



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# The Strive for Effortless Perfection:

*Aspirational Identity Performance and The Clean Girl Aesthetic on TikTok*

by

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May 2025

Master's Programme in  
International Marketing & Brand Management

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**Word count:** 20.923

# Abstract

**Title:** The Strive for Effortless Perfection: Aspirational Identity Performance and the Clean Girl Aesthetic on TikTok

**Date of the seminar:** 04-06-2025

**Course:** BUSN39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing - Master Level

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**Keywords:** Aspirational class, luxury consumption, identity performance, digital platforms

**Research question:** "How do young women construct and perform aspirational identities through the Clean Girl aesthetic on digital platforms?"

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of how trendy aesthetics on digital platforms like TikTok shape users' identity construction and self-performance.

**Theoretical perspective:** Two main theoretical fields, aspirational class and identity performance, have been combined into a new perspective of aspirational identity performance, in order to gain new insights in these areas.

**Method:** To answer the research question, a qualitative approach has been used, involving a netnography consisting of 6 content creators on TikTok, observing 515 individual posts. The study is grounded in a social constructionist perspective and has an abductive approach.

**Empirical results:** Key findings indicate that the performance of perfection is influenced by aesthetic curation, minimalism as well as luxury and class signaling. Secondly, there is a consistent use of hyper-feminine aesthetic codes while romanticizing girlhood and youthfulness. Lastly, the empirical results suggest that there is extensive labor behind the Clean Girl's polished appearance, meaning the performance consists of two parts: the labor displayed in the video as well as the hidden labor behind the camera.

**Conclusion:** The study finds that aspirational identity in the Clean Girl aesthetic is performed through disciplined routines and aesthetic control, signaled via subtle luxury, and shaped by platform dynamics that reinforce classed and gendered ideals as empowerment.

# Acknowledgements

It is with great gratitude that we write this acknowledgement for our Master's thesis in International Marketing and Brand Management. This project has been both intellectually challenging and deeply rewarding, and it would not have been possible without the support and guidance we received along the way.

First and foremost, we would like to sincerely thank our supervisor, Jon Bertilsson, for his thoughtful insights, valuable feedback, and ongoing encouragement throughout this process. His expertise and critical perspective have helped shape and strengthen our work, and his willingness to engage in meaningful discussions has been greatly appreciated.

We would also like to express our appreciation to the professors and lecturers who have guided us throughout the Master's program. Their teaching, support, and inspiration have laid the foundation for our academic development, and have helped us grow both professionally and personally.

To our families and friends, thank you for the endless encouragement and emotional support. Your belief in us made a lasting difference during the more demanding phases of this journey.

Lastly, we are grateful to each other for the collaborative spirit, shared dedication, and countless hours of discussion that brought this thesis to life.



Hilla Abrahamson

*May 28th 2025*



Sissy Olsson

*May 28th 2025*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

In the last few years, a new online trend has emerged on digital platforms - the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. It is a digital movement that promotes an aesthetic centered on natural beauty, health, and minimalism, aiming for a look that is both polished and effortless (Hedström, 2024; Duarte, 2024; Lobad, 2024). Emerging in early 2021, the aesthetic gained popularity on TikTok through makeup and lifestyle videos (Jones, 2025; Lobad, 2024). The aesthetic highlights a subtle yet curated presentation of femininity, featuring products that enhance natural features, such as dewy skin, feathered brows and a “no-makeup” makeup look (Jones, 2025; Lobad, 2024). However, the aesthetic extends beyond beauty to lifestyle - influencing wellness, fitness, and self-care routines, and promotes an overall clean, healthy, and self-assured appearance (Duarte, 2024; Lobad, 2024). Although the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is rooted in minimalism and simplicity, it is often linked to “quiet luxury” (Jones, 2025), a more restrained and refined form of luxury consumption, and achieving this seemingly effortless look often involves the use of high-end beauty, skincare and wellness products (Bhatia, 2025). This creates a tension within the aesthetic, as it projects minimalism and naturalness, yet relies on expensive luxury products and intensive routines. In this way, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic embodies a subtle performance of privilege and status, one that could be seen to hide its materialistic foundation beneath an appearance of simplicity.

TikTok serves as the primary platform where the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is both created and consumed. Its user demographic is young, with 66% of its global audience aged between 18 and 34 years (Ceci, 2025a). As of early 2025, the platform had approximately 1.2 billion monthly users globally (Ceci, 2025b). The short-form, visual and algorithm-driven format of TikTok makes it an ideal site for trends to spread rapidly and for users to express themselves online (Ling et al. 2021). The platform can thereby be understood not only as a space for entertainment, but also as a stage for self-performance, where users craft and broadcast visual personas through short but highly stylized video content. This context makes TikTok an ideal empirical ground for

analyzing the *Clean Girl* phenomenon, as it provides a scene for identity performance that is both aspirational and carefully curated.

The *Clean Girl* aesthetic is, in this sense, not only a beauty trend but a broader identity framework, one that reflects deeper social and cultural values tied to class, taste and consumption. A significant part of this aesthetic is the performance of subtle luxury, where high-end goods are used in ways that appear effortless and tasteful. This aligns with how Rosida (2023) describes the evolution of luxury consumption in the age of social media, and how social media has amplified the performative nature of luxury consumption, allowing users to craft personas reinforced by displays of high-end goods and services (Rosida, 2023). As such, luxury consumption on platforms like TikTok becomes an intensified form of self-presentation, closely tied to identity construction and social positioning (Rosida, 2023; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019). The visual and performative nature of TikTok makes it especially suitable for the continuous spreading of this consumption display, and therefore the construction of desirable identities. As a result, identity performance on platforms like TikTok becomes deeply intertwined with the symbolic value of consumption, with *Clean Girl* serving as an example of this intersection.

Further, Schau and Gilly (2003) argue that social media enables users to construct online selves by selectively curating what they share, drawing on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation. This curated performance is shaped not only by how users wish to be perceived, but also by the responses and validation they receive through engagement such as likes and comments. In this digital environment, identity becomes an interactive and performative project, one that is continually adjusted based on social feedback. Lambert and Wickström (2024) similarly highlight that digital culture encourages self-objectification, as individuals increasingly evaluate themselves through the gaze of their online audiences. Users selectively share content that aligns with their aspirational self-image, often rooted in values such as health, productivity, and aesthetic refinement (Marwick, 2015). In this sense, platforms like TikTok facilitate a culture where identity, status and consumption are deeply intertwined. As such, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is not just a trend, but a cultural practice that reveals broader shifts in how individuals perform identity and signal status in the digital age.

## 1.2 Problematization

In today's digital age, social media platforms have become central scenes for self-expression, identity construction, and social interaction. Visual platforms like TikTok have reshaped how individuals present themselves to the world, offering mechanisms for self-branding, aesthetic experimentation, and social validation (Lambert & Wickström, 2024; Wang & Feng, 2022). As part of this shift, identity has become increasingly performative, curated, and shaped by algorithmic systems that reward visibility to trending ideals. While existing research has explored online self-presentation (Marwick, 2015; Belk, 2014), luxury consumption (Truong, 2010; Rosida, 2023), and new forms of social distinction (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019; Bellezza, 2020), limited attention has been paid to how these dynamics intersect with specific digital aesthetics like the *Clean Girl* phenomenon. Trends such as this aesthetic reflect not just shifting beauty ideals, but also evolving conceptions of luxury, aspiration and identity within contemporary society.

Importantly, the process of aspirational identity construction does not happen in isolation, it is shaped by the algorithmic logics of social media platforms, which continuously expose users to content that aligns with idealized forms of self-identity (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022; Schau & Gilly, 2003). These platforms reinforce perceptions of desirability, success, and self-worth through likes and comments, encouraging users to conform to dominant aesthetic and lifestyle narratives (Airoidi & Rokka, 2022). This leads to a form of self-objectification, where individuals increasingly view their bodies and lifestyles as projects for public display, which drives consumption behaviors. However, as Schau and Gilly (2003) points out, the curated identity that the individual performs on social media, is just that - a performance, and does not necessarily reflect reality. The act of self-objectification as a performative behavior has been associated with a rise in luxury consumption, especially within the beauty and skincare industries, as individuals strive to enhance their online self-image (Sun et al. 2024). Further, existing research has explored the concept of the extended self in digital contexts (Belk, 2014), and the role that social comparison plays in luxury consumption (Petrescu et al. 2024). Platforms like TikTok become key sites where users display identity through symbolic consumption, and where visibility functions as a form of currency in an attention economy (Murray, 2015). In this attention

economy, posting content becomes a way to gain recognition, build a personal brand, and signal membership in desirable social categories and communities (Murray, 2015).

At the same time, luxury consumption is undergoing a form of transformation. The rise of “quiet luxury” and refined taste has marked a shift from conspicuous display of wealth to more subtle, coded expressions of privilege (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019). While the aspirational class has been theorized (Currid-Halkett, 2017), there is no knowledge about how it manifests on visual platforms like TikTok. Luxury goods consumption goes beyond material possessions, playing a key role in self-presentation and identity construction on social media platforms, especially in today’s digital society (Belk, 2014; Marwick, 2015). In the contemporary marketplace the two most important aspects for achieving social distinction is (1) the *flexibility* to adapt to new possibilities and assume new identity projects, and (2) the *attention* gained from building an online persona, representing a form of social capital (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019). For these consumers, luxury lies in experiences and aesthetic refinement rather than flashy logos or products (Atkinson & Kang, 2022), and minimalism, wellness, and self-optimization are now viewed as markers of good taste and distinction (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Yet, this “effortless” lifestyle still often requires significant economic and cultural resources, making it an indirect but powerful display of class identity.

Focusing on the *Clean Girl* aesthetic as both a cultural phenomenon and a performative digital practice, this study seeks to unpack the deeper social meanings embedded in these curated visual expressions. The *Clean Girl* aesthetic offers a unique empirical lens through which to explore how aspirational identities are formed and communicated online in the context of class, lifestyle, and gender. In doing so, this study responds to a need for nuanced analyses of how cultural capital is visually performance and socially interpreted in the age of social media platforms such as TikTok. As a global, youth-oriented platform driven by short-form visual content, TikTok provides a unique context for examining how identity is crafted through aesthetic participation. Within this context, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic offers a clear example of how users leverage social media to perform classed, gendered and culturally specific forms of self-presentation, connected to the visual language of refinement, wellness and quiet luxury.

### 1.3 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of how trendy aesthetics on digital platforms like TikTok shape users' identity construction and self-performance. Focusing on the intersection of aspirational class, luxury consumption, and self-presentation, this study's purpose is to provide insights into how young women perform aspirational identities within online communities through aesthetic choices and visual cues. Accordingly, this study will investigate the following research question:

*"How do young women construct and perform aspirational identities through the Clean Girl aesthetic on digital platforms?"*

### 1.4 Research contributions

This research intends to combine the concepts of aspirational class and identity performance, which will be used as a lens to look at *Clean Girl* aesthetic posts on TikTok in order to find new insights. While previous research has explored aspirational class, digital self-presentation, and identity performance independently, there remains a notable gap in existing literature of how these frameworks intersect within online lifestyle aesthetics like the *Clean Girl* aesthetic on TikTok. With the rise of self-care and wellness increasingly serving as markers of social capital, alongside global digital trends like the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, this study aims to explore and understand how young women consume luxury products and services to perform aspirational identities, particularly within the interactive and rising social media culture.

Thus, this research aims to contribute not only to academic understanding of digital self-presentation, identity performance, and aspirational class, but also offers relevant insights for society. Exploring how young women use aesthetic trends like *Clean Girl* would allow for a better understanding of the cultural logics that drive contemporary consumption and identity work.

## 1.5 Delimitations

This study has several limitations to ensure the topic stays clear, manageable and consistent. In this study we have chosen to only focus on the empirical context of the aesthetic of *Clean Girl* and have ignored other similar aesthetics. The *Clean Girl* aesthetic has been assessed to be a contemporary and relevant phenomenon to examine within this context. Furthermore, this study will be explored from a consumer perspective, limiting the managerial perspective of this topic. However, this limitation aligns with the aim of the study, which is to explore how consumers perform their identity online, rather than gaining insights for practitioners. Lastly, another limitation to the study is that it exclusively examines TikTok content creators, and thus limits the insights from the audience and their perspective of the creators' content. Therefore, this study solely focuses on how identity is constructed and performed, and not how it is received or interpreted by the viewers.

## 1.6 Outline of the thesis

**Chapter 1: The introduction.** This chapter will introduce and problematize the research topic along with some background, its significance, and presenting the research question. It will also provide an overview of the study's purpose and aimed contributions. Lastly, it will explain the delimitations to the empirical context of the study.

**Chapter 2: The literature review.** This section will bring up and discuss prior research that has been conducted in the area of identity performance and social distinction on digital platforms. Through this review, key theoretical concepts are identified and knowledge gaps in current research are highlighted. The chapter concludes with a critical reflection on these gaps, framing how this study contributes to the expansion and refinement of existing theoretical frameworks. This approach is expected to deepen the general understanding of identity performance and aspirational class on digital platforms.

**Chapter 3: Theoretical framework.** This chapter will summarize the existing research relevant to the study, discussing key theories, concepts, and previous findings related to two main frameworks: identity performance as well as aspirational class and good taste. This section will

further present the study's lens consisting of the two combined main frameworks. This combined lens aims to develop an integrated understanding for analyzing how young women perform aspirational identities on digital platforms. Lastly, the section will present a chapter summary, highlighting the key points of the theories.

**Chapter 4: Research method.** This chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of the study's philosophical positioning, research approach and research design, offering an in-depth analysis of the strategies used to conduct the study. Beyond methodological choices, this chapter also includes a critical reflection on the study's credibility, addressing key aspects such as trustworthiness, validity and reliability. This chapter aims to establish the methodological procedures and the ethical integrity of the research, providing a foundation for the following analysis and findings.

**Chapter 5: The empirical findings and analysis.** This chapter will present the empirical findings of the study and analyze them through interpretation and the lens of the theoretical framework. The data collection process involved several steps, beginning by coding the collected data. This was followed by creating sub-themes, which eventually led to the identification of three main-themes: "perfection in a curated setting", "embodying the ideal femininity" and the "labor of looking polished".

**Chapter 6: The discussion.** This section highlights the key empirical findings in the previous chapter, bridging it with the research question and overarching theoretical framework. It critically examines how the results relate to, challenge, or expand upon existing theories of identity performance and aspirational class. The chapter outlines the study's theoretical contributions, offering insights into how digital identity is performed within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. In addition, the broader societal implications of the findings are explored.

**Chapter 7: The conclusion.** This final chapter concludes the research by reflecting on the research question in relation to the study's findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of directions for future research, suggesting how the study's results could inform and inspire further exploration of identity performance, class signaling and aesthetic labor in online contexts.

## 2. Prior research

*This section will bring up and discuss prior research that has been conducted in the area of identity performance and social distinction on digital platforms, two key domains in consumer culture research. By reviewing prior research, existing knowledge gaps in the literature have been identified, which this study intends to address. The aim is not only to fill these gaps but also to expand and refine the current theoretical frameworks in the field. This approach is expected to deepen the general understanding of identity performance and aspirational class in the digital platform.*

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### 2.1 Online identity performance on social media

Previous research has explored identity self-verification on Instagram, examining topics such as fashion designers' social media engagement (Cheung & Choi, 2022), the role of emojis in creating an online persona and identity (Marko, 2023), and identity performance among female entrepreneurs (Heizmann, 2022). Murray (2015) further explores the cultural significance of posting selfies on Instagram, highlighting their role as a powerful form of self-expression, particularly among young women. While often dismissed as trivial or narcissistic, this research argues that selfies can serve as important tools for self-definition and identity construction (Murray, 2015). These studies have largely analyzed Instagram posts, including selfies, yet little attention in previous research has been given to how identity construction might differ on TikTok, a platform where users express their identity through a video format.

Several previous studies have examined different TikTok communities primarily used by young women, exploring how these aesthetics and communities provide a space for identity construction for its members (Steinke et al. 2024; Jerasa, 2025; Cano & Sklar, 2024; Sandall, 2024). Firstly, Steinke et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study where their focus was on observing women's self presentation of identity on TikTok through exploration of the Women in STEM community. The focus was additionally on platform features and how they were used to promote audience engagement. Jerasa's (2025) study examines how reading identity is constructed online through the #BookTok community. However, the findings focus specifically

on reading identity (self-perception and practices related to reading) and do not address identity construction in a broader sense. This niche means that the results may not be fully transferable to other forms of identity construction. While this research, similarly to the study by Jerasa (2025), focuses on a particular community and aesthetic, in this case the *Clean Girl*, the goal is to gain insights about identity formation that would be transferable rather than insights that are specific only to the *Clean Girl* identity. Moreover, Jerasa's (2025) study was conducted through an online survey and virtual interviews. As identity in this study is largely viewed as performative on social media it could be beneficial to examine identity construction without alerting the individuals that they are being observed, since awareness of observation might lead to adjusted behavior or less honest responses. Thus, exploring identity performance and construction through a more passive approach, such as a netnography, could potentially provide more authentic and accurate insights.

Cano & Sklar's (2024) study conducted a similar investigation to this study, by observing the PunkTok community, applying Goffman's (1959) framework to examine identity performance. Their findings reveal that contextual information, like hashtags and the demonstration of experience and knowledge are important for identifying and authenticating PunkTok-identity. Moreover, while Cano & Sklar's (2024) research was limited to a U.S. sample, it would be interesting to observe profiles globally, which could lead to more transferable and generalizable insights. Another study, by Sandall (2024), researched identity construction on TikTok through the #BimboTok community. While both *BimboTok* and *Clean Girl* are linked to hyper-femininity (Sandall, 2024; Hedström 2024), they differ significantly, with the *Clean Girl* trend being a more contemporary aesthetic and widely embraced aesthetic across social platforms (Lobad, 2024). Despite the aesthetic being highly popular in the last few years (Lobad, 2024; Jones, 2025), no previous research has investigated the *Clean Girl* aesthetic and how it enables TikTok users to perform and construct an identity associated with it, as well as the ways in which they do so.

In another study, Wang and Feng (2022) examine identity performance on TikTok in a way that closely aligns with our approach. However, their focus is limited to Chinese women who are "wanghong" (meaning micro-celebrity), while this study aims to examine a global sample as well as a wider range of content creators when it comes to number of followers. Wang and Feng

(2022) examine how these women construct their identities in self-branding videos on TikTok, primarily as a means to promote beauty products. In contrast, this study explores identity performance within a lifestyle- and beauty aesthetic, which may extend beyond self-branding and commercial intent to encompass a wider range of motivations behind identity performance.

## 2.2 Class, taste and the aspirational self in digital spaces

Traditionally, luxurious consumption has been viewed with the perspective of conspicuous consumption, where Veblen (1899) and Truong (2010) argue that individuals obtain high-end products and services, not only for their intrinsic value - but also to signal status and wealth to others. However, more novel research shows that the motivation for consuming luxury goods are more nuanced than what had been previously researched. These other motivations include intrinsic aspirations such as personal fulfillment, meaning individuals can obtain intrinsic satisfaction from owning high-end products (Truong, 2010; Atkinson & Kang, 2022). While Veblen (1899) suggested that lower classes emulate the upper classes in a trickle-down effect, more recent research challenges this linear model. Instead, status signals move fluidly between social groups, evolving in meaning as they are reinterpreted, remixed, and reclaimed (Bellezza & Berger, 2020). In this way, different social groups assign new significance to luxury symbols based on their values and cultural identity.

Building on these ideas, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that the democratization of conspicuous consumption in the 21st century has allowed for the middle class to access more luxury goods. As these luxury products have become more widely available, their exclusivity, and thus their role as a status marker, has diminished (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Atkinson & Kang, 2022). Currid-Halkett (2017) therefore argues that conspicuous consumption is no longer associated with the wealthy, but rather with everyone else. While traditional conspicuous consumption still remains prominent for other classes, the aspirational class has in response shifted towards “inconspicuous consumption”, where wealth is subtly displayed through investments in experiences, education and services that provide long-term advantages (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Elaborating on this, the aspirational class framework is echoed in Vaadal and Ravn’s (2021) “top girls” study, where urban young Norwegian women perform class through modest yet curated social habits. This group of women embody ideals of neoliberalism such as choice, agency and

self-optimization, as well as ideals of post-feminism, like empowerment through consumption (Vaadal & Ravn, 2021). Their wine-focused gatherings, moral distancing from hyperfemininity, and concern with future autonomy, map closely onto Currid-Halkett's (2017) notion of inconspicuous consumption as a new class marker.

While Currid-Halkett (2017) conceptualizes the aspirational class as performing status through inconspicuous consumption, favoring authenticity, education, and ethical lifestyle choices, the findings of Vazquez-Atochero and Romero-Sanz's (2025) study illustrate how these values are enacted on social media. The authors conducted a study on influencers on Instagram, using a mixed methods approach with interviews, surveys and participant observations, as well as one autoethnographic study. In this study it was found that fashion influencers on Instagram do not merely sell clothes through their profiles, they curate aspirational identities grounded in aesthetic taste, naturalness, and everyday relatability (Vazquez-Atochero & Romero-Sanz, 2025). These influencers could be said to model the aspirational class habitus in visual form, reinforcing the idea that class distinction today is less about luxury and more about curating the "right" lifestyle, one that aligns with subtle, moralized forms of cultural capital. Vazquez-Atochero and Romero-Sanz (2025) further argue that fashion serves as a powerful agent of socialization, reflecting individual identities while situating them within broader social hierarchies. Clothing on Instagram is still about taste and class, but now it is becoming more reframed through lifestyle aesthetics.

In addition, the dynamics of the aspirational class and distinctions of taste and lifestyle as described by Currid-Halkett (2017), are not limited to offline spaces. Zillien and Hargittai (2009) conducted a large-scale quantitative study on internet users in Germany, and found that even in online environments, class-based distinction is visible. It was found that individuals with higher social status are more likely to use the internet for "capital-enhancing" activities, such as seeking health information or reading political news, while lower-status users are more likely to engage in recreational or social uses, like chatting (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). This insight deepens the notion that digital culture mirrors offline class structures, and that people don't just consume differently online, they also perform class differently online. However, while Zillien and Hargittai (2009) show that social distinction is visible online, less is known about how these

individuals actually perform aspirational identities in digital spaces. Their work does not explore the symbolic dimension of digital self-performance, such as influencer aesthetics or lifestyle branding. Further, Levina and Arriaga (2014) deepen this perspective by showing that platform design itself plays a key role in shaping how distinction and status are produced in digital spaces. This framing highlights that digital class distinction is not just about what people do online, but also about how digital environments structure opportunities for status acquisition and self-presentation. Building on these findings, this study will investigate how cultural and visual cues are used in aspirational identity performance within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, including both usage patterns and performative expressions of class online.

### 2.3 Critical lens on prior research

Prior research on online identity has largely observed the social media platform Instagram (Cheung & Choi, 2022; Marko, 2023; Heizmann, 2022; Murray, 2015), and therefore to a great degree has been focusing on image-based self-presentation. In contrast, research surrounding identity performance on TikTok, where short-form videos are the primary medium, remains comparatively underexplored. This is important to investigate, as the design of different user-generated content platforms shapes not only how individuals interact, but also how they perform social status (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by observing individuals' identity performance on TikTok, where aesthetic choices and visual cues intersect to create a more layered form of online self-expression. Specifically, it will investigate the understudied *Clean Girl* aesthetic, offering a new lens on aspirational identity.

Although some prior studies have begun to explore TikTok communities linked to young women's identity formation, such as *BookTok* (Jerasa, 2025), *Women in STEM* (Steinke et al. 2024), *PunkTok* (Cano & Sklar, 2024) and *#BimboTok* (Sandall, 2024), these studies tend to be limited by narrow cultural scopes, quantitative methods, or focus on platform features rather than content and aesthetics. Therefore, this study will be using a qualitative netnographic approach, analyzing a global sample, and investigating a highly influential aesthetic that has yet to be studied. By doing so, it will address methodological and conceptual gaps in previous research, offering richer insight into how identity is visually and culturally performed on TikTok.

Moreover, while previous studies have focused primarily on how social class manifests in differences in what people do online (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009), and how digital platform designs shape how users gain status (Levina & Arriaga, 2014), less attention has been paid to how class is symbolically embodied and visually performed through social media content. Similarly, the aspirational class (Currid-Halkett, 2017) has yet to be empirically explored within the dynamic, fast-moving world of social media aesthetics. There is a gap in understanding how aspirational identity is constructed and performed visually by content creators, particularly among young women, through trends such as the *Clean Girl* aesthetic.

### 3. Theoretical framework

*This chapter will summarize existing research relevant to the study, discussing key theories, concepts, and previous findings related to two main frameworks: identity performance and aspirational class. This study aims to integrate these two concepts to provide a new perspective on online identity performance, enabling the discovery of new insights and findings. The Clean Girl aesthetic is a phenomenon where identity performance intersects with expressions of aspirational class. Therefore, in order to uncover these insights, the combined concepts will be used to analyze TikTok videos associated with the Clean Girl aesthetic.*

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#### 3.1 Identity performance

Goffman (1959) argues that in social situations, individuals aim to manage the impressions they give to others by intentionally adjusting their appearance, manners, and setting to guide others' perceptions and to perform a specific image. He further means that this management of impressions, or so called self-performance is a constant effort to maintain order and create a convincing reality, a dynamic process defined by both societal expectations and personal motives (Goffman, 1959). The desired image an individual constructs is maintained, by performing coherent behaviors, which Goffman (1959) coined as impression management. He argues that individuals manage the impressions they make to others to be perceived as embodying their desired identity. Similarly, to prevent unintended impressions, individuals must adjust their behavior and actions, including physical appearance and body language (Goffman, 1959). This identity performance can be seen as a show being performed on a stage by actors and stems from individuals' self-perception rather than being affected by the presence of others (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, an observer's interpretation is purely based on the presented image. The show, or an individual's presentation of their own self, is a constant performance that carries on everyday.

To understand how the theatrical aspects of Goffman's (1959) theory are implemented in practice there are some important terms to be aware of. The social interaction between individuals can be seen as the theatrical performance, and there is a so-called front region, where the individuals, namely performers, are on stage, performing in front of the audience (Goffman, 1959). The front

region of the stage also includes the setting which the performance is made in, which can include different stage props, decor, furniture, other background objects and physical layouts (Goffman, 1959). It is on the front stage where desired impressions of the self are performed through manners and appearance. Moreover, Goffman (1959) also mentions a back region, which offers the individual a space to prepare for performance or disengage from their performed role.

Instead of seeing possessions as props in identity performance (Goffman, 1959), Belk (1988) argues that they are a part of the extended self, and are a vital aspect of the individual's identity. He means that the extended self is not limited to the mind or body, but also includes external possessions, experiences, places and people that are part of the identity. Belk (1988) discusses four levels of the extended self: individual, family, community and group/nation. Objects can be integrated with the individual self in various ways. An object can be integrated by controlling it, like for instance body parts. The more control an individual has over an object, the more integrated it becomes (Belk, 1988). Belk (1988) means that when someone purchases an item, it can be seen not only as a transaction but as a form of creation - one that is influenced by the symbolic power of money. Purchasing power expands our sense of self by broadening the range of objects we can possess and incorporate into our identity (Belk, 1988). Another way to extend the self is through knowledge. Gaining extensive familiarity with an object or person can lead to their incorporation into one's self-concept, as that understanding fosters a sense of connection and ownership (Belk, 1988). While these are intentional ways of integrating something into the self, Belk (1988) also points out unintentional processes, most notably through what he terms contamination. This occurs when symbolic qualities are transferred to the self through physical contact or proximity, often without deliberate intention. Contamination can carry either positive or negative connotations, but in both cases, it explains how the self can be shaped by objects in subtle and involuntary ways (Belk, 1988).

Belk (2014) further expands on this theory by introducing how contemporary digital aspects can be integrated into the extended self, expanding the traditional view on identity and self-representation. He argues that the digital aspect allows individuals to present their identity in new ways on digital platforms, where they are no longer affected by physical constraints. Examples of this are social media personas, avatars in games, and profiles on dating sites (Belk,

2014). Belk (2014) furthermore means that these types of online identities serve as a digital extension of the self, allowing individuals to interact and express themselves in a digital environment. He argues that videos, pictures and other virtual objects also can be integrated into the extended self. Belk (2014) also highlights that an identity can be co-constructed, through two-way communication in digital spaces such as social media. For instance when friends post photos of an individual, tag them in these, add comments to their posts, and provide feedback on their appearance and activities (Belk, 2014). Individuals might seek social validation on social media through posting disparaging comments about themselves, with the expectation that others online will answer affirmingly, contradicting their claims, in order to gain validation (Belk, 2014).

Furthermore, Schau and Gilly (2003) expand on Goffman's (1959) concept of social performance, meaning that individuals through consumption behaviors aim to project a desired identity. Through consuming specific brands and products, even by merely showcasing the use on digital spaces, an individual can perform and showcase their desired identity, as well as showing who they are not (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Similarly to Belk's (2014) point that digital spaces have transformed the way individuals can project their identity, Schau and Gilly (2003) agree and discuss how this can be done in the digital age. According to Schau and Gilly (2003) individuals invest meanings in objects, which serve as non-verbal communicators to express their connection to the material world, which could be linked to Belk's (1988) concept of investing psychic energy in an object that one sees as being highly integrated into the extended self. Therefore, implying that individuals invest energy and meaning in objects that they believe can help them perform and construct their desired identity. Schau and Gilly (2003) further discuss why individuals create and manage their personal website and online profiles. They mention that consumers create these profiles as a form of conspicuous self-presentation, where an online persona is created to appear on the personal page. There can be several motivations behind why an individual starts a personal page for themselves, for instance a triggering event or a desire for personal growth and advocacy (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Lastly, the authors also argue that through the digital spaces, association is no longer affected by physical constraints as content creators can digitally associate themselves with objects, brands and places no matter where they are. This can be done through showcasing logos that represent certain identities,

linking to certain webpages, text, images, icons, as well as posting photos and videos including particular objects that strengthens the individual's aspired identity.

### 3.1.1 Gender identity as a performative act

Judith Butler's (1990) theory on gender performativity makes a distinction between the sex an individual is assigned at birth, and the gender an individual performs and becomes. Butler (1990) therefore means that gender is not an inherent identity tied to the biological sex, but rather a performance. Additionally she argues that gender is created by repeated mannerisms, behaviors and language use, which in turn shapes the illusion of a coherent gender identity. Butler's (1990) theory of gender as a performative act challenges the traditional view of female and male identities, presenting that both genders are constructed through socio-cultural processes rather than being biologically inherent. Therefore, Butler's work emphasizes the more fluid nature of gender boundaries, questioning and destabilizing traditional ideas of what is considered feminine and masculine. Moreover, Spielmann et al. (2020) introduce the concept of gendered products, which entails that products are given different values depending if their branding is perceived as feminine or masculine and the gender of the targeted consumer. Therefore, the authors argue that brands can be categorized as "gendered" through traditional gender cues. Examples of this are associating softness with femininity and hardness with masculinity (Spielmann et al. 2020).

## 3.2 Aspirational class and 'good taste'

Traditionally, social distinction has been explained as something shaped by the relationships between various social groups, which are positioned relative to one another based on the types and volume of capital they hold (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu further identified three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. These different forms of capital are not static, and can be converted; for example, economic capital can be transformed into gained cultural capital and social capital. According to Bourdieu (1984), our consumption choices are heavily influenced by our upbringing and socialization. These choices, in turn, reinforce and reflect our social position. Over time, repeated patterns of consumption form recognizable lifestyles that distinguish one social group from another. In this context, taste functions as a form of social distinction, as it acts

as a marker of class, revealing differences in access to economic, social, and cultural resources (Arsel & Bean, 2023).

Bourdieu (1984) also emphasized that specific social positions are associated with particular lifestyles and the consumption practices required to perform and sustain those lifestyles. An individual's status is closely tied to their cultural capital, shaped by factors such as family background, level of education and consistency in performing certain norms and behaviors. Those with high cultural capital are not only able to define what is considered "good taste", but they also embody it and recognize it in others. Finally, Bourdieu (1984) highlighted how taste and consumption preferences play a crucial role in maintaining social distinction. They foster feelings of closeness or alienation among consumers, thereby reinforcing the structure of the social space, which is determined by both the quantity and the nature of the resources individuals possess (Arsel & Bean, 2023).

However, recent studies challenge the traditional view that consumer taste is simply a matter of individual preference or class distinction. Instead, taste is increasingly understood as a product of market-mediated practices, social norms and collective cultural understanding (Arsel & Bean, 2013). This shift is captured in the concept of taste regimes, which are structured systems of cultural meaning and normative practices, that guide how consumers develop taste in specific areas, such as fashion (Arsel & Bean, 2013). These taste regimes operate through communities of practice, where individuals actively co-create and share standards of what is considered tasteful. Further, taste should not be seen as something developed in isolation, but rather through active engagement with market resources such as social media and blogs, that help consumers refine their aesthetic or style (Arsel & Bean, 2023). Arsel and Bean (2013) further argue that taste regimes consist of three interconnected elements: normative discourses, material practices and subject formation. Normative discourses are the cultural expectations that define what is considered tasteful, while material practices involve the actual hands-on, embodied activities through which taste is enacted by people, such as shopping. Lastly, subject formation includes the ways in which individuals craft their identities and lifestyles through these practices. Importantly, Arsel and Bean (2013) emphasize that taste is not a fixed attribute. Rather, it evolves through personal experience, experimentation, and social validation. Their perspective

reframes consumer taste as a dynamic and socially embedded practice, shaped not only by class-based disposition but also by media, market influences, and community engagement.

Connected to this notion of taste being shaped by normative practices and community, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that there is a new way of showing social capital and status signaling to show which class you belong to. This new group, called the aspirational class, is defined through its shared cultural capital. The individuals speak the same kind of language, they acquire similar kinds of knowledge and they share the same values, all of which embody their collective consciousness (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Their symbolic position in society still manifests itself through material goods, but mostly they reveal their class position through cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and their value system. In this way, this new group is tied together by a shared set of cultural practices and social norms, rather than by income level and economic capital (Currid-Halkett, 2017). The material goods and practices become the signifiers of this knowledge and thus in turn show membership within this group. The consumption of the aspirational class acts as a signal of its members' philosophy of life and their value system. Further, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that members of this new cultural and social formation aspire to be better humans overall, meaning that their economic position is not as important. Currid-Halkett (2017) also mentions conspicuous leisure, meaning engaging in leisure activities that signals social status and cultural capital rather than merely doing it because of relaxation or health. This describes how individuals can display wealth through engagement in exclusive, high status leisure activities like pilates and yoga, acting like markers of cultural distinction among affluent groups, signalling belonging to an elite lifestyle characterized by refined taste and social status (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

This leads to the most recent research connecting theories of taste and aspirational class to the evolving dynamics of the digital landscape. Scholars are now examining how the performance of taste and the signaling of social distinction manifest in online spaces. Bellezza (2020) explores how physical, social and psychological distance affects individuals' perceptions and expressions of social status. The author argues that in contexts where individuals are physically distant, such as virtual environments like digital platforms, traditional status markers like clothing, cars, or homes lose much of their relevance. Instead, in these settings, individuals shift toward alternative

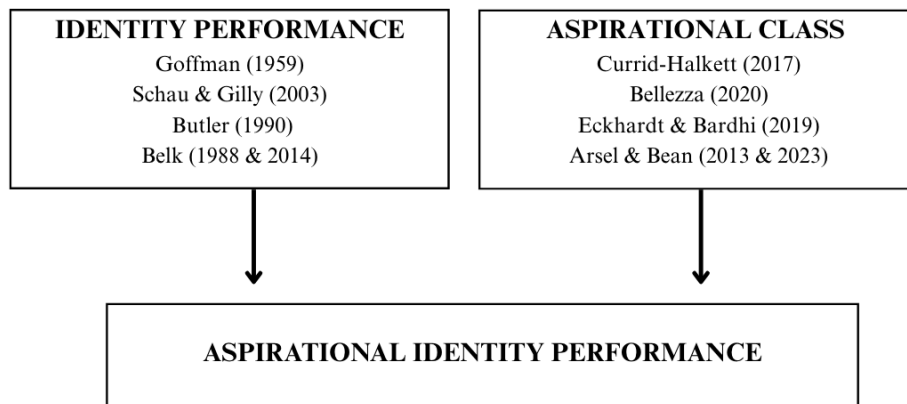
indicators of status, such as communication style, expertise and digital reputation (Bellezza, 2020). Building on Currid-Halkett's (2017) claim that knowledge, expertise and cultural capital are central to the formation of the aspirational class, Bellezza (2020) further argues that social influence, such as large online followings, has become an important signal of high status. Online elites frequently demonstrate their status through behavioral signals, such as projecting confidence, displaying authority, and engaging selectively with their audiences (Bellezza, 2020). These behavioral markers also include minimalist aesthetics and strategic understatement, where flashy displays of consumption are intentionally avoided in favor of subtle sophistication (Bellezza, 2020).

Similarly, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) investigate the influence of social media and the growing importance of digital reputation in contemporary status signaling. The authors argue that maintaining a strong digital presence is now a crucial way of displaying social prestige. High follower counts, engagement on accounts, and visibility on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn contribute to this status signaling and serve as new forms of social capital (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019). The authors further argue that in the contemporary marketplace, the two most important aspects for achieving social distinction is: (1) the flexibility to adapt to new possibilities and assume new identity projects, and (2) the attention gained from building an online persona, representing a form of social capital. Gaining attention in the digital space has become especially important and valued, as it could often be transformed directly to either economic capital or social capital. Similar to Currid-Halkett (2017) and Bellezza (2020), Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) insist that while traditional luxury goods still play a role, they are increasingly secondary to more fluid and experience-based status indicators. They argue that digital clout, such as being a trendsetter in a niche, can bring more status than material wealth. As a result of this, individuals actively curate their online identities, carefully managing the content they share to project an aspirational or exclusive image (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019).

### 3.3 Overview of theoretical framework

This study brings together two main theoretical perspectives, identity performance and aspirational class, to develop an integrated lens for analyzing how young women construct and perform aspirational identities within online aesthetics. Rather than treating these frameworks in

isolation, they are combined to offer a more nuanced understanding of how self-presentation, social distinction, and class-coded behaviors intersect on platforms like TikTok. By synthesizing theories from both domains, the framework enables a more holistic view of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, capturing not only how identity is performed and managed in digital environments, but also how this performance is shaped by class-based ideals of cultural capital. The result is a combined lens referred to as aspirational identity performance.



*Figure a. Theoretical overview*

### 3.4 Chapter summary

How individuals construct and express their identity has traditionally been viewed through different lenses. Firstly, Goffman's (1959) management impression argues that people actively adjust their manners and physical appearance to perform their desired identity, in other words, the way they want to be perceived by others. Similarly, Butler (1990) describes gender as a performance. This self-performance can be viewed as actors performing a desired role on a stage for an audience, using "props" like settings, decor, and objects to create a convincing portrayal (Goffman, 1959). Belk (1988) differs from Goffman (1959) by arguing that possessions are not merely props for identity performance, instead, they form an integral part of the extended self and are vital to an individual's identity and to who they are. Belk (2014) expands on the extended self theory by discussing how digital possessions can be integrated into who we are. He means that for instance online avatars and online personas can become an integral part of the individual's identity. Schau and Gilly (2003) instead argue that individuals use consumption to

project a desired identity, both to show who they are and are not. They emphasize that individuals invest meaning in objects as non-verbal communicators and manage online profiles for conspicuous self-presentation. Digital spaces eliminate physical constraints, allowing individuals to freely associate with objects and brands to strengthen their aspired identity (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Additionally, several perspectives on social distinction have been explored. Traditionally, social distinction has been understood as closely linked to an individual's taste and consumption preferences, largely shaped by their upbringing and socialization (Bourdieu, 1984). However, more recent studies argue that taste is not a completely individual preference but rather a product of market-mediated practices and cultural understanding, affected by taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013). Currid-Halkett (2017) introduces the aspirational class, which is defined by collective cultural capital and values rather than economic status or consumption, signaling their position through knowledge and lifestyle. In the digital landscape, physical distance diminishes traditional status markers, shifting emphasis to communication style, expertise, and digital reputation as well as to the amount of followers one has (Bellezza, 2020). Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) highlight the importance of a strong digital presence and online persona as new forms of social capital, arguing that digital clout can surpass material wealth in achieving social distinction. Individuals now curate their online identities to project aspirational images, carefully managing their digital content (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019).

## 4. Research method

*This chapter will provide a comprehensive exploration of the research approach and method, offering an in-depth analysis of the strategies used to conduct the study. Beyond method choices, this chapter also includes a critical reflection on the study's credibility, addressing key aspects such as trustworthiness, validity and reliability. This chapter will establish the method's procedures and the ethical integrity of the research, providing a foundation for the following analysis and findings.*

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### 4.1 Philosophical positioning

The aim of this study is to investigate how young women construct and perform aspirational identities on digital platforms, specifically through their participation in the *Clean Girl* aesthetic on TikTok. To explore this, the study adopts a netnographic approach, observing and analyzing the behaviors, routines, and visual practices of individuals participating in this online aesthetic. This inquiry is based on the understanding that identity is not fixed or singular, but instead fluid, multiple, and contextually performed. As such, the study assumes that individuals may hold and express various identities depending on social settings, audience, and platform-specific norms. Further, the understanding of this study is that identity can be performative, shaped by specific social, cultural and technological context in which it is enacted.

This perspective aligns with a relativist ontological stance, which entails that multiple realities and truths can coexist, shaped by individual experiences and cultural frameworks (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In line with this ontology, the study is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology, viewing knowledge as co-constructed through social interaction, cultural meaning systems, and mediated performances (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Identity, in this view, is not something to be discovered as a static truth, but rather something that is continuously performed, negotiated, and interpreted within a social context. Consequently, the research follows a qualitative methodological approach, emphasizing interpretive analysis and meaning-making within a specific cultural and aesthetic context, and accounting for the meanings individuals attach to their own performance and the symbolic resources they draw on.

Further, by using a netnographic approach, the study captures identity as a lived, visual, and mediated experience that unfolds in digital spaces and is embedded in aesthetic codes. Rather than seeking to define what identity is, this study seeks to understand how identity is constructed, signaled, and socially interpreted through patterns of performance within a specific online aesthetic culture.

## 4.2 Abductive approach

This study had an abductive approach, meaning that there was a constant interaction between theory and data (Bell et al. 2022). This abductive approach allowed for an open mind to emerging insights, while also engaging critically with existing literature. This includes identifying patterns and trends in the findings, and aiming to seek the best explanations for the observed data (Bell et al. 2022). The study aimed to expand and refine existing theories rather than generating new ones, based on the empirical findings and theoretical insights.

In this study, an abductive approach enabled a flexible yet rigorous examination of how identity is performed within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic on TikTok. As empirical patterns emerged during the data collection, the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter was revisited, in order to make sense of the nuanced ways that class and identity are performed in digital spaces. The abductive approach allowed to refine existing understandings of aspirational identity performance, by situating them within a specific online aesthetic. This process further allowed for the theoretical framework to be shaped by the data, highlighting tensions and uncovering new dimensions of class signaling and identity performance online. Furthermore, an abductive approach was deemed appropriate given the cultural specificity and fast-evolving nature of aesthetic trends on platforms like TikTok, where meaning is constantly negotiated through performance, repetition, and audience feedback.

## 4.3 Research design

### 4.3.1 Netnography

In this study, a qualitative research design was applied, using netnography as the research technique. Netnography is defined as “... a form of ethnography that examines online cultures and life that is often deployed in a marketing context with the aim of understanding consumer behavior.” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021. p. 248). Moreover, this method was considered a well-suited and tailored approach for analyzing online communities, since it can reveal crucial aspects of online behavior such as values, meanings and language that consumers share when they create online culture (Bell et al. 2022; Belk et al. 2012). Given the aim of the thesis, netnography was deemed an appropriate data collection method, since it is possible to capture performative, visual and context-dependent identity work. Since the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is inherently visual, analyzing it through a method that observes digital behavior without interference enables a more authentic understanding of how identity is constructed, performed and signaled online.

Further, this study utilized a non-participant netnographic approach, where the researchers observed content without directly interacting with creators or influencing the digital environment. Examining online interactions without the researchers’ active intervention or participation is essential for a non-participant netnography (Bell et al. 2022). This process is described as “lurking”, and entails ethical considerations, particularly since the individuals being observed are not aware of the fact that they are being studied. While this may raise ethical concerns, Bertilsson (2009) argues that studying publicly accessible content, especially from individuals actively broadcasting their identity to large audiences, can be seen as ethically permissible. Further, informed consent is not needed when the method uses passive analysis of posts online (Bertilsson, 2009). Thus, these users, by engaging in public performance on a highly visible platform, can be understood as public figures.

Moreover, the collected data could be seen as documentary data, specifically media outputs in the form of social media posts (Bell et al. 2022). Rather than treating these videos as transparent representations of an underlying reality, they were interpreted as constructing a distinct level of

reality in their own right. The analysis considers both the context in which the content was produced and its intended audience, acknowledging that the videos were likely curated to create a favorable impression, both of the individual users and of the broader identity they sought to embody. In analysing this visual material, attention was paid to what was presented, but also what was purposefully left out. As Bell et al. (2022) emphasize, researchers must remain sensitive to the implicit messages within visual content, exploring the potential detachment between the curated portrayal and the lived experience it appears to represent. This required a critical lens, looking beneath the surface to understand the symbolic and performative dimensions of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic as enacted on TikTok.

#### 4.3.2 Sampling method

This study employed a netnographic research design to explore the behaviors performed by female TikTok users engaged with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. The gathered data was guided by the central research question, focusing on observed actions and patterns within a selected sample of users. Participant selection followed a purposive sampling strategy (Bell et al. 2022), targeting TikTok users whose content aligned with (1) key characteristics of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic - namely young women embodying *Clean Girl* and showcasing *Clean Girl* aspects such as minimalist settings and beauty routines, (2) having more than 30K followers, and (3) the videos fall under both the categories of lifestyle and beauty content. While purposive sampling was the main approach, elements of snowball sampling were also present. Snowball sampling can be effective when studying social networks or communities with shared identities (Bell et al. 2022). In this case, although participants were not recruited through direct referrals, once an initial user matching the study's criteria was identified, their network was explored to find similar profiles. This involved an evaluative process to ensure that additional participants also embodied the relevant characteristics for inclusion in the study. Ultimately, six participants were selected, and their TikTok posts were monitored over a selected three-month period. Videos posted during this time were monitored to observe ongoing engagement with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, with relevant videos then analyzed in greater depth. In total 515 videos were examined and analyzed.

TikTok creator	Reference name	Observing time	Number of videos	Followers (8/5 2025)	Link to TikTok profile
@eleonoraue	Eleonora	1/1 2025 - 31/3 2025	26	738.5 K	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@eleonoraue">https://www.tiktok.com/@eleonoraue</a>
@vanessafaga	Vanessa	1/1 2025 - 31/3 2025	50	1.6 M	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@vanessafaga">https://www.tiktok.com/@vanessafaga</a>
@ninalaurent_	Nina	1/1 2025 - 31/3 2025	135	38.1 K	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@ninalaurent_">https://www.tiktok.com/@ninalaurent_</a>
@celinekiim	Celine	21/6 2024 - 22/9 2024	25	80.9 K	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@celinekiim">https://www.tiktok.com/@celinekiim</a>
@blissmaja	Maya	23/1 2025 - 23/4 2025	75	180.1 K	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@blissmaja">https://www.tiktok.com/@blissmaja</a>
@juliabelzaa	Julia	23/1 2025 - 23/4 2025	280	631.6 K	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@juliabelzaa">https://www.tiktok.com/@juliabelzaa</a>

*Table a. Sample overview*

The sample selection process was guided by a deliberate effort to ensure that the collected data would provide meaningful and insightful contributions to the research question. An initial round of data collection was conducted, followed by a process of refining and filtering content that did not align with the study's aims. Additional rounds of targeted collection followed, to refine the dataset. This repeated approach allowed for the inclusion of more targeted and meaningful material in the following stages of analysis. To identify relevant posts for the data collection, keyword searches were conducted within the TikTok app. The search terms used included: *clean girl*, *clean girl luxury*, *clean girl lifestyle*, *clean girl GRWM*, *clean girl skincare*, *clean girl must haves*, *clean girl products*. This approach ensured that the selected material reflected the diversity of expressions within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, while staying aligned with the core research objectives.

#### 4.3.3 The TikTok platform

In order to investigate the cultural and behavioral dynamics of consumers engaging with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, social media data was systematically collected from TikTok. The platform was chosen due to its strong association with the emergence and spread of the *Clean Girl* trend

(Jones, 2025; Lobad, 2024), as well as its relevance to the target demographic. At the time of the data collection, TikTok featured approximately 764.1K posts under the hashtag #cleangirl, compared to Instagram's 362K posts (see appendix 1), demonstrating its central role in the trend's visibility and influence. The platform has a fairly even distribution of genders with 44.3% of the users being women, and 55.7% being men (Ceci, 2025b). Additionally, 28.7% of TikTok users are women aged 18-34 (Ceci, 2025a), which closely aligns with the target group for this study, women aged 15-35. This indicates that a significant portion of the platform's user base is relevant to our research. TikTok's format, which emphasizes short-form video content, was particularly suited for capturing identity, as the act of filming oneself to post publicly could encourage a performative style. Videos were analyzed as curated performances designed to project an aspirational identity associated with cleanliness, minimalism, and luxury. To understand how users enacted this identity, attention was paid to manners, body language, language, symbolic imagery, placement and use of products, aesthetic choices, physical appearance, settings and other props. Both the visible elements and the deliberate absence of certain elements in the videos were considered, as they contributed to the overall portrayal of the *Clean Girl* identity. As this study is limited to TikTok and does not examine how the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is performed on other platforms, it could potentially jeopardize the generalizability of the study since other platforms might have different algorithms, audience dynamics and different main posting formats, such as photographs rather than short videos. However, as many digital platforms share similar features, the findings of this study could still be deemed generalizable.

#### 4.3.4 *Clean Girl* videos

The scope of the study was defined by restricting observations to content created by women aged 15-35, meaning the findings might not be transferable to masculine or nonbinary expressions of performative aspirational identity. The age group was deliberately chosen because this limited empirical sample provided a sharper focus for the study. This concentrated approach enabled the researchers to conduct a more in-depth analysis, providing clearer and more accurate insights. The age group was also assessed as relevant considering that a large number of the female users of the platform were included in this age group (Ceci, 2025a). Moreover, since the *Clean Girl* aesthetic emerged on TikTok (Jones, 2025; Lobad, 2024), where most female users fall within this age range (Ceci, 2025a), and the trend is most prominent there compared to other platforms,

focusing on this age group is considered an appropriate study limitation. Even though there are many similar trends on TikTok, the study was confined to the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, which allowed for a deeper and more focused exploration within the time constraints of the research. Another defining aspect of the research was the recognition that the individuals producing this content could be perceived as both consumers and content creators. On platforms like TikTok, these roles often overlap, as individuals simultaneously engage in product consumption and digital content creation. Therefore, the study incorporated both consumer and content creator perspectives, recognizing the blurred boundaries between consumption and creation in the social media environments. Given TikTok's global reach, the collected data was also inherently international in character, offering insight into how the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is enacted across cultural contexts.

#### 4.3.5 Data analysis

Following the completion of the data collection, a qualitative content analysis was done in order to examine the material through symbolic and metaphorical interpretation, allowing for the identification of subtle nuances within the data (Kozinets, 2002). This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the cultural and behavioral dynamics at play, particularly in relation to how individuals construct and perform aspirational identities through their online content. To systematically analyze the data, the process was structured into three key stages: sorting, reducing and arguing for the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

In the sorting stage, the primary focus was on repeatedly going through the data in order to detect patterns, repetitions, similarities and contradictions across the collected material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Bell et al. 2022). This step allowed for the identification of recurring themes and elements that appeared consistently through the dataset. Qualitative content analysis was used to extract and illustrate these themes, through direct quotations and descriptive interpretations (Bell et al. 2022). Additionally, elements of discourse analysis were applied to examine the language used in the videos. Specific keywords and phrasing associated with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic were analyzed for their role in shaping and conveying identity. A visual pattern analysis was also conducted, not only paying attention to what was represented in the videos, but also how the content was visually composed (Bell et al. 2022). This included

analysing production choices such as lightning, angles, settings, repeated mannerisms, and the symbolic use of emojis or captions common within the *Clean Girl* community.

The reducing stage involved refining the data by filtering out less relevant content and focusing on significant and frequently occurring categories. Related observations were grouped together, and distinct codes began to take form, which formed the foundation for the following thematic analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Further, a bottom-up, abductive approach was adopted throughout the coding process, where individual data first was examined in isolation from theory, then categorized into broader themes. The codes were then grouped together to create sub-themes, which subsequently led to the creation of three main-themes (see appendix 2). This method allowed for organic pattern recognition, ensuring that insights emerged directly from the data rather than being directed by preconceived assumptions. The analysis can best be described as a thematic analysis, not intended to generate new theory, but rather to refine or extend the existing understanding of theoretical frameworks (Bell et al. 2022). As themes were identified, they were critically assessed in relation to the overarching research question to ensure their relevance, coherence, and analytical value. Finally, the arguing stage involved synthesizing these findings into a well reasoned analytical framework. The identified patterns were linked back to theoretical concepts and existing literature, allowing for a more grounded and well-reasoned interpretation of how the *Clean Girl* aesthetic functions within the cultural and behavioral dynamics of TikTok.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the analysis was recognizing that the individuals featured in the study may present a carefully curated online persona that differs from their real-life identity. Consequently, the unit of analysis was not the individual behind the screen but rather the digital persona and behaviors enacted through their social media posts (Bertilsson, 2009). This perspective aligns with the understanding that online content serves as a performative representation of identity, shaped by platform algorithms, audience expectations and cultural trends. Furthermore, these posts were interpreted as social actions and communicative acts, reinforcing their credibility as valuable sources of observational data (Kozinets, 2002). The symbolic and performative nature of these digital expressions provided rich material for analysis,

allowing for an in-depth exploration of how aspirational identity is performed within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic.

#### 4.4 Research quality

While conducting this study, the researchers remained conscious of potential own biases while also critically evaluating potential biases in existing literature. Recognizing these potential influences allowed for adopting a critical stance throughout every stage of the study. To uphold the integrity and rigor of the research, the following criteria were incorporated: *trustworthiness*, *contextualization*, *reflexivity*, *data richness* and *ethical considerations*. The first criteria, trustworthiness, ensures that findings are *credible*, *transferable*, *dependable* and *confirmable* (Bell et al. 2022). These principles were followed in the study to reinforce research validity.

The credibility criteria looks at how well the findings align with actual reality, and in order to ensure this, investigator triangulation has been conducted (Stahl & King, 2020). To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the researchers independently collected, processed, and analyzed the data before collaboratively discussing and formulating conclusions. The credibility has also been strengthened further by using theoretical triangulation, meaning looking at the same situation or phenomenon from different theoretical perspectives to understand the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). This can be exemplified for instance through looking at the phenomenon of identity construction from different lenses, for instance as a performance with props (Goffman, 1959) and as a part of the extended self through possessions (Belk, 1988). To further enhance the credibility of the study, detailed descriptions of TikTok posts were provided, including captions, visual aesthetics and exemplifying screenshots, thereby enriching the reader's understanding of the data.

To strengthen transferability, purposive sampling as well as a type of digital snowballing was used, effectively targeting specific users who fit the criteria of the study. While this sampling approach was efficient, it may also have led to bias in the selection of participants. However, this approach facilitated a focus on predefined criteria relevant to this study's research objectives, thereby increasing the applicability of the findings to the same aesthetic within similar digital environments. Further, the transferability could be seen as limited due to the small sample size

this study utilized. Therefore, to strengthen the transferability, the data collection process was thoroughly documented, ensuring that future research could replicate or adapt the method used.

Furthermore, in order to ensure dependability, all research phases were systematically recorded. Observations were conducted independently by the two researchers before being compared, thereby enhancing reliability. Additionally, given the dynamic nature of social media, platform algorithms and user behaviors were recognized as evolving factors that could shift, and thereby influence the circulation of digital beauty trends. Nonetheless, this research provides a snapshot of contemporary trends. Furthermore, the study has continuously been followed by an experienced supervisor functioning as a support. The supervisor's feedback and advice has been taken into consideration as well as been used as a guide to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The critical feedback of the supervisor offers an insider perspective and valuable feedback before publication, thereby demonstrating trust in the research, says Stahl and King (2020). Moreover, the research process has been peer reviewed by fellow students, once in the middle of the study and once more in the end.

Lastly, there is confirmability - striving to represent objective reality as accurately as possible within the scope of qualitative research (Stahl & King, 2020). Given that a performance was observed, it can be assumed that there is no fully objective truth. However, the confirmability has been strengthened by systematically collecting and analyzing rich data. It has also been strengthened by critically examining the researchers' own assumptions to prevent wrongfully shaping the interpretations of the findings. The researchers had a solid understanding of the context and culture of the digital environment of this study, as they were both very familiar with TikTok and the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. Yet, the researchers maintained an analytical distance during the analysis of the material. Essentially, the researchers interpretive framework could have influenced the interpretations of the findings, but it could also have been an asset in uncovering nuanced and deep insights.

Moreover, contextualization highlights that research findings must be interpreted within the cultural, linguistic and normative frameworks of the studied online community (Bell et al. 2022). The researchers' extensive familiarity with TikTok and its unique linguistic and cultural codes

enabled a nuanced analysis of the content. Additionally, as the researchers belonged to the same demographic as the women in the sample, an insider perspective facilitated interpretation. However, this shared perspective also presented the risk of bias, which led to careful considerations through critical self-reflection and adherence to other quality criteria being necessary. This connects to another criteria, reflexivity, which requires researchers to remain aware of their biases and preconceptions when analyzing data (Bell et al. 2022). Throughout the study, continuous critical reflection on assumptions was undertaken to ensure that personal viewpoints did not influence the interpretations. Further, a key component of qualitative research is the collection of diverse data from multiple sources (Bell et al. 2022). Due to the scope of this study, examining multiple digital platforms was not possible. Instead, this study focused specifically on TikTok content, as it aligned best with the research aims. However, to ensure that the research complied with the criteria, a broad range of TikTok posts from various content creators who met the sampling criteria were examined in order to capture multiple perspectives.

#### 4.5 Ethical considerations

Maintaining ethical integrity was a fundamental priority in the research design. The analysis was based on naturally occurring digital interactions, as outlined by Kozinets (2002). In this study the observed individuals on TikTok were not aware of the fact that they were being participants, which could be seen as an ethical breach in research. Anonymity of the users could not be ensured, as the study involved presenting screenshots of the analyzed videos. However, given that social media content is publicly accessible, observations of it and its use for research purposes could be considered as implicitly permitted (Kozinets, 2002; Bertilsson, 2009). This dismisses the risk of any ethical breaches and ensures that our study has been conducted according to sound scientific method. Conducting an archival data study in this way (Kozinets, 2002), allowed for the systematic collection of data, enabling an exploration of the community's evolving dynamics, its underlying meanings, and behavioral patterns of its members (Belk et al. 2012).

## 4.6 Method limitations

While the netnography provided deep insights into the performative construction of aspirational identity within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, alternative data collection methods could offer complementary perspectives. It could have been beneficial to complement the netnography with semi-structured interviews of individuals who see themselves as being a part of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic community. By incorporating this methodological triangulation, using more than a single method of data collection, the credibility and therefore the trustworthiness of the study could have been strengthened further (Stahl & King, 2020).

Conducting in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method could potentially uncover motivations behind users' curated content, providing rich context to the visual and symbolic patterns observed. However, interviews were not selected, as this research aimed to observe natural behavior rather than self-reported intentions. Additionally, interviews carry the risk of social desirability bias, where participants may tailor responses to align with perceived expectations. These limitations highlight potential areas for future research, that could use different kinds of data collection methods to build a more holistic understanding of online identity performance.

## 5. Empirical findings and analysis

*In the upcoming section, the key findings will be analyzed through interpretation, and through the lens of the study's theoretical framework. Data referenced but not presented visually in the analysis, can be found in appendix 3. A key finding is that the performance of perfection within the Clean Girl aesthetic is heavily influenced by aesthetic curation and minimalism, as well as luxury and class signaling. Another finding is the consistent use of traditional hyper-feminine aesthetic codes in combination with the romanticization of girlhood and youthfulness. Lastly, the findings indicate extensive labor behind the polished appearance, suggesting that the Clean Girl performance consists of two parts. Firstly, the romanticization of the labor displayed on the frontstage, and secondly, the hiding of the extensive labor backstage, in order to create the polished look that is displayed in the final video.*

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### 5.1 Perfection in a curated setting

The findings from the data collection reveal that the examined TikTok creators associated with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic carefully construct a perfect, polished and desirable online persona. This digital persona reflects status and taste, while also maintaining a minimalist aesthetic. These performances are not only about personal taste, but also about signaling cultural capital and social status in ways that resonate with contemporary ideals of quiet luxury. The users who identify with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic communicate refinement, success and social belonging, while at the same time remaining understated and seemingly effortless. Through careful visual composition, these users present a lifestyle that appears effortless and elegant, while being highly curated and disciplined behind the scenes. Further, aesthetic minimalism is a consistent feature across all six creators' content, with a controlled color palette, focusing mainly on white and pink tones. This color scheme reinforces a sense of cleanliness and order, and the pink shades emphasize the aesthetic's distinctly feminine character. The visual styling across the videos reflects a high degree of planning and editing, with every frame composed to evoke a sense of calm, control and subtle sophistication. The findings suggest that creators associated with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic engage in deliberate identity performances that align closely with Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation. These individuals manage their surroundings and product

consumption on TikTok as though they are performing on a stage, using carefully selected symbols, gestures and visual settings to shape the impressions they make on their audience.

Despite this hyper-perfection, the videos are designed to appear casual and unforced. Videos often center on routines involving cleaning, organizing or aesthetically pleasing rituals such as journaling and making matcha, activities that promote a lifestyle of balance and intentionality (Vanessa, 12/3; Celine, 21/6; Julia, 6/2; Celine, 27/6). This phenomenon is particularly straightforward in Nina's (3/1) video, where the frame is carefully curated to showcase objects only in white and pink shades, contributing to an overall impression of visual harmony. A brief shot of her skincare cabinet subtly reveals rows of luxury products. Although these items are not the focus of the video, their presence communicates status and taste to viewers who are familiar with the aesthetic's typical elements.

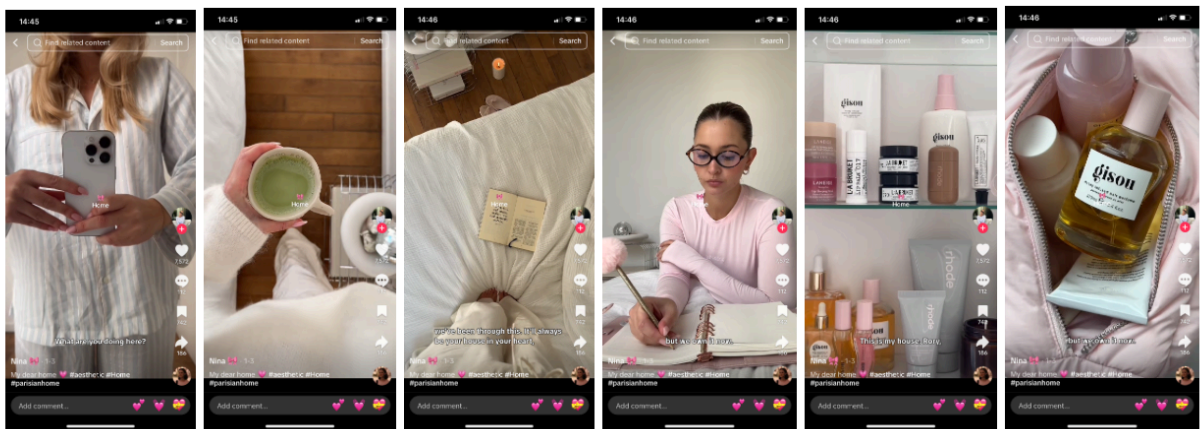


Figure b. Nina (3/1)

This form of visual signaling is intentional. The fleeting glimpse of high-end brands like Rhode, Laneige or Gisou may go unnoticed by casual viewers, yet for those immersed in the culture of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, such details carry significant meaning. The performance therefore functions on multiple levels, inviting admiration through visual beauty, while also signaling class and taste through understated luxury. Ultimately, this curated perfection in their surroundings communicates a lifestyle that is clean, calm, and disciplined, which is achieved through a lot of effort, yet is presented as effortless.

### 5.1.1 Aesthetic curation and minimalism

At the center of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic lies a highly stylized form of minimalism, one that reflects aesthetic preference as well as deeper cultural meanings related to control, discipline and status. A central element of this curated minimalism is a restricted and cohesive color palette, primarily featuring soft tones of white and pink. These colors evoke a sense of calm, femininity and refinement, and are consistently present across several creators' videos (Nina, 3/1; Julia, 29/1; Eleonora, 15/1 & 7/3; Celine, 21/6). The *Clean Girl* persona represents a highly curated front stage performance (Goffman, 1959), where elements such as lighting, color palette, product placement, and visual composition are carefully controlled to convey an image of perfection and feminine refinement. The minimalist approach appears in both physical environments and personal styling, projecting an image of simplicity, cleanliness and taste. However, this minimalist aesthetic also exists in a paradoxical relationship with the simultaneous display of abundance, particularly in the form of luxury beauty and lifestyle products. While the surface narrative promotes minimalism and restraint, the presence of an extensive range of skincare, makeup, and other wellness items suggests a curated consumption practice where having many products is still aligned with the *Clean Girl* ideal. Viewers are in that way expected to perceive this abundance as part of an overall polished and “put-together” appearance, rather than as material excess.

Another component of the aesthetic is hyper-perfection. Many videos adopt formats such as “reset routines” (Vanessa, 12/1 & 16/2; Celine, 20/7; Maya, 23/2) or “cleaning your fyp” montages (Elenora, 31/1; Vanessa, 28/1; Maya, 27/1), in which creators are seen carefully organizing and cleaning their homes and personal items. These often include restocking drawers, arranging products in symmetrical layouts, and presenting spotless and untouched surfaces throughout the creators' homes. For instance, in one video Maya (23/2) displays a carefully arranged setup, with each item purposefully positioned to enhance visual harmony. Similarly, another video (Celine, 21/6) is entirely structured around clean, composed frames, from the preparation of matcha to the application of skincare, each reinforcing a sense of hyper-perfection.

This attention to detail reinforces the idea of curated perfection, where the aesthetics of the users' videos are carefully staged to appear both flawless and effortless. In Celine's (19/7) video, the act

of packing a makeup bag becomes a performance of order and control, with each product appearing untouched, without a single smudge. All products look perfect, and the creator is carefully showing each beauty product before placing it in the makeup bag.

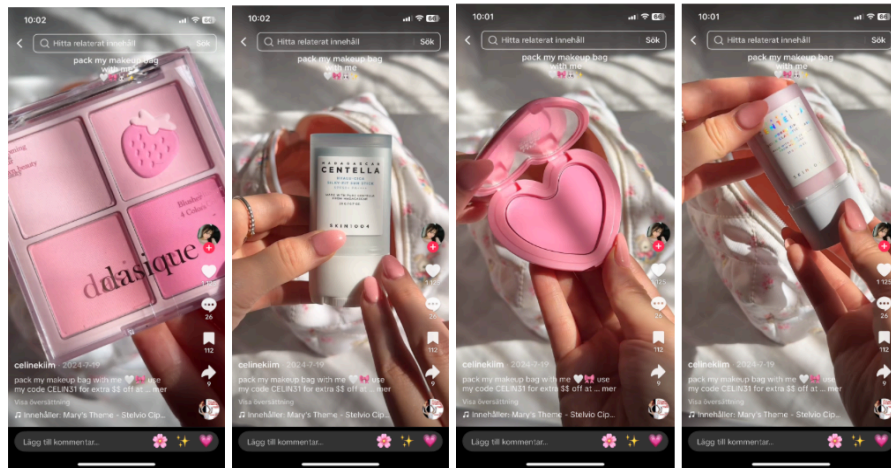


Figure c. “Pack my makeup bag with me” (Celine, 19/7)

Likewise, a brief shot in Julia’s (28/2) video features high-end skincare and makeup products placed with deliberate care, making the video and setup look perfect. The video is a montage of different minimalist settings, but this shot stands out since it is clearly very carefully staged. This can be seen to highlight how minimalism within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is not about doing more with less, but rather about carefully managing visual cues to signal organization, femininity and an elevated status. Meanwhile, the backstage labor of editing, organizing, scripting and staging is concealed from the viewer, reinforcing Goffman’s (1959) argument that the effort behind a performance is hidden to preserve the illusion of naturalness and ease. Within this framework, objects and practices such as hyper-perfection, minimalist spaces, and soft color palettes act as symbolic props that communicate control, calm and aesthetic taste. Seemingly ordinary rituals like skincare steps, cleaning videos or packing montages become stylized performances of order and self-care that project not only a particular lifestyle but also a socially desirable identity rooted in discipline and refinement.

### 5.1.2 Luxury and class signaling

A recurring element in the collected data is the subtle yet intentional display of luxury goods, a way of filming and editing that signals taste, status and cultural capital without openly emphasizing material wealth, aligning with Currid-Halkett's (2017) view on the aspirational class. Rather than showcasing luxury items through direct or explicit means, creators often incorporate them into fleeting visual moments (Eleonora, 7/3; Vanessa, 3/2; Nina, 20/2). These quick flashes of branded products are strategically embedded in broader lifestyle narratives, allowing the content to maintain a minimalist and effortless appearance while still conveying the ideal aesthetic. One illustrative example of this is found in Celine's (22/9) video, where the creator shows an overview of her packing a suitcase. The suitcase is placed on her white bed linens, and is filled with multiple luxury products and high-end gadgets. The clips in the video are deliberately brief, making the brand names difficult to make out unless one pauses or closely inspects the footage. This technique allows the viewer to absorb a general impression of affluence and sophistication, without the content appearing distinctly materialistic. Further, this method of subtle signaling aligns closely with the logic of curated perfection. The luxury products are not hidden, but neither are they the main point. Instead, they are integrated seamlessly into the aesthetic landscape of the video, appearing almost like they were captured unintentionally during a casual, everyday routine. This form of presentation contributes to the illusion of effortless, where luxury consumption appears natural, refined and unperformed.

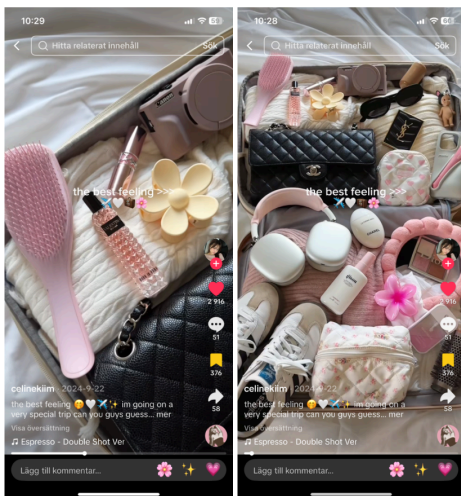


Figure d. Celine (22/9)

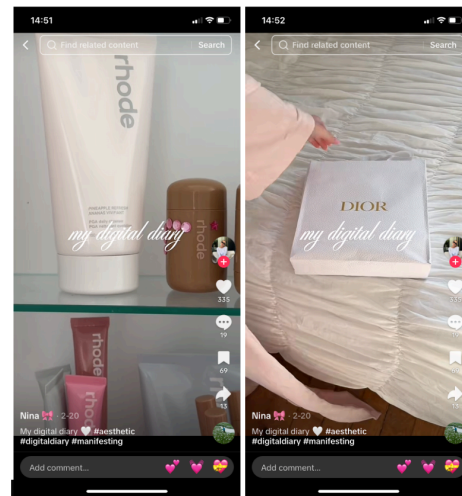


Figure e. Nina (20/2)

These performances reflect the values and consumption patterns of Currid-Halkett's (2017) aspirational class. Rather than relying on flashy displays of wealth, creators subtly integrate luxury brands, such as Rhode, Dior or Glow Recipe (Celine 22/9 & 25/6; Nina 20/2; Julia 29/1), into their videos through fleeting glimpses and understated presentation. This aligns with the aspirational class's preference for inconspicuous consumption, where cultural capital and insider knowledge of what products matter, replace traditional material excess as markers of status. The creators maintain aesthetic coherence and signal cultural belonging, by downplaying brand visibility while still making it recognizable to a knowing audience. The frequent recurrence of specific luxury brands across the sample further reinforces a shared set of cultural codes that fosters community, identity and belonging. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) notion that consumption preferences create feelings of closeness within a community, as it reinforces social distinction with those who are participating in the aesthetic.

While much of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic relies on the subtle signaling of luxury, the data also reveals a contrasting dynamic, which is an open and abundant product display. In some videos, creators engage in open product placement, showcasing an extensive array of luxury beauty and skincare items as central components of their routines (Celine, 29/6 & 25/7; Nina, 3/1). This visible product abundance suggests that a high volume of specific, often premium, products is perceived as necessary to achieve the *Clean Girl* look. The implication is that looking effortless, dewy and "put together" actually demands significant consumption. For instance, in a video a creator (Julia, 2/1) shares her "6 step everyday skincare routine", walking the viewer through each product in detail. She reflects on her evolving approach to skincare, saying: "*I never used to drench my face in creams, I would just put on one moisturizer and be done. So yes, I think for me I am slowly getting into the very dewy, very healthy looking skin which I am so happy about*".

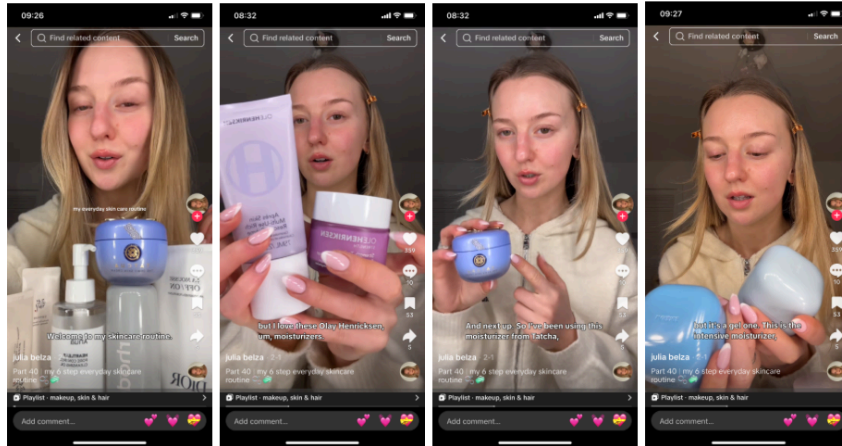


Figure f. Julia (2/1)

This narrative reinforces the notion that a multiple step routine, and by extension, multiple luxury products, are essential for achieving the idealized *Clean Girl* appearance. Here, the quantity of items itself becomes part of the aesthetic, suggesting that visible abundance of material items is also a means of achieving the *Clean Girl* look. This aligns with Arsel & Bean’s (2023) argument that social distinction is formed by both the quantity and the nature of the objects individuals possess. However, this dynamic partially contradicts Currid-Halkett’s (2017) argument that the aspirational class rejects conspicuous materialism in favour of symbolic and refined consumption. Instead, what emerges is a hybrid mode of expression: creators aspire to align with the values of the aspirational class, through minimalist visuals, brand selectivity, and subtle luxury, but at times return to traditional materialism, emphasizing excessive consumption. This suggests that while the *Clean Girl* aesthetic largely performs the ideals of the aspirational class, it occasionally reflects a lingering attachment to more mainstream, consumerist notions of status. In this way, the aesthetic reveals both the aspiration to embody cultural capital and taste, as well as the difficulty of fully detaching identity performance from the attraction of material abundance.

A similar pattern is evident in Celine’s (25/6) video, where she displays 18 different skincare and makeup products, arranged neatly in a color-coordinated palette of pink and white tones. Her caption, “*it is an addiction at this point*”, simultaneously glamorizes and lightly satirizes the level of consumption involved, while also reinforcing the normalized excess embedded in the

aesthetic. Another example appears in Julia's (29/1) video, where she showcases 13 pink-colored beauty products, highlighting how the visual organization of product presentation (in this case the color) contributes to the broader performance of femininity and refinement.

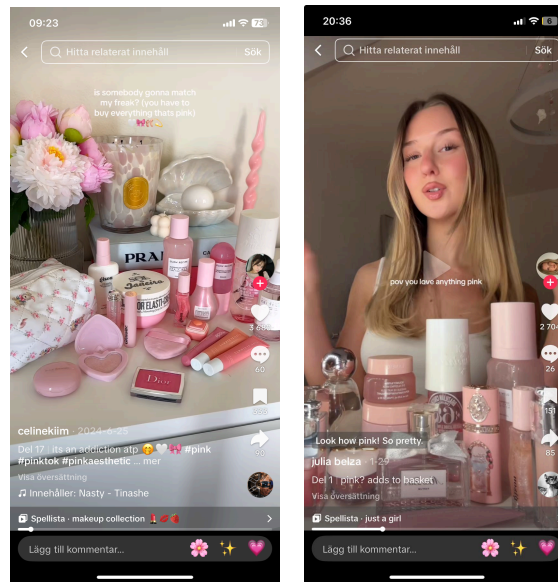


Figure g. Celine (25/6) and Julia (29/1)

These displays suggest that luxury consumption within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic serves a dual purpose: it functions both as a marker of status and as a visual language of femininity. Interestingly, despite the volume of products presented, they are rarely framed as very extravagant. Instead they are closely tied to the aesthetic, camouflaged through softness, white and pink colors, and clean arrangements, making the abundance appear natural, even necessary. Brand repetition is another significant finding. Across the sample, a small set of brands, such as Rhode, Glow Recipe and Dior (Celine 22/9 & 25/6; Nina 20/2; Julia 29/1), appeared repeatedly, reinforcing the communal and recognizable nature of the aesthetic. These brands have become symbolic within the *Clean Girl* community, functioning as props in the performance, signaling taste, belonging and aesthetic alignment. This symbolic function also ties into aspirational identity markers, such as the idea of being an “it-girl”, a person who embodies stylishness, desirability and effortless appeal. While only one creator explicitly identified with this label (Julia, 24/3), the overall presentation style of most creators suggested an implicit alignment with this aspirational ideal. Together, these performances suggest that the *Clean Girl* aesthetic hinges

on a strategic balance between visible abundance and visual restraint. This paradox, curated excess masked as implicit, reveals how consumption, femininity and identity are performed in the *Clean Girl* aesthetic.

## 5.2 Embodying the ideal femininity

A notable feature of the findings is the consistent use of hyper-feminine aesthetics across the *Clean Girl* content. All creators in the sample make use of traditionally female-coded visual symbols, such as soft, pastel colors, with a dominant emphasis on pink (Vanessa, 2/3; Maya, 5/3; Celine, 25/6). The content is centered around calmness, emotional balance, beauty maintenance and being effortlessly “put together”. In this way, the data highlights the physical and symbolic labor of performing feminine beauty, which is shaped by internalized ideals and visual culture norms. The findings further indicate that the *Clean Girl* aesthetic embodies a hyper-curated version of femininity, combining softness, youthfulness and perfection. From glowing skin and perfectly manicured nails (Celine, 19/7), to pink visuals and symbolic items like teddy bears (Maya, 5/3), the aesthetic presents an idealized image of womanhood that is simultaneously mature in composure and youthful in appearance. This femininity is visually and symbolically performed through beauty routines (Julia, 2/1; Vanessa, 26/1), body ideals (Nina, 20/2) and soft aesthetics, yet it often aligns with more narrow beauty standards, particularly those associated with thinness and flawlessness. As such, the analyzed content reflects aspirational ideals that link beauty with social value, and youth with desirability, shaping how women negotiate identity and self-worth in digital spaces.

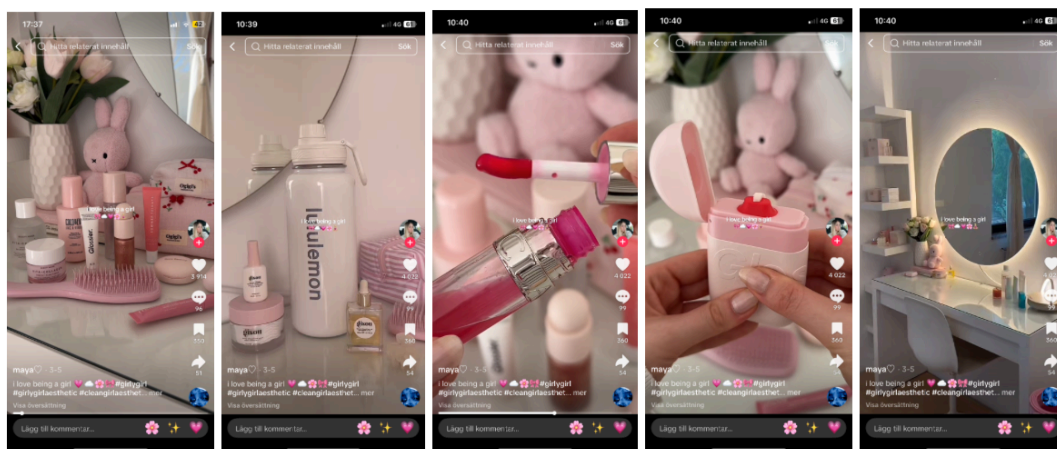


Figure h. Feminine elements (Maya, 5/3)

Maya's (5/3) video illustrates the layering of several feminine-coded symbols, such as beauty products, a pink teddy bear, flowers in soft colors, a perfectly clean room, and brand references aligned with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. Together, these elements contribute to a carefully composed feminine ideal. In another video, Julia (17/3) lists a set of aspirational descriptions associated with the *Clean Girl* lifestyle, including: "*simple outfits, feeling clean, natural makeup, gold jewelry, fresh sheets, slow mornings, Rhode, iced matcha, korean skincare, sleepovers, road trips, diet coke*". Each item reflects a symbolic aspiration tied to aesthetic minimalism, calm luxury, and feminine self-possession, reinforcing the curated lifestyle behind the *Clean Girl* identity.

### 5.2.1 Hyper-femininity through aesthetic codes

One of the more prominent and recurring patterns across the empirical material is the emphasis on hyper-feminine visual cues. This includes pink and soft color palettes, fresh flowers, delicate symbols and feminine-coded emojis. These design choices do not seem to be random, but rather highly curated symbolic tools used to communicate a particular vision of femininity aligned with the *Clean Girl* persona. Several creators explicitly reference their obsession with owning everything in pink, framing it both humorously and aspirationally (Celine, 21/6; Julia, 29/1; Maya, 5/3; Celine, 25/6). In a video Celine (25/6) states: "*you have to buy everything that's pink*" and "*it's an addiction at this point*", while displaying an extensive and color-coordinated collection of pink-toned beauty products.

Furthermore, the content creators focus on having a controlled color palette, mainly featuring pink and white tones as well as other soft colors. This deliberate color selection strengthens associations with femininity by visually invoking traditional gender norms and culturally ingrained feminine aesthetics. Overall, the featured products in the examined content creators videos seem to be targeted to women, as indicated by their packaging, shape, color and font, that align with traditional female cues. Examples include skincare and makeup products (Celine, 25/6), a pink plush bunny (Maya, 5/3), and a pink yoga mat (Vanessa, 6/1). This aligns with Spielmann et al.'s (2020) theory on gendered brands, as the majority of branded products featured in the posts classify as feminine brands as they utilize traditional feminine gender cues. Specifically, softness is identified as a traditional feminine element that can be used effectively in

branding (Spielmann et al. 2020). Elements of femininity are evident throughout the products shown in the videos, for instance, the soft colors induce a clear feeling of femininity. Other examples of softness in the videos include soft teddy bears (Maya, 5/3; Nina, 19/2; Celine, 19/8), the round shapes in the form and design of beauty products (Celine, 25/6), as well as the more rounded and gentle shapes of the product fonts (Celine, 25/6; Maya 5/3). Therefore, by including these traditionally feminine elements in their videos, it contributes to the content creators' performance of a hyper-feminine identity.

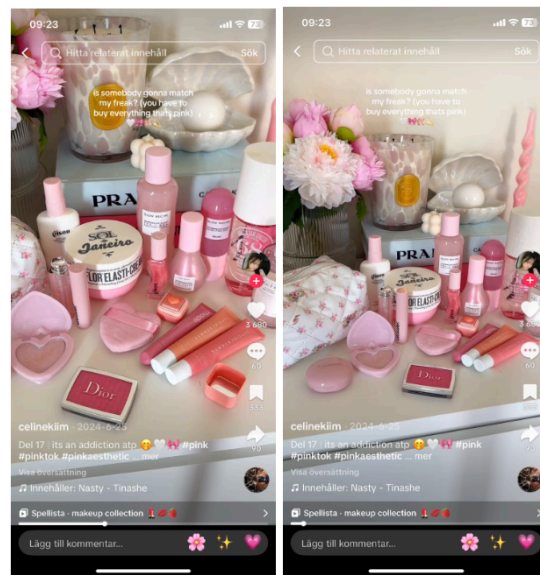


Figure i. Celine (25/6)

This exaggerated devotion to feminine color codes is extended to the creators' surroundings and props in the videos. Feminine-coded objects like a pink yoga mat (Vanessa, 6/1), a teddy bear (Maya, 5/3) and pastel-colored flowers (Celine, 21/6; Julia, 14/4) are deliberately positioned within the frame to maintain a consistent and coherent aesthetic. These choices are further reinforced by the use of emojis in captions and in the videos, such as 🎀, 💕, ✨ and 🌸, which function as a form of visual language, signaling aesthetic belonging within a hyper-feminine digital language. In this way, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic does not simply reflect femininity, it constructs it. Through repeated visual cues, curated product displays, and symbolic references, the content creators participate in a shared performance of womanhood that is soft, composed and visually controlled. These stylistic choices are not random, but rather crucial to the way femininity is being constructed: soft, decorative, and emotionally expressive. Moreover, status

and social distinction on social media are not only communicated through visuals and products, but also through specific communication styles (Bellezza, 2020). This is reflected in the creators' consistent use of emojis and symbolic language. These stylistic choices contribute to a distinct digital language that strengthens in-group recognition and shared identity within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. The findings further suggest that repetition of specific codes, whether visual, linguistic or behavioral, serves not only to curate personal identity, but also to cultivate a digital reputation. Within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, status appears to be gained by demonstrating consistency, fluency in the aesthetic's codes and success in embodying its values.

### 5.2.2 Romanticized girlhood

Another important pattern across the empirical material is the repeated self-identification with "girlhood" rather than womanhood, despite all content creators across the sample being adults. This identification seems to be a conscious choice and is frequently emphasized in captions and in the content itself, that celebrates "being a girl" as both an emotional state and a cultural aesthetic. This is visible in numerous captions, such as "*girl therapy night*" (Vanessa, 5/1), "*thanks, I am a girl*" (Nina, 6/2), "*I love being a girl*" (Maya, 5/3), "*how I love being a girl*" (Vanessa, 9/1) and "*I'm just a girl*" (Nina, 12/1). The extensive use of white and other soft colors might also be used to induce feelings of purity, innocence and therefore also youthfulness. These expressions point to a communal digital identity rooted in girlhood, that romanticizes softness, emotional vulnerability, and youthful charm. This linguistic choice appears to be more than stylistic, it plays an important role in how the *Clean Girl* identity is constructed. Rather than positioning themselves as adult women with responsibilities or complexities, these creators evoke a curated version of girlhood that is soft, playful and simple. The tone is not naive, but rather nostalgic, a digital retreat into a version of youth that feels safe, controlled and visually aesthetic.

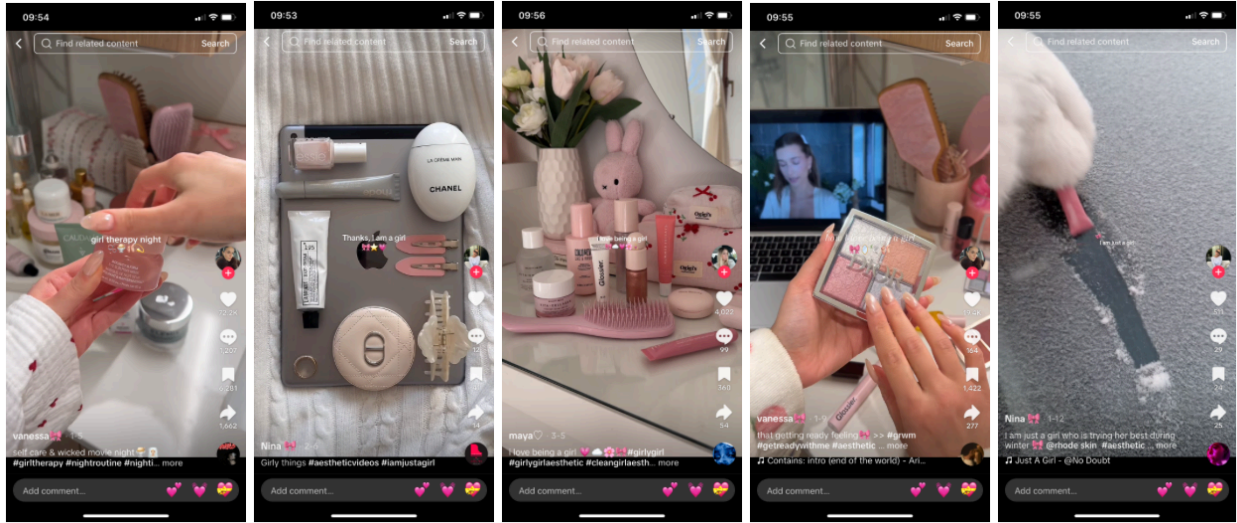


Figure j. Girlhood comments (Vanessa, 5/1 & 9/1; Nina, 6/2 & 12/1; Maya, 5/3)

In conjunction with these captions, the videos frequently include symbolic objects associated with youthfulness such as teddy bears, delicate flowers, soft lightning, and pink-toned beauty products (Nina, 20/2; Vanessa, 3/2; Nina, 19/2; Maya, 5/3; Celine, 19/8). This recurring theme suggests not just a feminine aesthetic, but a nostalgic and curated retreat into an idealized version of girlhood.

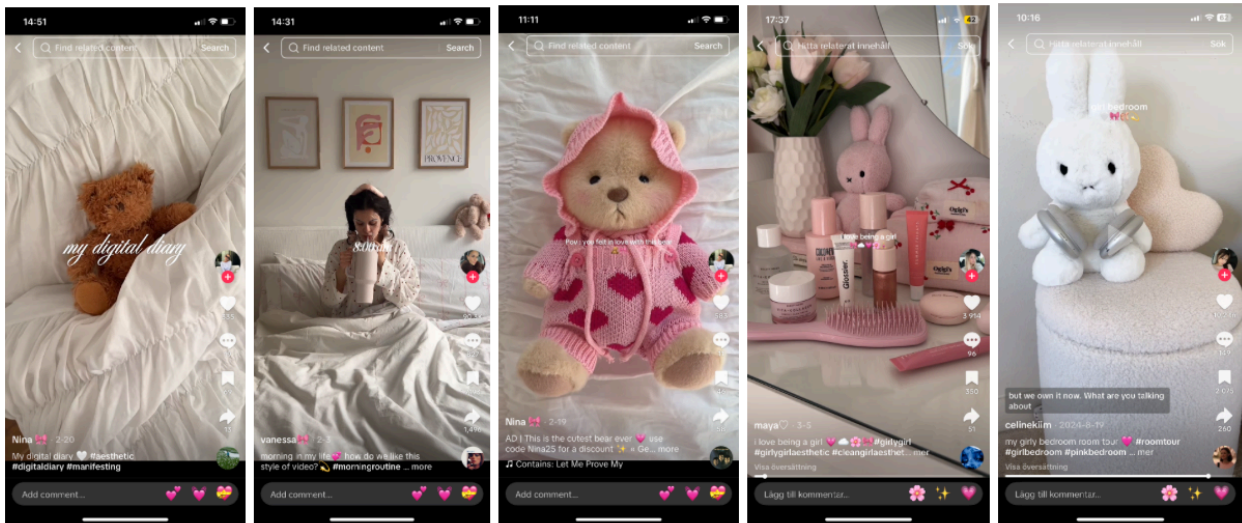


Figure k. Display of youthful symbols (Nina, 20/2 & 19/2; Vanessa, 3/2; Maya, 5/3; Celine, 19/8)

It is particularly noteworthy that none of the creators refer to themselves as women at any point across the sampled content, even though they are all young women. This emphasis on girlhood may serve multiple purposes. On one level, it softens the visible discipline and control involved in maintaining the *Clean Girl* aesthetic, framing skincare routines, strict organization and body maintenance as playful self-care rather than pressure. On another level, it offers a shared cultural sign for community and belonging. Being “just a girl” is not a diminishment, it seems to be more of a carefully selected identity that communicates desirability and purity. This consistent framing could be a sign that girlhood is being positioned as more desirable than womanhood, or that the *Clean Girl* aesthetic reflects a longing for a time perceived as more aesthetically pure. Further, in the highly curated, algorithmically-driven space of TikTok, such an identity becomes easily recognizable, aesthetic and aspirational.

The performance of hyper-femininity within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic can be interpreted through Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not a fixed identity but an ongoing performance constituted through repeated acts, gestures and discourses. In this context, the content creators’ consistent use of soft colors, delicate objects, beauty rituals, and girlhood language functions as a stylized repetition of socially recognizable signs of femininity. These performances do not only express gender, they actively produce and reinforce what is understood as the ideal feminine woman. When the TikTok creators refer to themselves as “girls” rather than “women”, despite their adult age, the creators reframe maturity through the lens of youthfulness, playfulness and aesthetic control. In doing so, they contribute to a digitalized version of femininity that is highly visual and also aspirational. This creates an environment where aesthetic choices become identity performances, shaping how femininity is seen, but also, valued, reinforced, and reproduced.

### 5.3 The labor of looking polished

The findings indicate that the *Clean Girl* performance consists of two parts, first, the aesthetic performance, and second, the hidden labor that enables the aesthetic performance. A consistent feature of the findings is the amount of work that is put into the aesthetic performance, leading to the assumption that a lot of backstage (Goffman, 1959) labor has to be done in order to successfully perform the *Clean Girl* identity. There is a huge focus on constant

self-improvement, reflecting a gendered ideal of being polished, beautiful and high-performing, while maintaining an effortless appearance. A significant focus for the *Clean Girl* content creators is to display their healthy lifestyle, emphasizing taking care of both physical and mental health. High performance might for instance entail being productive and waking up early to maximize morning hours (Eleonora, 1/3).

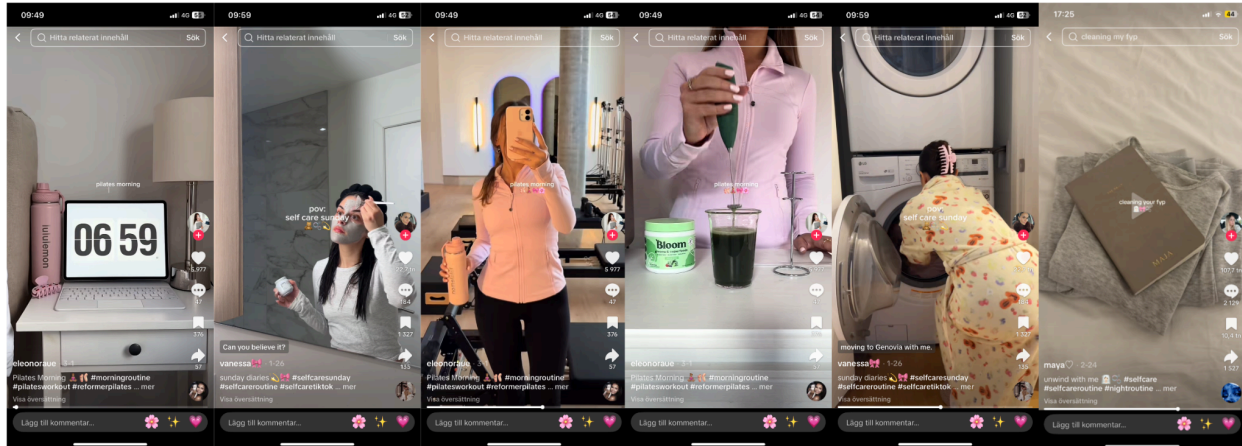


Figure 1. Typical *Clean Girl* elements (Eleonora, 1/3; Vanessa 26/1; Maya, 24/2)

The examined content creators follow an extensive multi-step beauty routine with specific products for skin, hair and makeup to look polished, yet natural (Eleonora, 1/3; Vanessa, 26/1). They work out regularly, favoring pilates as the ideal *Clean Girl* exercise form (Celine, 1/9; Eleonora, 1/3; Julia, 12/3; Vanessa, 6/1; Nina, 20/2). Moreover, they eat a healthy breakfast and a green drink or matcha as part of their routine, emphasizing an interest in wellness (Eleonora, 1/3). They maintain a tidy, minimalist and clean home, dedicating time to cleaning and freshening up their surroundings (Vanessa, 26/1). Lastly, the creators seem to prioritize mental health and self-improvement through practices like journaling (Celine, 26/6; Maya, 24/2). The findings show that the content creators ensure they stay productive and get things done, often appearing busy and “on the go”, but they also make time to relax and practice self-care through wind-down time. This often involves extensive beauty routines that are commonly framed as acts of “self-care” (Celine, 29/6; Vanessa, 10/2). This reveals how wellness can not only be framed as self-care but also as a routine of control and efficiency, a disciplined project of the self that is performed and masked as relaxation. Self-care rituals, such as journaling, skincare,

matcha-making and mindfulness, are paired with structured daily routines, early mornings and to-do lists (Celine, 1/9). These practices are positioned as acts of empowerment, motivating women to become the best version of themselves, yet they also reflect societal pressures of being self-improving, healthy and efficient. The *Clean Girl* aesthetic presents this ongoing labor as effortless, masking the discipline required to maintain it, and reinforcing moral undertones of “good” living through personal responsibility and routine. All this effort is ultimately aimed at creating the appearance of being effortlessly polished.

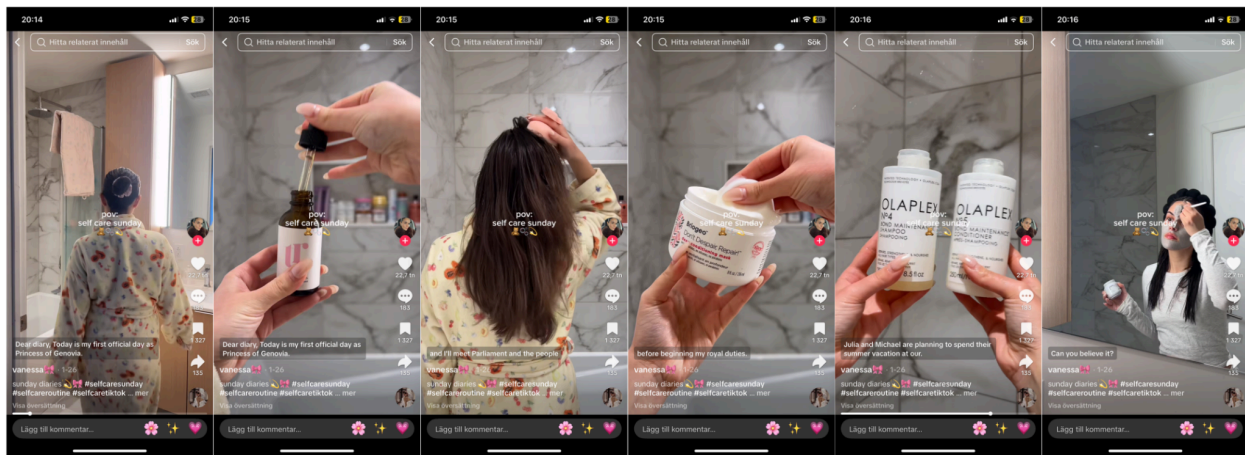


Figure m. Example of multiple-step beauty routines (Vanessa 26/1)

### 5.3.1 Self-care and wellness practices

The *Clean Girl* content is largely focused on displaying a healthy lifestyle, and in the examined content, creators display this in various yet similar ways. Firstly, the creators are often seen preparing and drinking green drinks (Eleonora, 1/3; Celine, 26/6; Julia, 13/3) which is associated with health and wellness because of the color itself as well as the ingredients. Another way the *Clean Girl* content creators display a healthy lifestyle is by displaying that they do pilates, either at home or in studio classes. Five of the six content creators examined over the three months film or mention doing pilates (Vanessa, 6/1; Celine, 1/9; Nina, 20/2; Julia, 12/3; Eleonora, 1/3).

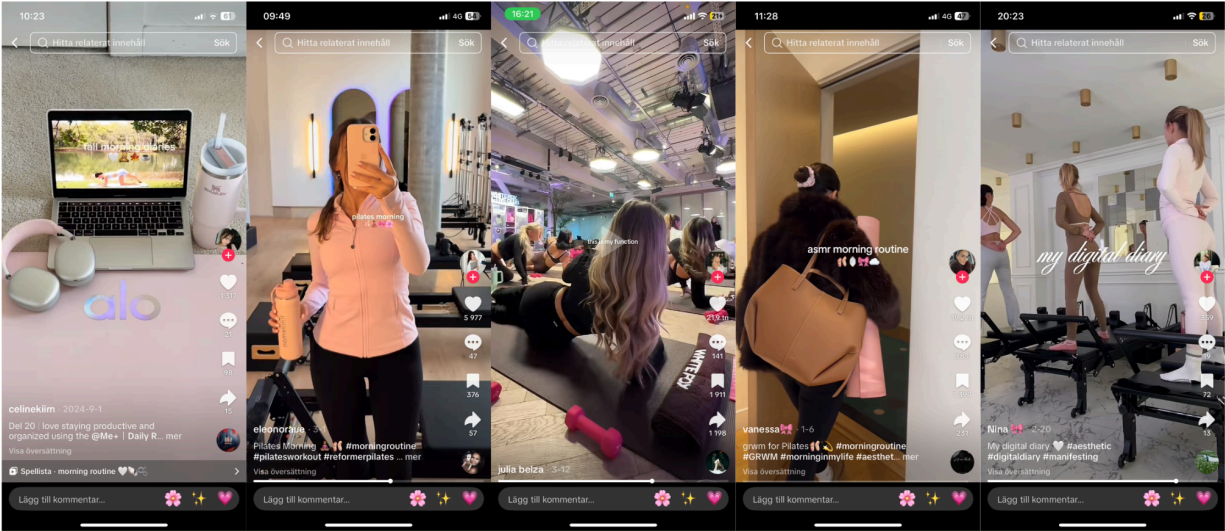


Figure n. Displays of pilates (Celine, 1/9; Eleonora, 1/3; Julia, 12/3; Vanessa, 6/1; Nina, 20/2)

For these content creators, mentioning or showing pilates is a crucial way of displaying a healthy lifestyle. This creates an association with health and wellness, signaling care for both mental and physical health through exercise, which is a vital aspect of the *Clean Girl* performance. The fact that all of the content creators exclusively showcase pilates as their chosen training form suggests it is the signature workout linked to this aesthetic. Moreover, pilates classes, widely recognized for their high cost, may also function as a status symbol, highlighting exclusivity for those who can afford them. However, for those that cannot afford these classes, practicing at home may still provide some association with this exclusive exercise (Celine, 1/9), providing a more affordable form of status. Currid-Halkett (2017) states that pilates can be seen as a form of conspicuous leisure, meaning taking part in activities that signal cultural capital and social status rather than simply for relaxation or health. Therefore, content creators showcasing their pilates classes might be performing to display wealth and status, similar to the unwinding and self-care videos which may appear to portray genuine relaxation, but actually serve as a part of the performance of the *Clean Girl* identity with a focus on wellness. The content creators continually portray new forms of labor to enhance their performance of the desired *Clean Girl* identity.

All content creators also make an effort to “look the part” to strengthen the association to pilates and, by extension, a healthy and exclusive lifestyle. This can be done by wearing typical pilates outfits (Nina, 20/2; Eleonora, 1/3; Julia, 26/2), showcasing their pilates mats (Celine, 1/9;

Vanessa, 6/1), and featuring branded items like Lululemon (Eleonora, 1/3) or Stanley water bottles (Celine, 1/9). Notably, these items often align with the *Clean Girl* color palette of pink and white. Another example of this is one of Julia's (26/2) posts where she poses in white and pink athletic wear, in what seems like a gym changing room, with a matcha drink in the background and the caption including the hashtag "#pilatesprincess".

This suggests that content creators use what Goffman (1959) refers to as props to strengthen the credibility of their desired identity performance. For instance, when preparing for pilates, a creator (Vanessa, 6/1) is shown going out of her door carrying a pilates mat in the end of the video, reinforcing authenticity. Arguably, the most powerful and consistent props in the videos examined are the numerous beauty products featured in nearly every video. The recurring presence of specific brands and products suggests these have become strongly associated with the *Clean Girl* aesthetic. Therefore, for individuals aspiring to be a *Clean Girl*, it becomes essential to display the consumption of the "right" products and brands to convincingly embody the desired identity. This is because appearance improvement through consumption is central to the identity performance of this aesthetic, aligning with Schau and Gilly's (2003) view on social performance through consumption.

An additional vital part of the content creators' display of a healthy and balanced lifestyle is them showing the audience that they also take the time to take care of themselves and relax. This can be seen in different wind-down videos (Celine, 18/7; Maya, 24/2) and in self-care videos (Celine, 29/6; Vanessa, 10/2). In these videos you can often see the *Clean Girl* content creators doing their hair- and skincare using numerous different products. They line them up, light a candle and try to make the setting cozy (Vanessa, 10/2). However, these unwinding and self-care videos are still heavily focused on multi-step beauty routines, where the ultimate goal still seems to be centered around self-improvement in appearance and beauty.

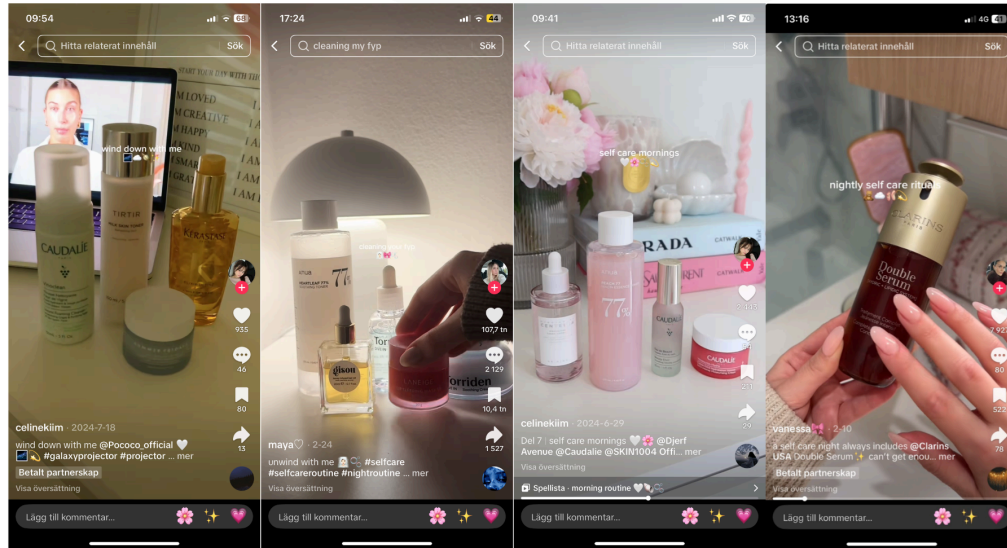


Figure o. Typical wind-down (Celine, 18/7; Maya, 24/2) and self-care videos (Celine, 29/6; Vanessa, 10/2)

This raises the question of whether they truly promote unwinding and self-care, or whether the labor of looking polished is a constant process. One reason creators commit to these multi-step beauty routines might be that according to Schau and Gilly (2003), individuals are more willing to invest energy and meaning in objects that they believe will aid them in their desired identity performance. In this performance, essential beauty products are a key element. Additionally, Belk (1988) argues that greater control over an object integrates it further into the extended self, making the own body crucial for identity formation. This could explain the *Clean Girl's* extensive focus on appearance enhancement.

Another recurring theme in these videos are content creators showing their personal journaling (Nina, 24/3; Maya, 24/2; Celine, 26/6) and daily affirmations (Celine, 19/8). This signals a broader pursuit of self-improvement beyond physical appearance, highlighting care for mental health and a commitment to mental self-improvement as well as physical. This suggests that these creators not only present the *Clean Girl* as being solely about external appearance, but also mental-wellbeing and holistic self-improvement. This broadens the aesthetic from purely physical beauty, to also including a lifestyle of balanced care and self-awareness, signalling nurturing of both body and mind.

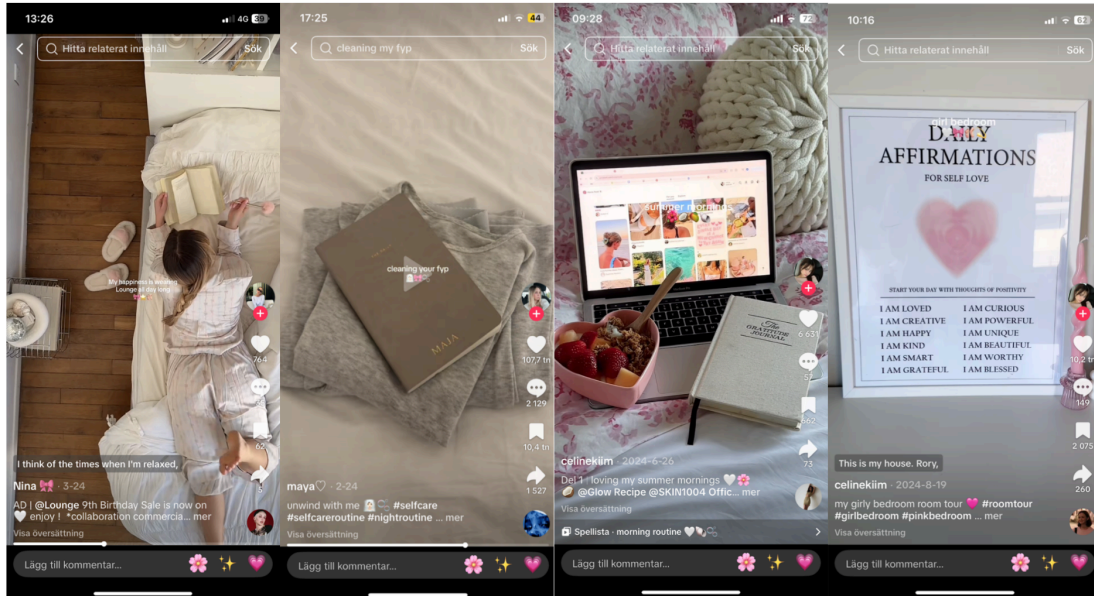


Figure p. Daily affirmations and journaling (Nina, 24/3; Maya, 24/2; Celine, 26/6 & 19/8)

### 5.3.2 Discipline and productivity

The *Clean Girl* content also includes themes of disciplined routines, to-do lists, productivity and romanticizing everyday life, all portraying a sense of “having it together”. One prominent theme in the examined *Clean Girl* content is a strong emphasis on routines. The two most frequent are beauty routines, such as haircare, skincare and morning routines which often feature similar beauty related content. A typical morning routine or getting ready for the day post usually starts with the *Clean Girl* content creator waking up early, doing their beauty routines, and then beginning a productive day, in this case studying at university, which can be exemplified by Eleonora’s (15/1) video.

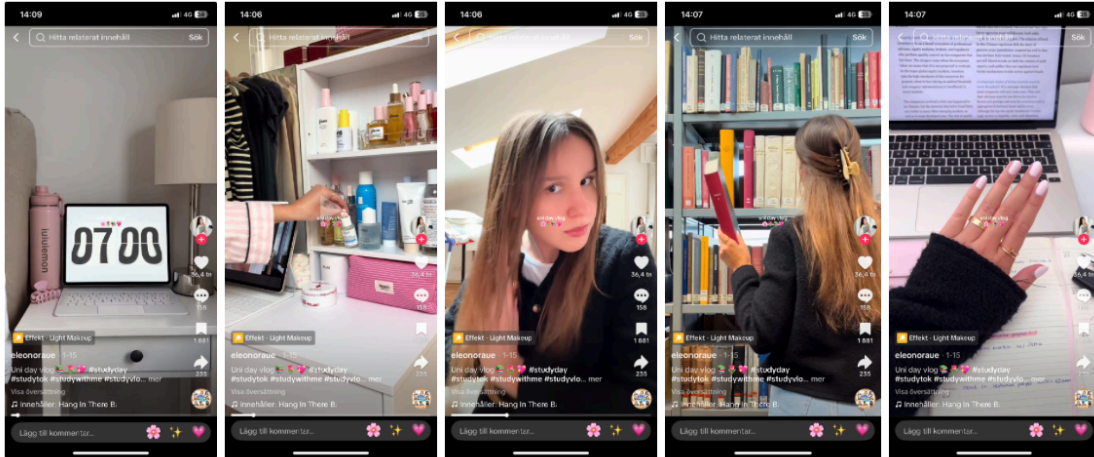


Figure q. Eleonora's "getting ready for the day" routine (15/1)

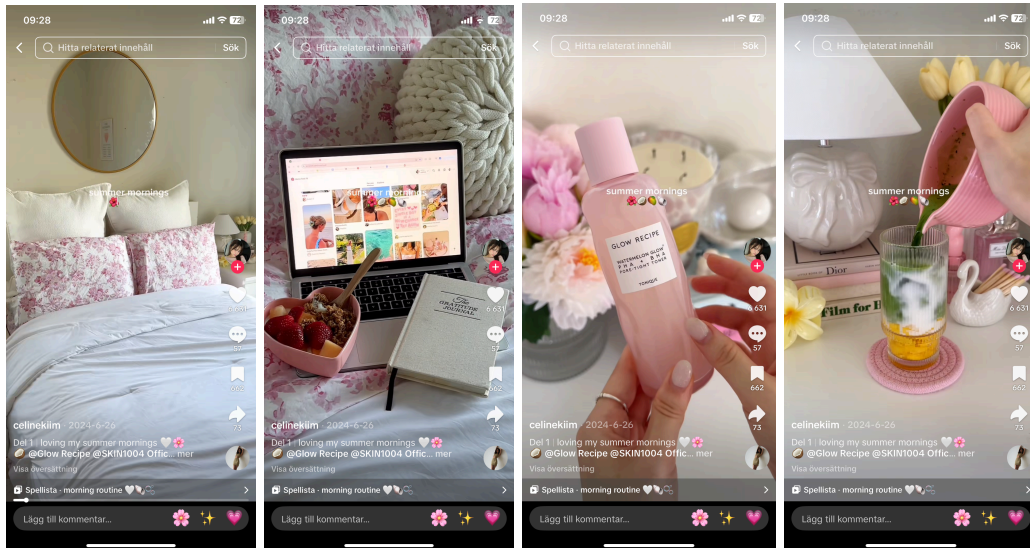


Figure r. Celine's morning routine (26/6)

Another example of a typical *Clean Girl* morning routine consists of waking up, making the bed, preparing and eating breakfast, perhaps while journaling, doing beauty routines, and ending it with a green drink or matcha (Celine, 26/6). Celine's morning routine post caption says: "...loving my summer mornings...", implying that she sees the morning as a good time of the day and does not have a problem with getting up early to get things done. Julia (10/2) says in a video that she "woke up 5:30" to be able to do her makeup before catching her morning flight. These examples, and the frequency of posts showing morning routines, implies that *Clean Girls* truly

desire to make use of the early hours productively, eating breakfast, doing skincare, journaling and more. They do not sleep in, reflecting an active, disciplined and healthy lifestyle. This also signals that they “have it together” and would rather wake up earlier than straying from their specific beauty routine, meaning always prioritizing the polished look through discipline and determination - the *Clean Girl* is always ready to put in the labor to look polished.

Another element examined in the content creators’ posts is that they always seem to be productive or “on the go”. This aligns with them associating with a healthy lifestyle, but also them being disciplined and having routines in their life. Maya’s (23/2) reset day starts with a to-do list where she starts to check off the different tasks that need to be done. This includes reorganising, cleaning, and naturally her beauty routines. Celine (1/9) also has a post where she checks off essential *Clean Girl* tasks such as waking up early, working out and doing her morning skincare. She also captioned the video with “...love staying productive and organized...”. In another video Maya (4/3) writes “productive mornings” and shows how she packs her bag. Julia (13/4) walks around with a takeaway coffee tray filled with beauty products and an iced latte. All of these elements convey a sense of constantly being “on the go” and embracing an active and productive lifestyle. Considering this in combination with the winding-down and self-care posts, it displays a balance between relaxation and productivity. The creators emphasize the importance of taking time to unwind, but also highlights maintaining disciplined routines, such as waking up early and doing skincare. The productivity, routines, and discipline to stay consistent is a vital part of being able to keep up the polished look to maintain the *Clean Girl* identity. According to Belk (2014) digital platforms allow content creators to present their identity in new ways that are not affected by physical constraints. In this way, TikTok facilitates the content creators’ construction of an idealised social media persona through displaying routines, discipline and productivity. While these elements might be real, the power of editing videos and arranging clips in a certain way can create the illusion of an individual being more active and productive than they actually are, in order to attain the *Clean Girl* identity.

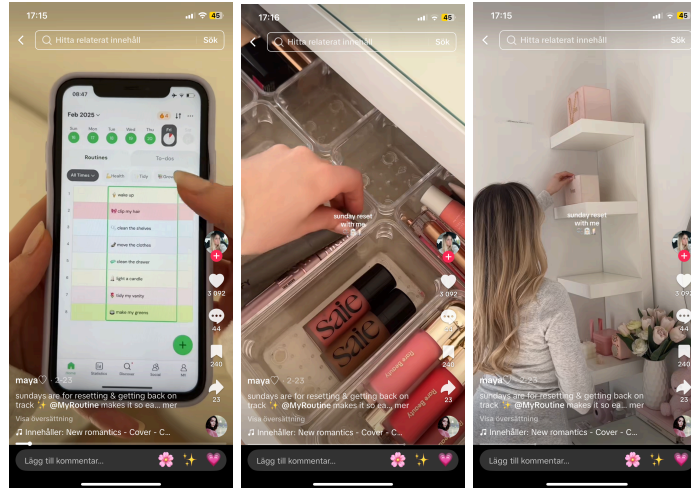


Figure s. Maya's reset day (23/2)

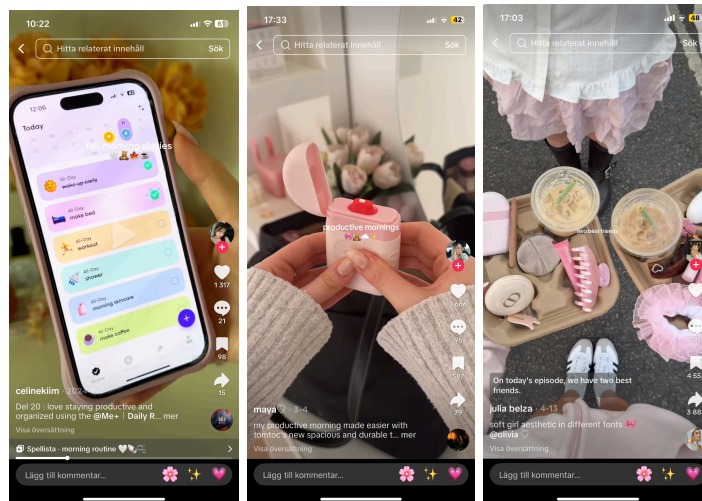


Figure t. On the go / productivity lifestyle elements (Celine, 1/9; Maya, 4/3; Julia, 13/4)

Lastly, a key insight from the empirical material is that the creators heavily romanticize everyday life. This might be done by creating cozy atmospheres, for instance with candles (Maya, 23/2; Celine, 21/6), fresh flowers (Julia, 13/3; Maya, 5/3) as well as extensive video editing. For instance, cleaning videos might make chores seem quick and enjoyable in a 20-second clip (Maya, 23/2), and long beauty routines (Celine, 18/7; Vanessa, 26/1) appear effortless on the front stage (Goffman, 1959), despite taking considerably longer and requiring extensive effort. Through trying to make the surrounding setting cute and cozy with a soft color palette, as well as heavy video editing, the creators can reinforce the illusion that maintaining this polished look is effortless, even though it requires significant labor in what Goffman (1959) calls the back region.

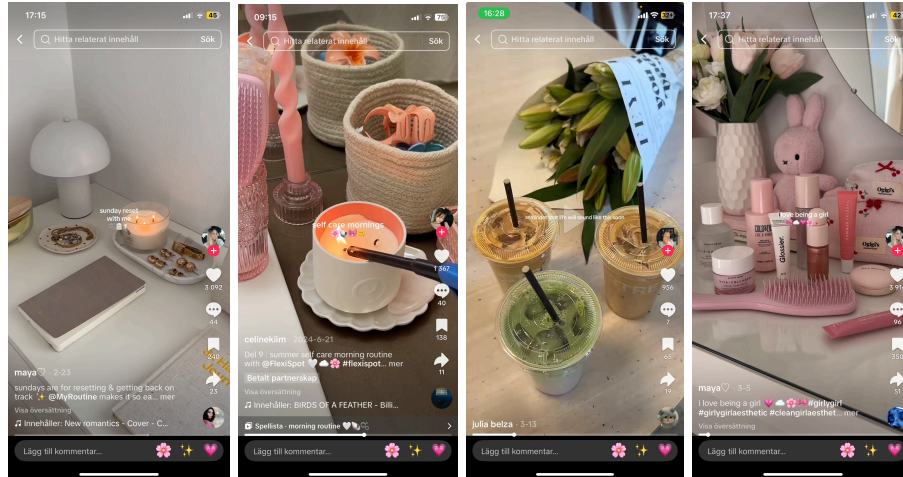


Figure u. Examples of fresh flowers and candles (Maya, 23/2 & 5/3; Celine, 21/6; Julia, 13/3)

Taking these findings into consideration, it is evident that *Clean Girl* content creators on TikTok strategically manage the impressions they present to their audience in their posts (Goffman, 1959), to reinforce their polished appearance and maintain the *Clean Girl* identity through performances. This is exemplified by their extensive attention to appearance, engaging in multi-step beauty routines, adjusting their manners through activities like pilates (which is heavily associated with the aesthetic), and ensuring their settings (often their own home) are tidy, clean and minimalistic. Occasionally, the setting shifts to a gym to emphasize a healthy lifestyle, or multiple locations appear within a single video to convey a productive and active lifestyle.

The TikTok posts of the creators who have been examined can be seen as a stage for performing their desired *Clean Girl* persona. Creators control when to enact this performance by choosing when to record content and post it for public view. This implies the presence of a back region (Goffman, 1959), namely what occurs off camera, allowing creators to reveal selected curated parts of their life and edit videos to amplify the impression of effortlessly maintaining a polished look. However, upon closer observation, the abundance of beauty products indicates that significant labor lies behind the polished look. Therefore, creators tailor their content according to the *Clean Girl* aesthetic rule book, to convincingly perform this identity for their audience. They carefully decide what to reveal and what to conceal to construct an image of effortless, often romanticizing their routines despite the considerable work involved.

## 6. Discussion

*Through discussion of the findings, this section aims to offer new insights that challenges and extends current views on digital consumption and identity performance, particularly in relation to aspirational class and status signalling. Moreover, this section considers the theoretical contributions and societal implications of these findings.*

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### 6.1 Summary of key findings

This study identifies three interlinked themes and expressions through which aspirational identity and class are performed within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic on TikTok. The first key finding is that identity is constructed through visual perfection, expressed through minimalist styling, carefully curated color palettes and highly controlled staging. The *Clean Girl* persona embodies visuals often dominated by pink and white tones, that signals not only taste but also cultural capital. Luxury products are strategically included in subtle or fleeting ways to maintain an appearance of effortlessness. The findings also show that within the aesthetic, there is both minimalism but also material abundance. When multiple luxury products are shown, they are however done so in a tasteful and seemingly effortless way. This suggests that class signaling within the aesthetic has evolved into a hybrid form of conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption, where distinction is communicated through refined, aesthetic fluency rather than flashy materialism.

The second key finding centers around the romanticized and highly curated performance of femininity. Across the dataset, content creators draw on hyper-feminine visual cues, such as pink products, delicate flowers, girly emojis, and girl-coded language, which signal emotional softness and aesthetic coherence. Importantly, they consistently refer to themselves as “girls”, not women, despite being adults. This points to a broader cultural narrative where femininity is associated with youth, innocence, and beauty, which is framed as aspirational. The findings thus reveal how gender identity is aestheticized and commodified, with girlhood functioning as a digitally mediated form of feminine ideal.

Finally, the third key finding concerns the extensive labor required to maintain the *Clean Girl* identity. Behind the polished digital persona, lies a daily practice of self-optimization, including multiple-step skincare routines, matcha rituals, pilates, journaling, and highly disciplined morning routines. These acts are both performed and aestheticized, reframing personal discipline as a form of lifestyle branding. While framed as self-care or empowerment, these routines are also status signals, demonstrating time abundance, control, and the ability to invest in one's self. The labor is presented as casual and enjoyable, yet the behind-the-scenes efforts remain substantial, aligning with Goffman's (1959) theory of frontstage and backstage performance.

## 6.2 Theoretical contributions

The findings from examining the *Clean Girl* aesthetic reveal that on highly visual digital platforms like TikTok, the performance of aspirational class is shaped by a dynamic interplay between inconspicuousness (Currid-Halkett, 2017) and strategic conspicuousness (Veblen, 1899; Truong, 2010). Rather than representing a full rejection of material displays, the aesthetic embodies a form of performed subtleness, where luxury possessions and product abundance are seamlessly integrated into daily routines and minimalist visuals, thereby being integrated into the digital extension of the self (Belk, 2014). These items are not shown in an extravagant way, but neither are they hidden. They are framed as natural, even necessary, components of the aspirational lifestyle being portrayed, aligning with Bellezza's (2020) description of online behavioral markers which signal status. The findings suggest that the visual structure of the platform, the algorithm demand for engaging content, and the aesthetic norms established within the *Clean Girl* community, all contribute to a hybrid form of status signaling. To create the illusion of good taste (Arsel & Bean, 2013), the creators combine subtle cues of cultural capital, such as using certain brands, with more visible yet stylized displays of product abundance. In this way, aspirational social distinction in digital spaces appears to require a strategic layering of visual signals; it is refined enough to appear effortless, but yet distinct enough to be recognized by in-group viewers. This nuanced performance complicates Currid-Halkett's (2017) framework of inconspicuous consumption. While Currid-Halkett's (2017) theory draws a sharp line between mass consumerism and subtle, elite consumption practices, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic illustrates how digital environments blur these boundaries. On platforms like TikTok, class signaling

evolves into a curated blend of visibility and restraint, where the tension between authenticity and display becomes a central feature of aspirational self-presentation.

Moreover, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic exemplifies a contemporary form of conspicuous discipline, in which intensive self-optimization practices, such as multiple-step skincare routines, early-morning rituals, and curated reset days, are not only performed but also aestheticized and praised. These practices go beyond simply showcasing the “right” products (Belk, 1988; Schau & Gilly, 2003), or participating in elite-coded leisure activities (Currid-Halkett, 2017). Instead, what is being performed is the labor itself, meaning the visible dedication to a highly structured, demanding lifestyle, portrayed as both desirable and attainable. Importantly, this labor is framed through a paradox: it must be both extensive and effortless at the same time. Creators strategically display the steps involved in their daily maintenance, often multiple coordinated products and carefully sequenced actions, while maintaining a calm and natural conduct. This tension functions as a new mode of status signaling, one that depends on the ability to balance aesthetic perfection with emotional control and apparent ease. The findings suggest that the *Clean Girl* persona obtains symbolic value not only from what is consumed, but also from the ability to perform self-discipline, time management, and emotional regulation in a highly stylized and consistent manner. The privilege to invest time, money, and effort into self-improvement becomes a marker of aspirational identity and status, that is particularly gendered and classed. In this sense, discipline itself becomes a form of luxury, not only because of the products used while exercising this discipline, but because of the invisible resources required to maintain such an appearance of control and order.

The findings further reveal that digital perfection in the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is more than an individual stylistic choice, it also functions as a marker of aspirational class identity, achieved through hard work, made to look effortless. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) theory of performance, the creators carefully manage their front stage presence through controlled visuals, routines, and symbols, while concealing the effort and labor that take place behind the scenes, off the screen. The curated digital self (Schau & Gilly, 2003) becomes an extension of the real self, more disciplined, more productive, and more beautiful than reality allows. Thereby, Goffman’s (1959) view on identity performance extends Currid-Halkett’s (2017) concept of the aspirational

class, showing that distinction on digital platforms like TikTok relies on how effectively symbolic behaviors, like pilates, skincare, or slow mornings, are visually integrated into the aesthetic. Class is strategically performed through visual codes, where success depends on knowing exactly what to reveal and how to do so. These findings also build on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of symbolic capital, highlighting that aesthetic taste and self-discipline now function as key indicators of digital status. The creators' ability to display an ideal version of themselves is thus not just a performance of identity, but a performance of class. The *Clean Girl* persona becomes a form of social capital, where creators gain value partly from what they consume, but also through how convincingly they embody the ideal of aspirational femininity, strengthening Eckhardt and Bardhi's (2019) argument that a curated online persona in a certain context can be more important than material wealth in achieving social distinction online. Therefore, identity curation is not just personal branding, but the digital enactment of class-based capital. What is being signaled is not just who they are, but how well they embody the *Clean Girl* ideal through visual details, effortlessness and coherence. These signs of perfection become a form of digital currency in aspirational spaces, where attention, taste and control are the new indicators of status.

### 6.3 Societal implications

The *Clean Girl* aesthetic could be seen to reflect and reinforce a broader contemporary ideal, that aligns with neoliberal values of individual responsibility, self-discipline, and self-regulation as argued by Giesler and Veresiu (2014). The aesthetic does more than influence beauty standards, it also contributes to a cultural discourse in which women are expected to be constantly improving, optimizing, and managing themselves. The findings suggest that young women today are not only navigating pressures to optimize their lives, but are also expected to aestheticize that optimization. At its core, the *Clean Girl* ideal promotes a vision of womanhood that is calm, composed, productive and visually perfect, achieved through routines of self-care, consumption and control. These ideals are often framed as empowering, yet they subtly reproduce traditional gender norms, where women are encouraged to clean, organize, care for themselves and their environment, and to do so while appearing effortlessly beautiful. These expectations mirror older domestic roles, but are now recast in modern, aestheticized, and highly individualized terms.

The aesthetic's emphasis on romanticized girlhood and its use of hyper-feminine visual cues suggests that contemporary femininity is increasingly performed through curated aesthetic practices. This reconstruction of femininity frames identity as something to be visually managed and optimized, where value is closely tied to appearance, often under the guise of wellness or self-care. Rather than challenging existing gender norms, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic repackages them in a more aspirational form. Thereby, it could be seen as a broader cultural shift where digital femininity becomes a performance, in which women gain status and social visibility by aligning with and reinforcing narrow beauty standards, especially when such performances are wrapped in emotionally appealing, girl-coded language and visual consistency. In this way, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic could be seen to both reflect and reinforce neoliberal values on gender, in which structural inequalities are masked by narratives of personal choice and responsibility. The burden of success and self-worth is placed on the individual, in this case on young women, who are encouraged to view self-optimization through skincare routines, wellness rituals, and lifestyle productivity, as the key to female empowerment. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the identity performance of endurance runners, where societal pressures around self-management and status motivates the individual to endure pain and sacrifice, masked as a voluntary and fulfilling performance, in order to achieve this desired identity (Egan-Wyer, 2019). In this study's context, consumption becomes a moral act, and the performance of discipline is rewarded with social capital and algorithmic visibility.

Furthermore, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic's emphasis on extensive self-discipline, hyper-organization, and aestheticized perfection, expressed through obsessive cleanliness and minimalism, can be interpreted as a response to a deeper desire for control. From an anthropological perspective, Mary Douglas argues that consumption practices often serve as a means to create order in the presence of external chaos (Corrigan, 1997). When individuals are faced with societal instability, complexity, or uncertainty, they may turn inward, exercising heightened control over their bodies, routines and environment. In this sense, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic reflects a form of self-regulation that may function as a means of creating personal order in response to a broader atmosphere of uncertainty. This search for control can be connected to the postmodern society, where traditional structures such as gender roles and class boundaries have become increasingly fluid (Butler, 1990; Arsel & Bean, 2013). Without clear

societal boundaries, individuals are thus driven to construct online identities through performative acts, relying on visual cues, consumption patterns and lifestyle signaling to navigate belonging and value.

Moreover, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is sustained and intensified by digital platforms that normalize aesthetic labor, and thus is not solely driven by an internal desire for self-improvement. The pressure to be “put together” is not simply cultural but rather systemic, rooted in a digital economy where attention is currency (Murray, 2015), and visibility is tied to curated perfection. The success of the *Clean Girl* aesthetic could partially be due to TikTok’s algorithmic repetition, where creators learn what kind of content is successful, repeat it, and then further reinforce this kind of specific content. This process blurs the boundaries between authentic self-expression and strategically performed identities to favor algorithmic success. The practical implication is that digital platforms, like TikTok, increasingly function as a judge of aspirational identity, subtly influencing what is valued as worth seeing and desirable. Therefore, identity construction shifts from an internal process of self-improvement to an external performance, carefully curated to gain algorithmic favor and peer validation. This creates a feedback loop in which feminine ideals are continuously reinforced by platform logics, audience engagement, and community norms.

In this sense, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is not merely a trend, but can also be seen as a visual manifestation of a broader societal shift toward the responsabilization of women under neoliberalism, where they perform an image of being superior moral subjects, as suggested by Giesler and Veresiu (2014). It encourages the belief that to be valuable, women must be productive, beautiful, emotionally balanced and visibly in control, all while presenting these traits as effortless and natural. This narrows the definition of empowered femininity to a labor-intensive, consumer-driven ideal that is difficult to achieve, and also inherently exclusionary.

## 7. Conclusion

*This section states the conclusions drawn from this research, and presents directions for future research to gain a further improved perspective on the complexities of digital identity performance and aspirational class.*

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This study aimed to explore how young women construct and perform aspirational identities through the *Clean Girl* aesthetic on TikTok. The findings reveal that these identity performances are deeply structured by cultural, social and algorithmic forces that shape how femininity, class and the ideal self are enacted in digital spaces. Drawing from theories of identity performance (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990), aspirational class (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Bellezza, 2020), and digital consumption (Belk, 2014; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019), this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how aesthetics are used to perform social distinction and aspirational identity on digital platforms.

The first conclusion of this study is that identity within the *Clean Girl* aesthetic is performed through more than what is being consumed, specifically through how the creators' lives are managed, aestheticized, and shared. The content reveals consistent routines involving early mornings, multiple-step beauty routines, matcha rituals, and curated environments that operate as signals of discipline and lifestyle control. The discipline of performing this online identity becomes a form of luxury itself, symbolizing the privilege to invest time, effort, and financial resources into the constant optimization of the self. The *Clean Girl* persona thus reflects a gendered performance of aspirational class, where value is produced through the combination of consumption, aesthetic minimalism, and disciplined self-improvement, all framed as effortless and desirable.

Another conclusion highlights that young women construct aspirational identities online by carefully balancing displays of subtle luxury, with more conspicuous ones. This balance, when done right, creates the illusion of effortlessness, while remaining recognizable to informed audiences. On digital platforms, such as TikTok, class identity is not solely about minimizing visibility but about carefully managing it; the knowledge and understanding of precisely how

much to reveal and the manner in which to do so. This approach to visual signaling represents a shift in how cultural capital is interpreted through online performance.

Lastly, the *Clean Girl* aesthetic signifies a broader transformation in the performance and identity construction of social value within digital spaces. Traits, such as perfection, coherence and discipline are more than desirable traits, they also signal social capital through algorithmic visibility and validation in the community. This generates new expectations on young women regarding appearance and behavior, and additionally demands that they should dominate both fields, in ways that align with subtle, class-coded and gendered ideals. Furthermore, even though the aesthetic is supposed to empower young women to become the ideal version of themselves, the strict demands on how to perform inevitably reinforce traditional ideals of aspirational femininity. Due to this process, aspirational identity is not only constructed and performed, but also persistently regulated through online aesthetics.

## 7.1 Future research

The *Clean Girl* aesthetic demonstrates that self-optimization, when aestheticized and shared publicly, operates as a form of social capital, reinforcing hierarchies of class, gender, and digital fluency. Therefore, future research should aim to expand theories of status signaling and identity construction by accounting for the performative and algorithmically shaped labor involved in curating aspirational digital identities. Another suggestion for further research is investigating how more masculine lifestyle aesthetics construct and perform the ideal man online. Comparing these with feminine aesthetics like the *Clean Girl*, would provide deeper insight into how gendered identity performances differ across digital spaces. These aesthetics each promote distinct ideals of self-presentation and aspiration, often grounded in gendered assumptions about success, value and control. Lastly, it is well known that identity on social media platforms is not static, but rather highly fluid and dynamic, as it tends to follow trends. Thus, conducting even further longitudinal studies could allow an understanding of how aspirational performances online evolve over a longer period of time. This research could lead to answers on how content creators maintain, switch or abandon these aesthetics depending on changes in trends, platform shifts or lifestyle. Therefore, this could allow an extended and deeper understanding of the digital identity as a continuous and dynamic project, rather than merely a static performance.

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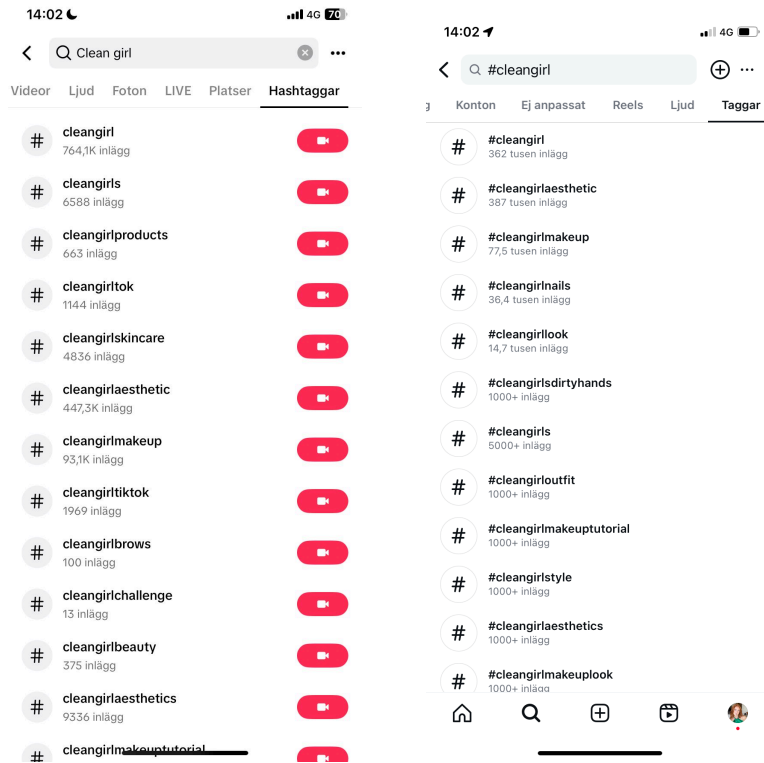
## Declaration of AI use

We declare the AI tools were used during the preparation of this thesis in a limited and supportive capacity. Specifically, AI tools such as ChatGPT and LundAI were occasionally used to assist with improving language, and making sure that correct grammar was used. All final writing was thoroughly reviewed and authored by us. Additionally, ChatGPT was used to support the literature review process by summarizing academic articles during the initial stages of searching for literature. This was done to gain a general understanding of the relevance and content of the articles. However, all sources cited and referenced in this thesis were fully read and critically evaluated by us before being included.

At all stages, the content was independently verified and assessed to maintain academic integrity. The use of AI did not replace original research, analysis or critical thinking.

# Appendix

## Appendix 1



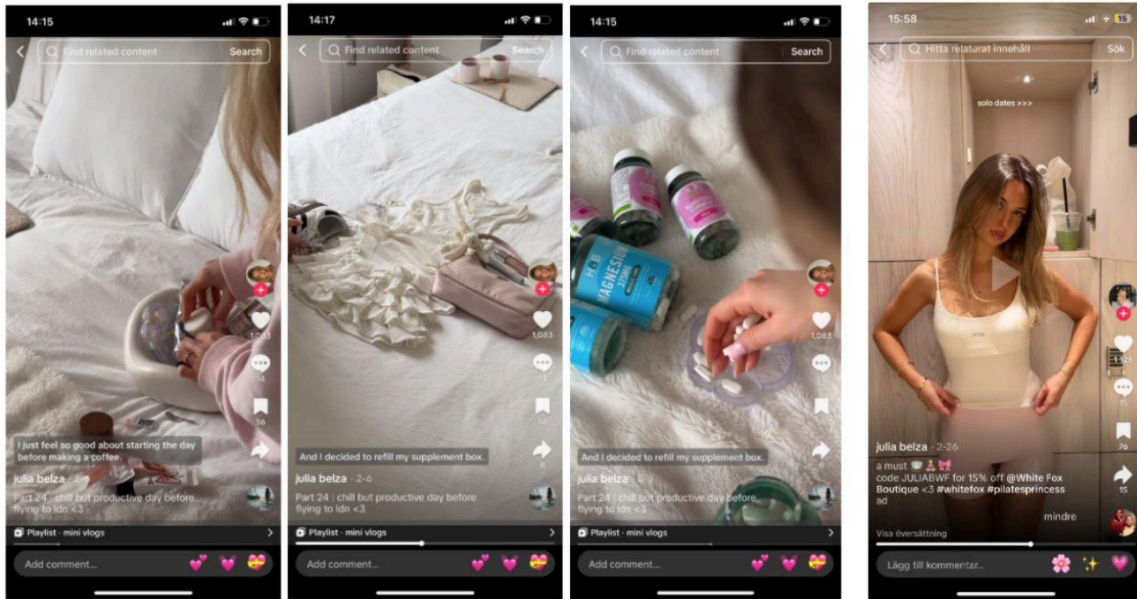
*TikTok vs Instagram Clean Girl hashtag traffic. Screenshot taken on February 25th 2025.*

## Appendix 2

Code	Sub-theme	Main theme
Aesthetic minimalism, color palette control, effortless look, hyper-perfection, curated perfection	Aesthetic curation and minimalism	<b>Perfection in a curated setting</b>
Quiet luxury, luxury product placement, association to <i>Clean Girl</i> brands and IT-girl referencing	Luxury and class signaling	
Hyper-feminine aesthetics, girly symbols, feminine visual language, soft colors and elements	Hyper-femininity through aesthetic codes	<b>Embodying the ideal femininity</b>
Youth performance, curated girlhood, idealized nostalgia, playfulness	Romanticized girlhood	
Healthy lifestyle display, wind-down routines, self-love rituals, mental health routines	Self-care and wellness practices	<b>The labor of looking polished</b>
Routines, morning routines as self discipline, to-do lists and productivity, early wake-ups, “having it together” signaling, romanticized daily life	Discipline and productivity	

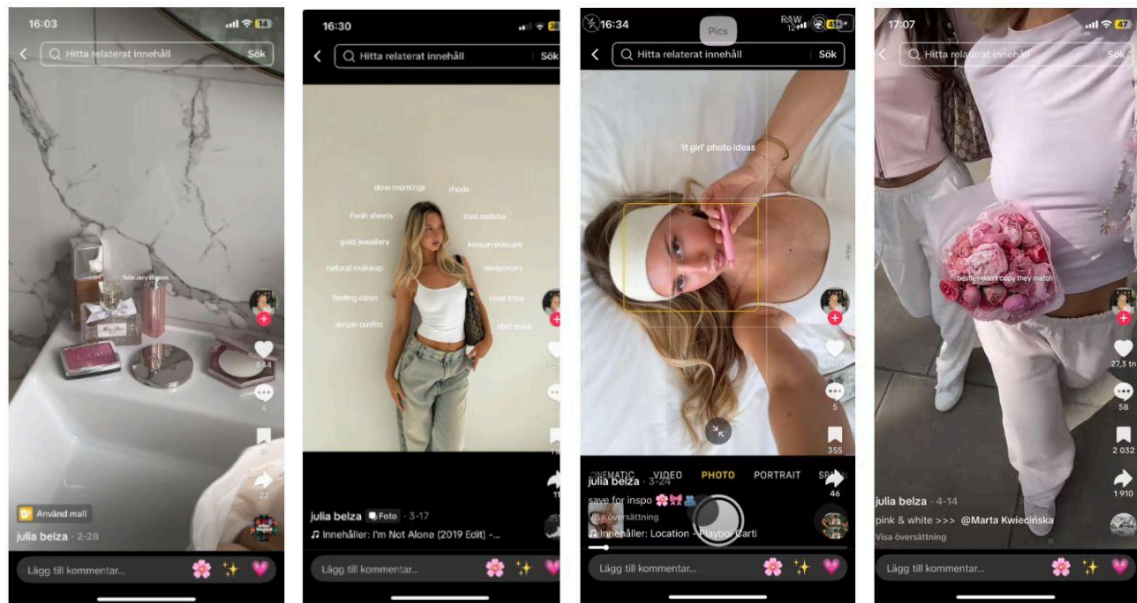
*Table of codes, sub-themes and main-themes developed during analysis*

# Appendix 3



(Julia, 6/2-2025)

(Julia, 26/2-2025)

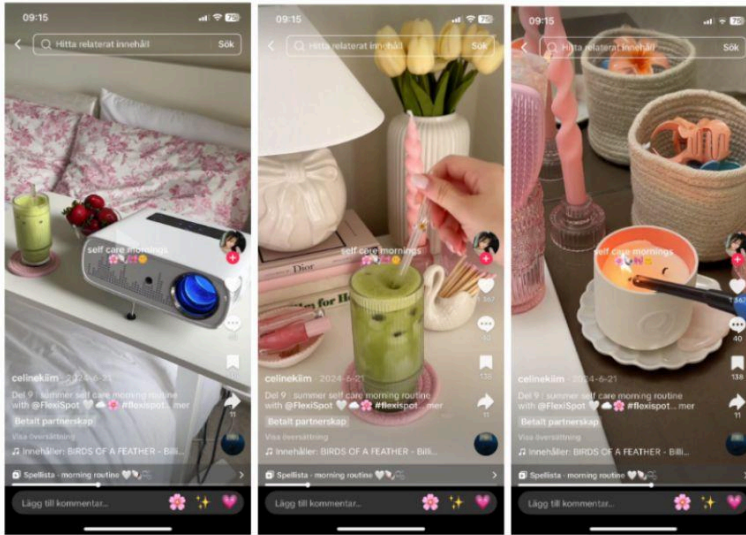


(Julia, 28/2-2025)

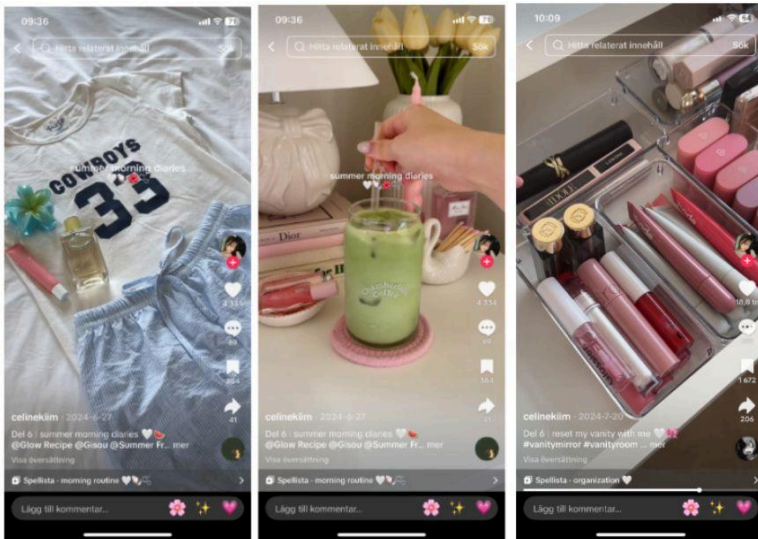
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(Julia, 24/3-2025)

(Julia, 14/4-2025)

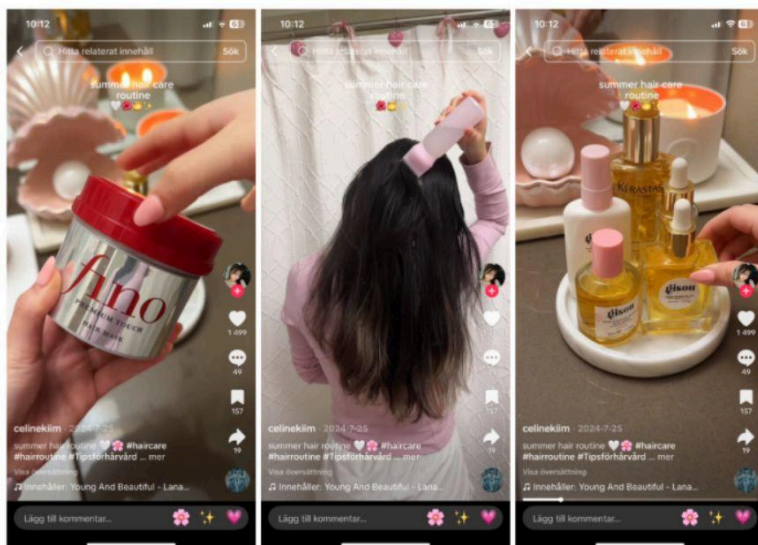


(Celine, 21/6-2024)

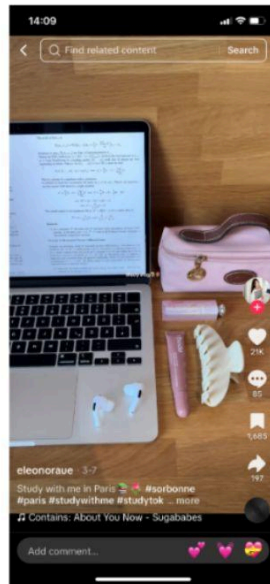
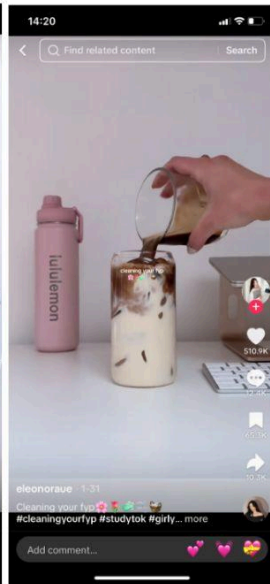
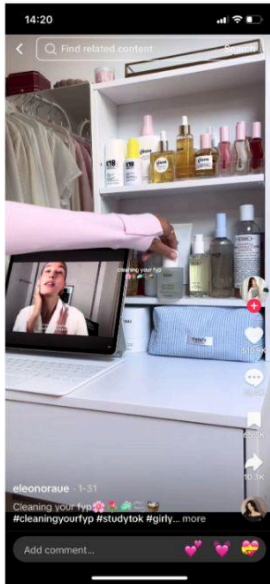


(Celine, 27/6-2024)  
Two videos to the left

(Celine, 20/7-2024)  
Video to the right

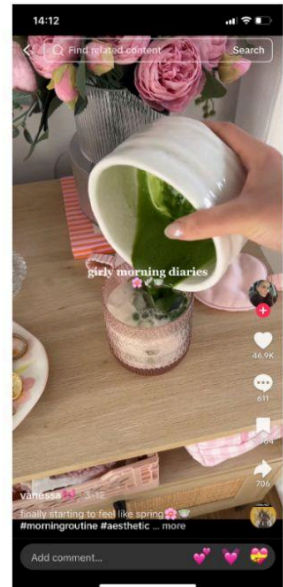
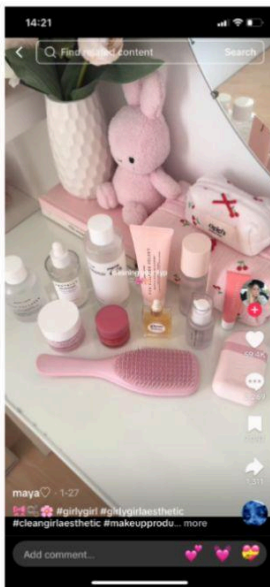


(Celine, 25/7-2024)



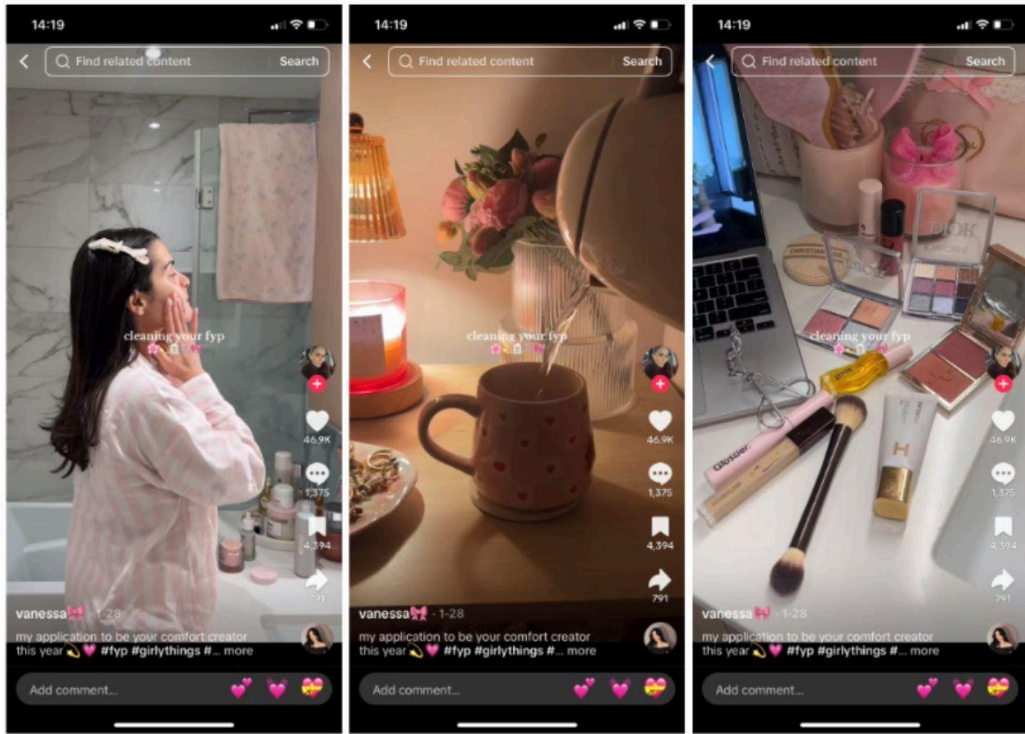
*(Eleonora, 31/1-2025)*

*(Eleonora, 7/3-2025)*

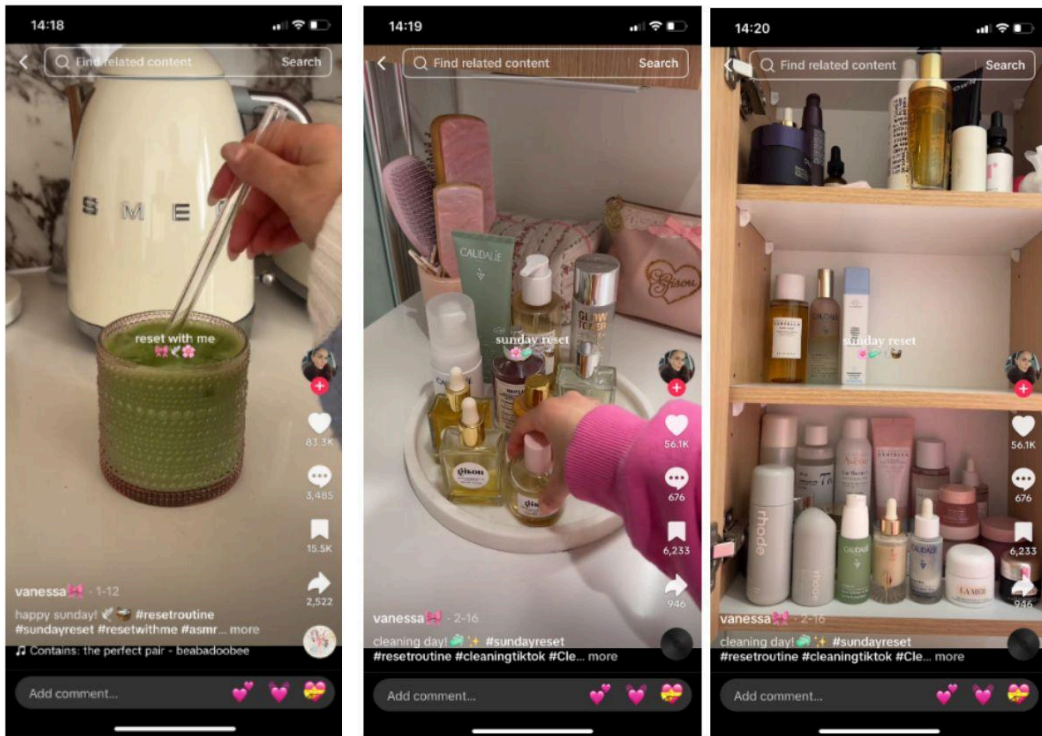


*(Maya, 27/1-2025)*

*(Vanessa, 12/3-2025)*



(Vanessa, 28/1-2025)



(Vanessa, 12/1-2025)

(Vanessa, 16/2-2025)