Girl" is a girl (or any gender) that gets up at 5am, meditates, drinks [smoothies](#), has showers every day, [journaling](#), eating only healthy food, goes [to gym](#) every day, and is successful in many ways. This stereotype is typically on tiktok and films morning or night routines. Most likely rich too...

I want to be "that girl".

My [goals in life](#) is to be "that girl"

[Oh so](#) you think you're "that girl"?

by [Mrspyramidhead1](#) June 19, 2021

214 22 FLAG

Figure 14: Urban Dictionary Screen-Shot, That Girl definition by Mrspyramidhead1, June 19, 2021.

The background of the giant painting *Becoming That Girl* is filled with the words “Do it for yourself”, a common motto amongst social media influencers (i.e. a way to become ‘That Girl’), which is often associated with the #selfcare, which has been trending since 2016 with increased use during the COVID-19 pandemic and all the stay-at-home orders, triggering a wave of content on how to care for ourselves in such a situation.⁷⁰ ‘That Girl’ is a very specific person as well as a made-up norm, who is currently trending on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.⁷¹

Wiens and MacDonald explain that the trending content associated with #selfcare and ‘That Girl’ aesthetics, heavily emphasizes “commodities and consumption as the answer to our ails.”⁷² And, a quick search of “the hashtag on TikTok will reveal an ever-expanding series of montages of users’ beauty regimes”, as well as the workout routines, eating habits and favourite brands to purchase from, with Linktree links in their bios. Wiens and MacDonald state that,

These examples make evident #selfcare’s ties to a neoliberal, postfeminism that advances a ‘boss babe’ ethos of self-empowerment through consumption. Many feminist media scholars have previously

⁷⁰ Wiens, and MacDonald, “Living whose best life?,” 220.

⁷¹ Urban Dictionary defines ‘That Girl’ as, “a girl (or any gender) that gets up at 5am, meditates, drinks smoothies, has showers every day, journaling, eating only healthy food, goes to the gym every day, and is successful in many ways. This stereotype is typically on TikTok and films morning or night routines. Mostly rich too...”

⁷² Wiens, and MacDonald, “Living whose best life?,” 220.

...tied this spirit of consumerism to the post feminism that has dominated women's media environments over the last three decades.⁷³

Wiens and MacDonald with support from Rosalind Gill, write that the problem with performative acts like these on social media is that it avoids “any real commitment to political action” or resolution, making TikTok the perfect platform for influencers to pretend to care and take advantage of feminism as a networking tool to reach more users and sell more product.⁷⁴

The repeatedly written words in my own handwriting within *Becoming That Girl* reference self-empowering mantras that manifest your future, as well as the act of journaling as a mode of self-care or self-therapy—a constant within ‘That Girl’ daily routines and ‘healthy’ habits. Within the messy writing and mantras, the words “starve yourself” are woven throughout the background to underscore the glorification of under-eating habits, another constant within ‘That Girl’ content.

As someone who has suffered from an eating disorder (ED), I have always disguised my condition with health, masking my undereating behind supposedly healthy menu items such as green smoothies, bulky salads and seafood. I would binge eat when around my family and then the regret and frustration would set in, fueling an overwhelming want to be ‘That Girl’, to not

⁷³ Wiens, and MacDonald, “Living whose best life?,” 220.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

binge eat, to not feel sad and tired all the time, and to fit into the capitalist imperatives of hyper productivity. It is an endless cycle of both hope and disappointment. Trends like these are unhealthy, unsustainable, hard on our mental health and glorify a privileged white upper-class lifestyle while excluding all who do not fit the description.

The history of self-care is much longer than its recent *début* in social media, which is something most users of #selfcare probably do not know. Wiens and MacDonald explains that the term was originally coined in the 1950s as a medical term and shortly after became a political act during the rise of the women's and civil rights movements, thanks to civil rights activists such as The Black Panther Party. Activists recognized the relationship between poverty and poor health and began advocating for better health care practices and began to "dismantle the structures and ideologies that keep sexual orientation, gender, race and class as barriers to care."⁷⁵

The adoption of #selfcare on social media platforms by white upper-class women is then a perfect reflection of the matrix of domination in all systems that we navigate daily, as well as the historical suppression of women of color's voices within feminism. Western feminist theorists have

⁷⁵ Wiens, and MacDonald, "Living whose best life?," 221.

been challenging the “elite White male”⁷⁶ but have ironically also excluded the ideas of women of color. This exclusion has led to the advancement of certain feminist theories claiming to be “universally applicable to women as a group [but] upon closer examination appear greatly limited by the White, middle-class, and Western origins of their proponents.”⁷⁷ This situation is eerily similar to how women of color, trans-women, as well as plus-sized women, have been excluded from trends (like 'That Girl' posts) within social media, although they claim to support and be inclusive of all woman-identified individuals. When comparing these situation, it becomes clear that Western postfeminism’s dominant position within social media networks acknowledges feminism if only to be opposed to it.⁷⁸ As Wiens and MacDonald further explain, its ideologies present a reflection of self-care by

[...]linking femininity to the body; women’s self-subjectification through practices of self-surveillance, competitive individualism, and the myths of ‘choice and empowerment’, rather than objectification from the outside; a reification of sexual difference as ‘natural’ alongside the ‘sexualization of culture’ and a consumerist code that employs a ‘commodification of difference’.⁷⁹

Therefore, the issue with a neoliberal, popular postfeminism active on social media networks (and within all systems) is that, despite recognizing the

⁷⁶ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 65.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Wiens, and MacDonald, “Living whose best life?,” 226.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

existence of inequality within their networks, they avoid “recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable”⁸⁰, instead they put the focus on the individual to better herself, mentally and/or physically. The message is that self-care is achievable if you purchase the product advertised by one of the influencers who popped up on your FYP due to an embedded algorithm that listens and tracks your behaviour. As Wiens and MacDonald explain, despite selfcare becoming a ten-billion-dollar industry, women continue to experience higher rates of eating disorders, anxiety, and depression.⁸¹ It is obvious then, that these neoliberal forms of self-care bypass the systemic racial and gender issues in order to profit off of that very suffering.⁸²

In fall 2021, I noticed a new trending topic: *Hot Girls Have Digestive Issues*. The trend’s main intent is to normalize girls with so-called unattractive digestive issues (i.e. bloated tummies, gas, and other complications). This trend is problematic for a few reasons. The use of the term ‘Hot Girl’, which is very similar to ‘That Girl’, is located within the male gaze which desires a specific impossible body type, excluding all other bodies. The use and repetition of ‘Hot Girls’ also fuels the normalization of these associations. This

⁸⁰ Wiens, and MacDonald, “Living whose best life?,” 226.

⁸¹ Ibid, 227.

⁸² Ibid, 227.

trend prompted me to think of where these digestive issues came from. For some it might be genetic like lactose intolerance, or related to menstruation, but for others it may be caused by histories of eating disorders, starving and binge eating, or even the use of birth control, which can lead to gut issues like IBS. Issues like those listed, all stem from trying to fit into those so-called norms which also includes fitting into size 0 jeans. Many women are judged and shamed on social media for having natural experiences such as farting, gaining weight, growing hair on certain parts of their bodies, or getting acne.

Hot Girls Have Digestive Issues is a large-scale soft sculpture with a diameter measuring approximately four feet.⁸³ The work is sewn, fabricated out of two round pieces of canvas that were stuffed with foam and pillow filling with an elongated flap attached to the inseam so that it visually resembles a Whoopee Cushion.⁸⁴ What is funnier than a fart? Someone else's embarrassment? The soft sculpture speaks to the repeated embarrassment of women-identified bodies on social media networks for normal bodily functions, critiquing how and what words we use to defend ourselves.

⁸³ The work references pop art pioneer Claes Oldenburg's 1962 Floor Burger, which was part of a series of large-scale soft sculptures: Floor Burger, Floor Cone and Floor Cake, which was first exhibited in 1962 at the Green Gallery in Manhattan, New York City, and later purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, in 1967. What is important to acknowledge is that despite the work belonging to white, male, cis-gendered, artist Claes Oldenburg, the soft-sculptures were assembled and sewn by his then wife, Patty Mucha. Oldenburg then painted the works after they were assembled by Mucha.

⁸⁴ A whoopee cushion is a rubber cushion used within jokes and pranks, which produces a fart noise when squeezed or sat on.



Figure 15: Ashley Guenette, *Hot Girls Have Digestive Issues*, Installation as part of *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by my social media algorithms*, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

We must be more conscious of the language we use so that we can thrive to be more inclusive of all women-identified bodies, not only some. Recently I noticed that this trend, as well as the *Gorgeous Gorgeous Girls*⁸⁵ content which was trending around the same time, produced pop up ads for products to ease digestive issues on my FYP. It's a closed system that continues to regurgitate and feed itself.

⁸⁵ Gorgeous Gorgeous Girls is a trending soundtrack on TikTok.



Figure 16: Ashley Guenette, Hot Girls Have Digestive Issues and What it means to be a girl as part of Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms, installation of exhibition, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

Conclusion

Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms draws from a fraction of trends that are generated on social media that use playfulness to veil hate and harm. The posts which formed the subject of my thesis is a part of a lengthy history of abuse, and I acknowledge that I have only scratched the surface and touched on a small portion of the oppressions that take place within social media networks. The trends and issues I have curated within my thesis research are based on a collection of data tracking my engagement with TikTok since the spring of 2020 when I first downloaded the app, and an increased engagement with specific content within the short timeframe between November 2021 to March 2022. As such, the content that surfaced on my FYP is a reflection of my own body, insecurities, mental health, and experiences. Those I encountered may differ from those you encountered due to a number of reasons which I have argued within this text. As Wiens and MacDonald have stated, not all trends require an in-depth critique but, "continuing to uplift a culture that marginalizes bodies that cannot and do not conform to dominant standards of thinness, whiteness, and richness perpetuates harm." And therefore, *Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms* offers myself and the viewer a chance to notice the harm that takes place online, to understand how that harm is circulated and redirected with narratives that back the oppressive histories tied to them. In a fast-paced culture where

microaggressions are so easily normalized and accepted, I hope to offer a moment to pause and reflect.



Figure 17: Ashley Guenette, Put a finger down if you've ever been personally victimized by social media algorithms, installation of exhibition, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2022, Photo by Scott Lee.

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