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Change core-ified:

A visual discourse analysis on the trending tendency
of contemporary gendered aesthetic constructions on Tiktok

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Abstract:

Within the field of gender studies, this research aims to analyze the contemporary gendered constructions that are made through fashion trends on Tiktok. This interdisciplinary thesis on culture, fashion and social media utilises both Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Visual methodology to study the multidimensional material of Tiktok videos with sound, visuals and text. Central theories include poststructural constructions of meaning, feminist discussions on gender identity and body, and theories on constructions of femininity and masculinity in relation to digital space and fashion. Through thematic analysis, five main themes emerge. First, resurgence of conservatism in fashion; second, the wide range of aesthetic expression across the gender spectrum; third, a questioning of male-centered gendered aesthetic construction; fourth, aspects of exploitation and inaccessibility to keep up with trends; and fifth, an ongoing tension between homogenized aesthetics and non-conformist expressions. Together these surmount to an unresolved tension of hegemonic gendered aesthetic construction and non-hegemonic gendered aesthetic construction.

key words: gender, genus, fashion, mode, social media, social media, culture, kultur, trend, trend

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I want to thank me, nevertheless she persisted. Treat yourself with some tiramisu mochi and a mango drink from Lokchan.

Content Warning: misogyny, sexism, oppression, sexualization, objectification, transphobia, homophobia, discrimination, sexual harassment

Table of contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1 Why we should turn our research gaze on a snapshot of gender	6
1.2 How do gender, fashion and Tiktok connect with one another?	7
1.3 What spurred the research focus?	8
1.4 Research focus	9
1.5 Motivations behind the research	10
2. Previous literature	11
2.1 'Why Tiktok though?': a facilitator and critiquer	12
<i>2.1.1 The tiktok functions, their usage.</i>	12
<i>2.1.2 Round two of diversity, tiktok and its functions versus other media</i>	12
2.2 What Tiktok enables, fashion-focused	13
<i>2.2.1 Tiktok allows for cross-boundary construction</i>	13
<i>2.2.2 Two sides of every coin or (in this case) Tiktok video: with exposure or visibility comes vulnerability</i>	14
2.3 Gender construction	15
<i>2.3.1 What are the contemporary general tendencies of gender construction on TikTok?</i>	15
<i>2.3.2 What gender constructions can be seen?</i>	16
2.4 Tendencies of contemporary society: core-ified	17
<i>2.4.1 The question of change IRL: in real life</i>	17
<i>2.4.2 The cultural moment of..?</i>	17
2.5 Conclusion	18
3. Behind the scenes of the theoretical frames	20
3.1 The foundational aspect of meaning-making, unpacking constructions of difference and dichotomy	21
<i>3.1.1 The core of constructed meaning</i>	21
<i>3.1.2 Unpacking the construction aspect of oppression, continued</i>	21
3.2 The (dis)alignment of identity and bodies; to be a Subject in a male-centric world	22
<i>3.2.1 Transness and ablebodiedness regarding (dis)alignment</i>	22
<i>3.2.2 Fundamental gender construction regarding (dis)alignment; women as antithesis to Subject</i>	22
<i>3.2.3 The purpose of the consistent cohesiveness of gender production in (dis)alignment: to be a Subject in a society with phallogocentrism and heterocentrism</i>	23
<i>3.2.4 Recognition of (dis)alignment as power implicated</i>	24
3.3 Misconstrued binary of femininity and masculinity in self-construction, and their structure in relation to hegemony	24
<i>3.3.1 Hegemonic masculinity regarding gender construction, unpacked</i>	24
<i>3.3.2 The existence of hegemonic femininity?</i>	25
<i>3.3.3 Gender construction beyond the constructed binary of it</i>	25
3.4 Digital space and fashion; dialectical relations	26
<i>3.4.1 Digital space as boundaries upheaved?</i>	26

3.4.2 <i>Digital space used for self-construction</i>	27
3.4.3 <i>The space of fashion and trends 101; their functions and self-construction usage</i>	27
4. Methodology	29
4.1 Feminist research methodology	29
4.2 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Visual Methodology	32
4.3 Method	34
4.3.1 <i>Sample</i>	34
4.3.2 <i>Data collection</i>	35
4.3.3 <i>Analytical framework</i>	36
4.4 Ethical considerations	38
5. Results	41
5.1 Conservatism is back in fashion?	41
5.1.1 <i>Bounded by time, and timelessness unbound</i>	41
5.2 The spectrum of clothing	44
5.2.1 <i>Trending Gender-neutral fashion</i>	44
5.2.2 <i>Women and men on the full spectrum of gendered aesthetic expression</i>	46
5.3 Dressing for men?	48
5.3.1 <i>For men; for attraction</i>	48
5.3.2 <i>Who is one's gender expression for?</i>	50
5.4 Keeping up with trends	52
5.4.1 <i>A local boundary to gendered aesthetic expression</i>	52
5.5 Homogenized versus non-conforming aesthetic expression	54
5.5.1 <i>Fashioning one's identity; creative aesthetic use</i>	54
5.5.2 <i>Tension crystallized between two aesthetic constructions of -girl</i>	57
5.6 Discussion of the main findings	59
6. Conclusion	63
7. References	65

1. Introduction

Raw, next question. cleangirl. coconutgirl. strawberrygirl. brat summer fascist fall. Executive orders. your body, my choice. Wicked. cute winter boots. Kendrick vs Drake. girl dinner. P. Diddy. GOT7 comeback. Tiktok ban. Rednote. Mr. plankton. South Korea martial law. Babygirl and chicken shop date. the 90's are back. Gulf of fragile masculinity. Hostile Government Takeover - EDM Remix. Mobwife. Rockstar-girlfriend. AI image Trump, Musk and feet. Luigi, mamma I'm in love with a criminal. Duolingo's death. Domingo. Greenland. The Last Showgirl. Hyunjin's bald. the feminine urge to reinvent oneself. yearning. sadcore. hopecore. corecore. this and yap. undercover highschool. booktok recommendations. Do you hear the people sing. thirst edits. more thirst edits. BSS comeback. Every great movie is gay. trauma. even more thirst edits. Weak hero class 2. US legislation two genders. Roman salute. Zelensky and Trump. Madam Chairman. Doechii. brainrot.

Enter me. Freeze frame. Close up. Narration: I bet you're wondering how I got here. Well... Let me start with introducing the zeitgeist at the time of writing this. These references set the scene of my own Tiktok for-you-page and contemporary society. A for-you-page, meaning a flow of recommended videos based on my previous interactions on the platform. Tiktok could be stigmatised as something superfluous that younger generations use instead of doing something productive and useful, assuming that the content is only dance videos. This is a mistake to view Tiktok and its usage as something lesser than a social space to interact where a mixture of content can be seen, as seen from the examples above. These are a snapshot from when I wrote this introductory section so the popularity of some likely have already changed, speaking to the temporality of trends yet how connected they are to the contemporary cultural zeitgeist. Together they show the static background noise to the choice behind doing this research.

1.1 Why we should turn our research gaze on a snapshot of gender

The importance of matters of gender is recognized by how action is taken against its research. This action can be seen from Trump's executive orders, words like 'gender', 'oppression', and 'advocacy' amongst others which are tied to diversity are being reviewed in the process of affording research grants (Mukherjee, 2025). Another of Trump's executive orders was

about binary gender or rather binary sex since the gender part is forsaken, and stated that binary sex was to be determined by the differing size of the reproductive cell when conception occurs (Mahdawu, 2025). Though since the genitalia at conception is “phenotypically female” for both sexes (Mahdawa, 2025), we can hereby greet Madam President Trump, possibly the first ‘female’ US president. Should we rejoice? A consequence of the executive orders could be the exclusion, discrimination, and decreasing physical and mental health of people who do not fit into a tradition of a binary-sexed identity (Dawson & Kates, 2025).

This bright red cap and a glaring red stop sign on gender research and on conceptualizing gender seems reminiscent of another historic leader’s haunting red colour in which a “roman” salute has been used in support of, that also have sought to see himself as above the law and democracy, indicative of a King or a Führer. Society, and the world at large have previous historical experience of the results of limiting visibility and understanding of a certain group of people. These signs do not indicate a ‘win’ to make society great but rather a regressive tendency where hate, conflicts and loss permeate the fabric of society.

What is happening is that an understanding of gender, its related research and the existence of people that do not align with a binary-sexed notion of identity, are being reduced and highly threatened on a large scale. However, when there is fear of gender and what it implies, what it could do, it means there is power to its persistence. This is an argument for the perseverance of gender research and its utmost relevance and need today.

1.2 How do gender, fashion and Tiktok connect with one another?

Let us turn our gaze to the question of gender through Tiktok and fashion. Research shows that on a global scale of 26 countries people who identify as LGBT+, or those outside the traditional male/female binary and non-heterosexual, have an increased prevalence in Generation Z at 17% as compared to Millennials at 11%, Gen X at 6%, and Boomers at 5% (Ipsos, 2024a, In Summary, Living in colour). The research further speaks to how Gen Z's global environment could be a contributing factor in terms of this higher representation (Ipsos, 2024a, In Summary, Living in colour). Gen Z are posited as the “first truly global generation”, as “digital natives” (Ipsos, 2024b). A research report by McKinsey & Company

shows some general tendencies of non-conformity with gender fluid fashion, which is on the rise as Gen Z prefer to buy clothes from gender categories other than their own (2023:18). Also Gen Z fashion seems to be taking a front row seat on social media as its starting point and where inspiration is taken from, for example the views on the hashtag #genderneutralfashion on Tiktok counted above 316 million (McKinsey & Company, 2023:56-57).

From trends like cottagecore, gorpcore and normcore we enter into a Tiktok trend itself of corecore, meaning a mixture of videos or images coming together to create something more than its parts, usually in the form of a message (Roberts, 2023). A digital media platform that features articles on pop culture sees ‘Core’ as “shared experiences, genres and ideas.” and corecore follows as an exploration of its “antithesis” because “it can be anything”, it offers reflection and questioning (Roberts, 2023). These types of videos could be inspired by the use of montage, which is historically known by its mixing of different clips or images to create something more, which draws upon 1920s Russian cinema where the technique was used by Eisenstein in *The Battleship Potemkin*, and by Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* (Sperling et al., 2016). It is associated with photomontage and the artistic influence of Dadaism, and has been used as both propaganda and as social commentary (Sperling et al., 2016). From montage historically taking part in establishing cinema as an artform we can see the connection between the visual media of Tiktok and politically charged material and how the videos are constructed. We see, for example, corecore again as something not in a vacuum. We can together see how fashion overlaps with an artform on the Tiktok media platform along with the art of social commentary. This is illustrated by my writings in the beginning of this introduction as a textual display of montage where Tiktok for-you-page demonstrates a cacophony. It altogether also shows the possibility of how Tiktok and fashion and gender stand in relation with one another and are interesting sites of research.

1.3 What spurred the research focus?

Outside of my Tiktok for-you-page and the contemporary status of fashion, this research focus captures my own interests and experiences. Fashion has always been intriguing with its shapes and colours, offering ways of self-expression wherein Tiktok has been a form of inspiration to me. Fashion has been an avenue for exploration of understanding my own gender-identity, how feminine-coded clothes can feel like a performance and

masculine-coded ones to be worn when I feel less of a desire to be perceived. How I can feel at home in both but in different contexts and how the mixing of the two is what feels authentic to me. This has made clear the possibility fashion has as a medium and a site of contestation in terms of gender and identity, and has been a core in driving the chosen research focus for this thesis. In broader terms, there is a cultural component to how people choose the clothes they wear everyday, and how they use Tiktok as a space for cultural and social analysis where gender is being produced is meaningful to study. Research shows that globally in 2023 the users were almost 2 billion, and for 2025 it is calculated to reach 2,136 billion (Statista, 2023). This illustrates the widespread growing proliferation of Tiktok in contemporary society, hence, it is highly relevant to observe and examine how people live their social lives on Tiktok, in order to explore how gender is being shaped. It is not something to be left in the periphery but rather brought to the core in research. Which I aim to do.

1.4 Research focus

Spotlight. Cue. The main research questions which guide the study are:

1. How is gender reproduced through fashion on Tiktok?
2. What are the aesthetic constructions which emerge in the portrayal of the self, gender, femininities and masculinities through visual representation on Tiktok?
3. How can we visually and discursively explore the hierarchical social structures prevalent within Tiktok fashion videos?

I seek to contribute a small piece to the puzzle of how gender is constructed in contemporary society. To see gender constructions situated between the norms of fashion trends and wider views on societal context. All this leads to the main aim of this thesis, which focuses on how gender is constructed in the form of visual culture and fashion. The research field herein is one of visual media and fashion.

This is meant to be thought of through the core, the medium of fashion within the arena of pop culture on the social media platform Tiktok. I aim to focus on videos regarding trends and how Generation Z express themselves through fashion in relation to these trends. I am interested in the tensions which emerge in the ambivalences, the complexity, the

multidimensionality of gender construction. To perceive these through fashion, the dis-alignment or how boundary-crossing takes place. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Visual methodology are the main methodologies and methods, whilst Creative feminist writing has been used as an implicit method as a starting point and to help guide the two and the writing process in this research.

1.5 Motivations behind the research

I have noticed that the subject of Tiktok as a platform is grossly understudied within academia, although there has been substantial research on other social media platforms. The further connection between gender and fashion would be beneficial to delve deeper into. Some relevant theories I have seen from my own engagement with the matter include, the ‘short skirt theory’ or more well known as ‘the hemline index’ where the society’s economy correlates with the length of skirts worn (Waligora, 2023), the ‘fashion pendulum’ where what is trending swings from one extreme to another (Goncu Berk, 2023b:72), or ‘a hoe never gets cold’ how body temperature and self-objectification was studied (Harper, 2022). The fresh perspective which I bring in is to combine such studies on fashion and gender with the focus on the social media platform Tiktok. This could also provide an in-depth perspective into the format of videos rather than solely text on gender and fashion, demonstrating a multidimensional look at gender production. The digital space is thus a space to express, play with, perform or transform gender in relation to the fashion and trends posited. Altogether there is interplay of fashion studies, culture/social studies and digital media studies, and I intend to contribute to the intersections of these fields throughout this research. Through this I have endeavoured to meet this combination of fields and continue to provide insight to an understudied arena, this to arrive at the raw core of an alternative research understanding, refusing to dismiss it by saying “next question”.

2. Previous literature

The previous literature draws on research that was relevant and gave an understanding to key fields of fashion, digital media, and culture, and the social media platform of Tiktok. I used a mix of relevant keywords, boolean operators and truncations in different ways, searching in both the full-text and the abstract field on LubSearch with a criteria of peer reviewed research. Keywords chosen were “gender”, “tiktok”, “construct”, “discourse”, “fashion”, “aesthetic”, “norm*”, “feminis*”, “feminin*”, “trend”, “core”, “masculinit*”. The database was chosen on the basis of its interdisciplinary character, having a greater possibility to illuminate the cross-boundary research focus of fashion, culture and social media. The majority of the articles available were post-2010, speaking to the contemporary character of this research. Some more specified keywords from my preliminary engagement with the platform and my own knowledge about the research topic were also searched, such as “tradwife”, “coconutgirl”, “girl-epidemic”, “mobwife” showing few results which could be significant. This further illuminates the challenge to address my research aims.

The articles chosen were on different subcultures and differing subject groups and persons of a range of genders, ethnicity and sexuality with a variety of research methods. We will see lesbian teenagers (Lin, 2023:193), Black girls (Nashid, 2024:86), cisfeminine white sorority girls in the US (Brewster, 2024:1), mixed race Japanese-Australian Jiyayjt (Steains, 2025:1), content producers on men’s fashion (Lascity, 2024:242) and Muslim women in Germany (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:1) amongst others.

I also sought a spread of different methods such as qualitative content analysis (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:403), thematic analysis (Sykes, 2024:1; Patouras & Tanner, 2024:1), web scraping and qualitative coding (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:1), mixed methods (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:1), multimodal critical discourse analysis (Lascity, 2024:242) and visual research (Lin, 2023:193) amongst others. Other articles had alternatively an overview of the cultural moment rather than noting a specific trending subculture. There was an article on gender construction across different social media platforms (Hernández-Ruiz, 2024:1) and another on the contemporary cultural tendencies of Metamodernism (Ceriello, 2022:489). Together, the chosen previous literature has been synthesized in the following themes of: *‘Why Tiktok though?: a facilitator and critiquer;*

What Tiktok enables, fashion-focused; Gender construction; Tendencies of contemporary society: core-ified.

2.1 'Why Tiktok though?': a facilitator and critiquer

2.1.1 The tiktok functions, their usage.

Construction of self and community has been facilitated by people using Tiktok's hashtags (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:399; Sykes, 2024:1; Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:5; Cano & Sklar, 2024:232; Brewster, 2024:4), sound (Patouras & Tanner, 2024:1; Nashid, 2024:88; Sandall, 2024:6) and visuals (Lascity, 2024:251; Lin, 2023:200; Steains, 2025:7). Altogether this allows for a multidimensional way to communicate and connect.

Research additionally shows that Tiktok both functions as facilitator and critiquer of norms, the first from the norms portrayed in content by creators and the second by comments posted fostering a response (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:399). This dynamic is illuminated by the further existence and possible support for discrimination and inequality, from how Tiktok allows a spread of gender stereotypes and from the anonymity it affords (Yin & Binti Abdullah, 2024:93). However, Tiktok enables a condensing of problematic ideology to entertaining short videos (Sykes, 2024:5), this implies its function in practice is not neutral. Therefore it would be beneficial for the content shared and created that affords both facilitation and criticism of norms, for it to be contextualized through this possible bias that the functions themselves and the bias of the people using them may have regarding a specific content. This aspect of Tiktok's usage not being in a vacuum will be continued in the subsequent theme.

2.1.2 Round two of diversity, tiktok and its functions versus other media

Tiktok seems to allow for an open space for non-normative content and identities, meaning content which defies or challenges societal norms. Researchers who assess diverse social media note that Tiktok as compared to Twitter is "less partisan and more dialogue-based" (Peña-Fernández et al., 2023:47). This tendency is supported from how Discord and Twitch favor gender normative content with Discord depicting white cishet males and a hegemonic masculinity for Twitch, while Instagram is favours gender diversity and Tiktok from its algorithm "may create a democratizing digital sphere where ascriptions to sexual and gender identity are attenuated" (Hernández-Ruiz et al. 2024:7-8). Tiktok in comparison to "web

forums, Facebook groups and subreddits” “is open-ended and grants access to spectators” (Cano & Sklar, 2024:222). Tiktoks algorithm is made for engagement with diverse content (Lascity, 2024:244), the platform allows access to global content with differing norms (Steains, 2025:1). It is further purported that in relation to the traditional authority and dominant discourse of other media and the dominant fashion, social media offers an alternative in the fashion sphere (Lascity, 2024:244).

Although Tiktok is not in a vacuum exempt from bias. Tiktok’s for-you-page uses a recommendation of content that is based on the user's demographic, their interaction with videos, and which videos have a higher engagement overall (Brewster, 2024:3). However Brewster (2024:3) underlines that these recommendations are based on the interest by the users who are biased, which subsequently supports a hegemony where some identities are subordinated. Patouras and Tanner (2024:5) build upon this argument, that although this algorithm and the short video format is used for disruption of norms, Tiktok is nevertheless biased in ‘who’ it is recommending or providing a voice to, for the algorithm chooses which videos to show or not, favouring identities of “white, middle-class women”. Here further providing how the practice of it could both be an allowance of non-normative content and norm disruption, and a support of hegemonic constructions. Together demonstrating how Tiktok, when compared to other media, could have some benefits in some regards, although its diversity remains lacking to some extent.

2.2 What Tiktok enables, fashion-focused

2.2.1 Tiktok allows for cross-boundary construction

Tiktok could be a space for a recognition of cross-boundary self-construction. It is a space for different ways to construct and express oneself (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:1; Steains, 2025:20). Research shows that on social media platforms, clothing items like the hijab are used as a medium to construct identity and in turn the meaning of the item itself is constructed and possibly changed (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:3-4). This is also evidenced through how fashion or aesthetics on Tiktok are used to construct a non-hegemonic identity, going against a normative discourse (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:1; Nashid, 2024:86). Sandall (2024:2) further brings up that fashion or aesthetics have been used in the media as activism to go against normative constructions. Fashion on Tiktok is

used as a practice to understand one's non-normative identity and bring one closer to people who construct themselves in similar ways (Lin, 2023:204-205).

Going further into an explanation that has been implied in regards to the space of Tiktok, the platform is seen as a 'third space' that allows the challenging of boundaries that "exist[s] between private and public, between institution and individual, between authority and individual autonomy, between large media framings and individual 'pro-sumption,' between local and translocal" (Hoover and Echchabibi, 2023:14 cited in El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:4). It crosses boundaries of constructions, place and norms amongst others that have a significant and possibly dominant influence are here unraveled. This will be further discussed later on.

2.2.2 Two sides of every coin or (in this case) Tiktok video: with exposure or visibility comes vulnerability

The other side of self-construction is the recognition otherwise afforded or not. Research shows that by using aesthetics or fashion on Tiktok to construct one's identity, one could be met with a questioning of it, if it were authentic or not (Cano & Sklar, 2024:240). This is further evidenced by El Sayed and Hotait (2024:13) where a response towards an online presence of Muslim women and how they chose to self-construct was met with harsh criticism. This implies that the possibility of a negative response to one's self-construction exists, and could occur when one chooses to use Tiktok and fashion to construct oneself. This is further evidenced by Tirocchi and Taddeo where the phenomenon of #StayAtHomeGirlfriends on Tiktok alongside its trending portrayal of associated gender norms also invited critical reflections towards them (2024:399).

Although, Lin (2023:205) brings up how tiktok is a space where both recognition and criticism can take place and provides an implied idea about how we should not expect Tiktok to only be a safe space but see that creation of *a* space that entails different types of behaviours. We must see Tiktok in a context. Expecting Tiktok to only be a safe space based on it being more dialogue centered and accessible to users, denies the understanding of tiktok not being in a vacuum exempt from society. It is able to be multifaceted as it is both made and used to upheave norms and to facilitate them. This can be exemplified from Patouras and Tanners' (2024:1) research where womanhood is constructed through Tiktok, yet this

construction is that the spheres of what is private and public is not subsequently upheaved but instead reified.

2.3 Gender construction

2.3.1 What are the contemporary general tendencies of gender construction on TikTok?

We see that when the subject group is higher in the societal hierarchy the general tendency is that they construct the normative through clothes or aesthetics. This can be seen from research on men who make clothing recommendations on TikTok. Their videos show a reification of the dominance of traditional fashion, meaning the hierarchical system and its practice of the norm of western luxury brands and traditional ways to dress, rather than challenging the norms and the fashion status quo (Lascity, 2024:254-255). From a study around the question of how a sorority girl is constructed under #rushtok it is evident that there is support for a constructed ideal of an implied white cis het woman. Here, the ideal type is coded through “luxury branding, highly feminine but conservative styles, and bodily discipline” (Brewster, 2024:1). Another study showed a reproduction of a traditional image of the male breadwinner norm through the growing phenomenon of #StayAtHomeGirlfriend on TikTok, connecting it to a hyper-feminine aesthetic (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:399-400). This is similar to the research by Sykes (2024:14) regarding the same phenomenon of #stayathomegirlfriend which is discussed as ‘tradwife’ repackaged and shown to support the constructed tradition of female domesticity.

Although there is an ambivalence seen from ‘bimbotok’, it evidences how a hyperfeminine aesthetic together with queer culture is used to deconstruct “patriarchal, Eurocentric and capitalist structures of inequality”, while reinforcing said Eurocentric standard of hyper-femininity and privilege (Sandall, 2024:13-14). This could be the end result of what happens when people try to instead disrupt it through simultaneously deconstructing and reifying hegemonies. Contrastingly when looking at identities lower on the societal hierarchy, the general tendency is to engage by challenging normative constructions. A case study shows soft masculinity being reproduced and inspired by Asian culture in Jiyayjt’s TikTok content with his background of being both Japanese and Australian (Steains, 2025:1). Likewise, a Soft Black Girl is being constructed on TikTok to “deconstruct stereotypes pertaining to the adultification of Black girls and disengage from whiteness” (Nashid,

2024:86). Also, regarding marginalized Muslim women in Germany, their usage of Tiktok has been to construct themselves differently to stereotypes (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:1). Together, these tendencies bring to light the ambivalent dynamic to a shaping and reshaping of one's identity through aesthetics in a contemporary arena of Tiktok, that we negotiate self-construction through ascribing to and challenging norms. It together asks the question if change is possible, and if so, by whom and to what extent. I will venture further into this in the next theme.

2.3.2 What gender constructions can be seen?

From the previous subtheme, we see the making of the ideal types of trends of tradwife, #stayathomegirlfriend, a cishet white sororitygirl and bimbos. They highlight how traditional femininity of domesticity and hyper-femininity is joined with consumerism, whiteness and body size. Though the gender construction is not as binary when looking outside of a heteronormative lens. Research shows that when the sexual orientation of the subject group on Tiktok is homosexual (Lin, 2023:193), or when the gender construction is influenced from queer culture (Steains, 2025:1) the construction has a greater tendency for boundary crossing than being traditionally binary. This queer influence opens up to attributes of softness in masculinity (Steains, 2025:1) and more 'gender neutral' coded clothing or aesthetics of Dr. Marten shoes, pierced nose and flannel shirts (Lin, 2023:201). When turning our gaze to bimbobotok there is a gender construction that is hyperfeminine and agentic at the same time, it welcomes a representation of a queer sexual desire that previously has been deemed as absent (Sandall, 2024:4). Contrastingly, the previous gender constructions that were conservative did not illustrate a sexual dimension in its construction.

This boundary crossing of softness, gender neutral coded clothes and agentic hyper-femininity seems indicative of a contemporary gender construction. Here, what is observable is that there are two streams. One stream of videos follow the hegemonies of heteronormativity, eurocentrism and whiteness along with the subsequent gender construction that comply. Another stream challenges these hegemonies and the subsequent gender construction.

2.4 Tendencies of contemporary society: core-ified

2.4.1 *The question of change IRL: in real life*

Social media “constitute a space for the negotiation and acquisition of gender models” (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:402). This is supported by what the previously mentioned research on the current gender constructions purport. From these we can see how Tiktok affords its users an alternative space to construct themselves, to understand themselves, to recognize oneself. Gender has here actively been reproduced in different ways and has effects through the discursive influence it has on the viewers of such content.

However, Yin and Binti Abdullah (2024:93) are critical of saying that societal change has been achieved for they state, “[f]urthermore, the research highlights how the anonymity of the internet, the media’s role in encoding and perpetuating gender stereotypes, and the consumerist traps set by capitalist market dynamics, collectively contribute to an illusory facade of gender equality. This facade obscures the underlying realities of discourse bias and gender discrimination that persist in the digital realm.”. This shows the complexity of the domain of social media as I have discussed before, how it is not ‘picture perfect’ since it is made- and used by humans who are imperfect and biased. And it is here shown as a cog in the machine of society influenced by other forces.

Although, seeing it through the lens of Sandall (2024:4) explains the construction on bimbotok as “a ‘dis-identifactory performance’ of gender norms that denaturalises hegemonic norms of gender and femininity”. Together we see the tension of achieving societal change through the influence of norms on social media when there is an ambivalence towards the disruption and reinforcing of hegemonic norms. But, if we look at it this way, when there is complexity and opposition, does it mean the effort is in vain?

2.4.2 *The cultural moment of..?*

To zoom out, looking at these gender constructions and fashion aesthetics, Vujošević (2024:153) illuminates that a post-postmodern fragmentation on Tiktok is crystallized by the phenomena of #corecore. To explain, the suffix -core is used in our hyper-aestheticized society as a signifier of aesthetic, identity, lifestyle, vibes and subcultures, it exists both on the aesthetic/superficial and on the identity/deeper level (Vujošević, 2024:148-149).

Hyper-aesthetification means that there is a much greater degree of aestheticization of people's routinized living than what has been previously recorded or studied (Vujošević, 2024:148-149). Hereafter, corecore is seen as "the most meta of internet subcultures" (Roberts, 2023 cited in Vujošević, 2024:148). Its phenomena is explained as an understandable result of contemporary society's "consumerism, capitalism, technological atomization, systemic injustices [...], and irreversible climate change" (Colquitt & Cobb, 2023 cited in Vujošević, 2024:158). Corecore stands on the general cultural tendency of fragmentation, "[w]hen you want to portray everything, such an endeavor necessarily breaks up into fragments" (Vujošević, 2024:155). Therefore, from the contemporary situation being too big to note and understand, we can use fragments, use corecore as a way to grasp and convey it. This cultural tendency is further discussed in the subsequent illuminative mention of metamodernism.

Metamodernism, the umbrella term for the zeitgeist of contemporary culture. Metamodernism "oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010 cited in Ceriello, 2022:489-490). This is noted and further explained as the time period post postmodernism where the core is a tension that does not get resolved (Corbett, 2023:2). A facet of metamodernism that is discussed is the feelings of a post-irony that is making light of an absurd reality, yet sincere and self-aware about it (Corbett, 2023:6; Ceriello, 2022:493). This could explain why we simultaneously see a reinforcing disruption of hegemonies regarding contemporary gender construction. It could further explain how the climate of contemporary gender construction could feel fragmented and polarizing yet have some intersecting and similar gender constructions.

2.5 Conclusion

From the dawn of Metamodernism that has sought to tentatively illuminate a new cultural era, I wish to take a part in understanding this contemporary period. These synthesized themes and subthemes demonstrate what my research seeks to study, the intersection of self-construction of gender, and fashion and Tiktok, they contribute to a preliminary understanding of what is occurring in the zeitgeist. From the beginning, the majority of the specified previous research look at various specific subcultures, here I intend to see the overarching tendencies rather than a specific trend, -core or #-tok. This was further exhibited

by how some relevant keywords showed little to no results. In this thesis I pursue the umbrella catching the drops of aesthetics to see what they all flow into. The themes above provide a preliminary understanding of my research focus and relevant previous research and show the direction which I further intend to take in my subsequent research. The following chapter outlines the theoretical framework.

3. Behind the scenes of the theoretical frames

The theoretical framework has been synthesized into relevant themes. I begin with the theme of *the foundational aspect of meaning-making, unpacking constructions of difference and dichotomy*. This is to understand how meaning has a history of construction which is part of gender construction that takes place in the visual culture of Tiktok videos. We see Hall's theory on semiotic difference with hierarchical differentiation in meaning making, and Lugones and Wilderson III discussions on the history of knowledge production being implicated in societal power dynamics. It is a roadmap on the previous constructions made and how they are implicated.

Under the second theme of *the (dis)alignment of identity and bodies; to be a Subject in a male-centric world*, I illuminate how further in gender construction alignment and a male-centric world are core aspects part of its construction. Bremer and McRuer delve into transness and crip theory, dimensions of an ideal normative construction. Butler digs into women, their Subject-status and how 'she' does not predate her own temporal creation. Butler follows with recognition as problematic regarding the (dis)aligned.

The third theme *misconstrued binary of femininity and masculinity in self-construction, and their structure in relation to hegemony* speaks to a specific understanding of femininity and masculinity and how they constitutively relate to one another and how power is implicated in their construction. We have Schippers and Connell on femininity, masculinity and hegemony's basis in a patriarchal structure and supported by West and Zimmerman, and Butler on gender's performative interactive basis.

I end with *digital space and fashion; dialectical relations* to examine how self-construction is part of these spaces as well as to delve into the aspects of fashion and digital space as specified fields for my research. Goffman's theory discussed by Lunt sees digital space as crossing the boundary of public versus private, a place for interaction that supports self-construction and of constructing authenticity. Goncu Berk provides a theory on how fashion trends function in terms of societal forces and the choice of adopting one, which further demonstrates the connection between fashion and identity.

3.1 The foundational aspect of meaning-making, unpacking constructions of difference and dichotomy

3.1.1 The core of constructed meaning

To start with I find it beneficial to look at the core of constructed meaning, knowledge production of meaning and subsequent formation of hierarchical construction and oppression. This gives a fundamental understanding on how we create meaning and how it is tied to power and differentiation, forwarding that choices of self-construction and fashion choices are here implicated. It is stated that semiotic understanding of something is based on what it is not, meaning an underlying oppositionary dynamic in how we perceive things (Hall, 1997:31-32). Although this way of constructing meaning has been criticized for how other meanings get left out, when solely looking at two ends of a spectrum (Hall, 1997:31-32). This could then mean that our understanding reduces the meaning otherwise posited in between the two opposing ends. This is in line with the historically construction of the Other, of how the enslaved and natives from the scrawl of colonizers' pen were written about as animals opposing the (Western, white and 'agentic') modern human, and the woman was seen as subordinated and in service of said hu(man) (Lugones, 2010:743). Although the construction of the Other does not inherently imply a dehumanizing aspect, these are however the relevant patterns shown here.

3.1.2 Unpacking the construction aspect of oppression, continued

Here, what is a woman, is seen as opposing yet beneath a man (Lugones, 2010:743-744). However, the oppression of women and oppression of natives are two different things even though they both can be accounted for under the umbrella term of 'oppressed'. This idea stands on Wilderson III (n.d.), who notes the existence of a difference in oppression of Natives versus Black people. This logic stands on construction of difference, of what, who is deemed as the norm. Therefore, to not fall into the buoyant pit of ignorance we must follow the river towards the bend to explore how dominant knowledge is defined (Lugones, 2010:748) as springing from a meeting of conflicting forces. To see how knowledge and power interact, to be mindful of the possible reduction of meaning when prescribing to an oppositionary and hierarchical understanding. This is demonstrated throughout history up

until contemporary society, of how some social groups are considered less than others, and are constructed as such.

3.2 The (dis)alignment of identity and bodies; to be a Subject in a male-centric world

3.2.1 Transness and ablebodiedness regarding (dis)alignment

Bremer (2010:99-100) lifts multiple identifying categories in the norm of a White Western cisheterosexuality in a phenomenological discussion regarding transness and gender-affirming care. An existence beyond that is deemed and felt as not 'whole', when one does not follow the lines in the sand, the moist sand sticks to the soles of one's feet showing the crossing tracks which signify a cutting, crisscrossing and unsatisfactory existence (Bremer, 2010:99-101). This connection between identifying categories is further discussed by McRuer (2006:2-3) who uses crip theory to analyse ablebodiedness as the norm historically conditioned by normative heterosexuality which characterises all other bodies as deviating from the norm. This goes back to the dichotomized view of the norm and Other, of which bodies are accepted and which are not. However McRuer mentions compulsory heterosexuality supports compulsory ablebodiedness which then leads to the subordination and suppression of queer and disabled bodies, though this is never seemingly enough to make such bodies disappear (2006:31). Therefore through the existence of the 'Other', the hegemony of ablebodiedness and heterosexuality is similar to a house of cards, where the gust of an 'other' can bring the cards tumbling down (McRuer, 2006:31). This shows how there exist complex connected hegemonies of whiteness, ablebodiedness, masculinity over femininity, heterosexuality and cisness. How we are pressured to align ourselves is based on a constructed ideal that only a few are seemingly able to obtain. Although with the support and prevalence of other forms of living and being, this ideal could be dysregulated for it is constantly threatened by the existence of its alternatives.

3.2.2 Fundamental gender construction regarding (dis)alignment; women as antithesis to Subject

Butler fundamentally questions the purpose of gender when its reductive definition is in opposition to feminist inquiry (2006:7-8). They critique the binary of sex (biology) and

gender (cultural), and rather see it constituted by construction in the same way as how gender 'becomes' (Butler, 2006:9). This follows a deconstruction of the sex/gender binary and supporting man (masculine) and woman (feminine) construction (Butler, 2006:9). Which allows one to see the arbitrariness of the content of gender and sex along with what it fundamentally means in terms of body and its alignment with identity. Such that normative bodies align with supposed cisheterosexuality. They further see the paradoxical nature of women as a gender yet not, for they are the absence of the universal masculine rather than their own constructed entity (Butler, 2006:13). Women can never "be" for what it means to be constituted as a Subject is the exclusion of women, of femininity, a Subject thus constitutes the antithesis to women (Butler, 2006:25). This provides an understanding of a different dimension where if a woman seeks to be seen as a Subject she is implicated in the difficulty of unearthing and fighting the naturalized binary constructions.

3.2.3 The purpose of the consistent cohesiveness of gender production in (dis)alignment: to be a Subject in a society with phallogocentrism and heterocentrism

Butler (2006:22-23) opens a line of questioning if there is an agentic being 'outside' of gender based on the normative ideal of a congruent and thus comprehensible identity that a congruent and comprehensible *gender* identity stands on. This congruence is what constructs a seemingly perceivable "gender core" (Stoller, 1985:11-14 cited in Butler, 2006:33), although such an ontological existence is renounced (Butler, 2006:34). Therefore, the perception of a 'woman' as an existing object only means a temporal success in the procedural self-naturalization of 'woman' (Butler, 2006:45). In regards to gender's construction and its 'reign supreme' we hereby end (or begin) with phallogocentrism taking its seat in the king's place and heterosexism in the queen's (Butler, 2006:44-46). This demonstrates gender is assumed as the 'bowing of our heads' to heterosexuality and the man's dominance (phallogocentrism). Here, we see how gender is being constitutively mirrored by these and therefore are implicated in a patriarchal societal structure. There is pressure to continuously align ourselves to dominant gender construction if we want to *be* a Subject.

3.2.4 Recognition of (dis)alignment as power implicated

Butler holds the view that recognition between people should be something that is continuous and not end with an answer per say (2005:43). To not simply behold another through the normative eyes of society and deem the person recognizable only if it adheres to such norms (Butler, 2004:3). This shows that recognition is not inherently good and that power relations are implicated in its doing/performance. It demonstrates that there is a constructed societal gap in 'seeing' or recognizing people through their gender identities and sexual identities and sex, this does not and need not align but falls on a spectrum (Butler, 2006:23). It implies that to be able to exist in contemporary society one must 'take a knee' to normative gender (Butler, 2006:190). This problematizes the seeking of recognition tied to gender. It shows the difficulty in existing as an unaligned sex, gender and sexual identity in society, how there is a normative force that seeks to hide you. To disregard you. Therefore it is imperative to 'hold space' for a cross cutting path and of non-normative bodies and disalignment because these sandy tracks reveal the traces of self-construction outside of the norm. That here is important to set foot and allow research to flourish to understand something otherwise excluded and pushed out of sight.

3.3 Misconstrued binary of femininity and masculinity in self-construction, and their structure in relation to hegemony

3.3.1 Hegemonic masculinity regarding gender construction, unpacked

I want to broach the subject of how femininity, masculinity, power and discourse are interwoven and constructed. There are different constructed types of femininity and masculinity. There is hegemonic masculinity that infers and stands on 'genushegemoni' or genderhegemony, that gender is constitutive of the legitimization of men's hierarchical position above women (Schippers, 2007:91). This means that what is masculine is seen as what is not feminine, it is seen as more traditionally masculine attributes, and that such masculinity is part of the bolstering of men's position in society (Schippers, 2007:90-91). This differentiation stands on heterosexuality where attraction for the other, the polar gender is posited and biology is part of this argument for this relation (Schippers, 2007:90-91).

However not just men can be masculine, for masculinity is the enactment, the performance of such associated attributes (Schippers, 2007:92). This aspect and the overall theory stands on

West and Zimmerman (1987:126) where gender is something part of an action of an individual and constructed from the social interaction and overall socially constructed perception of gender. Additionally it is reminiscent of Butler (2006:34) who goes into an ontological discussion of the subject in regards to gender, how there predates no gender identity before the enactment of it. It criticizes how the concept of gender identity could mean seeing it as fixed and formed before and exempt from its enactment (Butler, 2006:34). Gender is here demonstrated as being in support of a hierarchically structured society, that in its discursive construction with correlated normative expressions of gender an alternatively structured society and constructed gender is regulated by it being deemed and constructed as socially undesirable.

3.3.2 The existence of hegemonic femininity?

Now, does hegemonic femininity exist? Schippers (2007:94-95) posits the possibility of a femininity being in constructed concordance with the hierarchization of man. However not everybody agrees, Connell (1987:183) notes that there is a difference in the society we live in, that of being a patriarchal one, therefore in this context a hegemonic femininity cannot exist in the same way hegemonic masculinity can. Instead we see emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987:183) in service and support of the man. Which embraces the more traditional feminine attributes (Connell, 1987:187). The other types of femininities are first pariah femininities which are constructed with previously masculine coded attributes (Schippers, 2007:94-95), and alternative femininities which oppose the societal relationship of the dominance of man/masculinity on top and woman/femininity on bottom (Schippers, 2007:97-98). This could mean that the binary of femininity/masculine is theoretically opened up for the structured binary of man as masculine and woman as feminine is problematized. It illustrates how the construction of such binaries are in support of a patriarchal system with the man's dominance.

3.3.3 Gender construction beyond the constructed binary of it

I theorise through these conceptualizations that a person could make use of femininity and masculinity in mixed ways in their own self-construction where the two exist on a spectrum. Although the choices made could have differing implications and be perceived differently depending on the person's own gendered identity and expression. Gender construction is fluid

for it is constituted by the discursive constructions made by people in different levels of society (Schippers, 2007:93-94). Together, these differing types of femininity and masculinity illustrate that they are constantly constructed in different and more or less accepted ways, for different purposes and in relation to the hegemonic discourses. This shows how what is thought to be binary is actually only constructed as such, and when we perceive that then we can more deeply understand where multiple gender identity constructions come from. Furthermore we can see there is power implicated in pressuring people to align with these constructions for they are normative, and how transgressing these boundaries implies resisting these normative powers and constructions. This shows that in self-construction, binary-aligned choices of fashion is normative pressure manifested in thread, though this is not the only option available if one chooses to look beyond the simple depictions of two opposing poles.

3.4 Digital space and fashion; dialectical relations

3.4.1 Digital space as boundaries upheaved?

To turn to the space where self-construction is done, there is Goffmans theatre-based theory that has been discussed and applied to digital space (Lunt, 2022:195-196). Digital space crosses boundaries of what is private and what is public, it allows for interaction that is no longer bound to geographical place, and it further accesses a space for creation of a “common culture” (Lunt, 2022:198). The differences in social power is upheaved, in two ways, to no longer be bound by the cultural context you live in, and by the differentiation of private and public, the latter meaning the former privacy of higher positioned figures is weakened along with everybody else’s privacy (Lunt, 2022:198-199). Power is both no longer as firmly kept in the hands of the few and based on being tight-lipped, wrapping oneself in shadows. We have entered an era where the red curtain has been pulled aside and the spotlight shines brighter than before, we can see the stage more clearly (Lunt, 2022:203). An aspect emerging from this change in power and coartness is how the boundaries of masculinity are together with femininity upheaved and instead of having a clear distinction are both encroaching on a grey area on a spectrum (Lunt, 2022:199).

3.4.2 Digital space used for self-construction

Another point is how digital space is where one can interact with the construction of a person's self (Lunt, 2022:201). This use of digital space is discussed as being characterised by a self-serving notion of showing a neatly packaged, united and positive image of oneself, though Lunt seems to open an inquiry on how it is about something more than that with their subsequent discussion on recognition (2022:202). Lunt says that the interaction between users of social media through comments and likes is “a form of recognition, mutuality and collectivity” (2022:202). With less shadows wrapping around oneself there is a social tendency towards continuing to pull away the red curtains that hide what is behind them, to not let a performance go on without looking behind the stage makeup and the crafted staging, for an example we see an increased unveiling of celebrities secrets (Lunt, 2022:203). This altogether shows a dynamic of not accepting seeming inauthenticity yet also respecting and recognising a person's own space/construction.

3.4.3 The space of fashion and trends 101; their functions and self-construction usage

Let us move further into the space of fashion and trends. The adoption of trends goes through different stages, where after becoming aware of the possible trend, its desirability is perceived by how well it fits “with the individual's needs and wants” (Goncu Berk, 2023b:64). This could mean that a person's choice of clothes and associated applied trends is a choice for their desire to construct themselves in a certain way, that they speak to the identity of the wearer. This is supported by the theorising of fashion as “personal expression and a channel for identity” (Goncu Berk, 2023b:71). The later stage regards a choice to accept the trend or not after trying it out and what type of response you get (Goncu Berk, 2023b:64). This could relate to the reinforcement that likes on a video provides, as previously mentioned.

From a different level, other aspects affecting trends are sociocultural and political (Goncu Berk, 2023a:54). This shows how trends are created in a context and affected by what's happening in the world. Trends can exist at different time spans and levels (Goncu Berk, 2023a:53), and so can countertrends that are further conceptualized as being in relation to popular trends and an opposite reaction to them (Goncu Berk, 2023a:61). Altogether, fashion trends are constructed in relation to societal forces and individuals' own choices. We see it on the individual level of choosing what to wear everyday and globally on a digital platform,

from participating in and interacting with the production of gender and trends. This means that when people choose clothes or trends to adopt, they make meaning themselves, but are also moved by meaning, they influence and construct fashion trends and gender and are in a dialectical relationship. Digital space is where this can happen, a place for meaning to be constructed, performed, accepted or refused in mixed ways.

4. Methodology

4.1 Feminist research methodology

To start with, let us turn our gaze towards the ‘feminist’ part, towards what it means to do research in the field of gender studies. The feminist core is a critical perspective on structure and constructions (Sager, 2024:31). To oppose a patriarchal structure and constructions, where what is served are plates filled with unpalatable oppression and inequality rather than the otherwise queer-coded kind beginning with c. With this full-course meal of methodology, I will begin with a description of each ‘course’ that is part of and important to such research.

The first ‘course’ is one of situated knowledge which means that knowledge, a gaze, cannot be disengaged from the beholder (Sager, 2024:32). It criticises generalizability (Sager, 2024:34). It repels the shiny fabrication of knowledge being objective and further expels the ‘absence’ of a creator in knowledge production. This follows recommendations by The Critical Methodologies Collective (in The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2021:3) where the author of a research should be critically accounted for. It emphasises the centrality of the gaze with a greater vantage point towards differing knowledge, although not dismissing that non-subordinated gazes are also worthwhile to research (Sager, 2024:33). We subsequently must note how such vantage points are not naturalized and inherent for the knowledge produced but partial to it (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002:315-321). Therefore throughout my study and the writing of this thesis, the question of gaze has been reflected upon.

As an example, in the analysis I have reflected on the situatedness of constructions conveyed. Additionally, my gaze, the implications this has had for my research choices, stands on the different possibilities afforded to me and where in the power structure I stand (Sager, 2024: 36-37). Therefore I have in the introduction situated my research focus in a social context and as coming from my own exploration about gender identity/expression through fashion.

The second ‘course’ is one of reflexivity which is a lens against the masculine coded research object separate from the researcher, where ‘cold’ empirical knowledge is deemed valid (Gunaratnam, 2024:136-137). It stands on the same basis of situated knowledge. Reflexivity is about turning one’s research gaze towards research choices, demanding ethics and responsibility (Gunaratnam, 2024:135-136). We should refrain from a simple description of

one's background for it stops the researcher from further responsibility and reflection after the final dot of that sentence (Gunaratnam, 2024:137-138). Reflexivity demands a continuous process. For example if I write myself as a cishetero woman it closes the circuit of my reflections on my own gender and sexual identity, it crystallizes and limits them from being on a spectrum. We should meet the other and in turn open up ourselves (Nagar et al., 2016:512-513). Therefore in the process of this thesis I have endeavoured to continuously face myself as I face the thesis.

What further identifies reflexivity is to bring a blanket to the burning building, to relax into the discomfort that lights up within oneself, because this means facing the complexity of meaning and the uncomfortable, discordant truth otherwise set aside (Gunaratnam, 2024:143-144). We should allow ourselves to reflect over when truth irks us and to follow wherever that feeling leads us (Pillow & Mayo, 2012:198). This means further straying from a masculine coded 'cold' knowledge disengaged from the body. I have practiced reflexivity from my later decision to add the theory about digital space in the theory section.

The third 'course' is of scale which sees social phenomena as implicated and interwoven in the levels of society as something you cannot easily separate, which is a sign of feminist research for it criticizes how normative research does not state and reflect on scale choices (Ramasar & Kolankiewicz, 2024:96). It follows the guiding principle of feminist research of rejecting the normative way to do such research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012:184). This further shows reflexivity from how I have been 'very mindful, very considerate' in the analysis using scales as a foundational tool. It illuminates the relations of gender and power across scales that otherwise would remain in the shadows (Ramasar & Kolankiewicz, 2024:109). It has allowed me to see the dynamic of how agency is exercised by individuals in constructing themselves in relation to societal discourses, gender and fashion practices and to in turn constitute them.

The fourth 'course' is feminist creative writing which is a tool to explore oneself as one explores the research (Dahl, 2024:149). Again we see reflexivity, to revise ideas previously written down, to not write with permanent ink. From the start of my master's programme I have continuously used the process of writing through creation of a document on my possible research focus. Creative feminist writing is a means of liberation, both from not taking the well treaded road of formal writing, and for allowing words to have power of change and

influence (Dahl, 2024:149-150). To write from yourself, your experience is honest and seen as something to strive for (Dahl, 2024:155). This is a reason for my research focus since it comes from my own experience of exploration of gender identity and expression through fashion.

I have endeavoured to use creative feminist writing by using metaphors, pop culture phrases and Metamodernism as a textual practice. This to keep the warmth otherwise snuffed out by 'cold' masculine coded factual and formal research language, to not disentangle myself. This to let the meaning, the feeling that dresses my sentences not be one of a 'neutral' white research coat. Although, pop cultural phrases have been 'bracketed' like so to emphasize how I am not the creator of such a phrase. In the analysis I use textual expressions to curate a visualisation of the trends researched, to continue a spirit of such 'warm' and descriptive language. Other than this, my writing was inspired by the cultural zeitgeist of Metamodernism that was illuminated in previous literature. I have made use of the core feeling of post-irony that is at the same time genuine and self-aware (Ceriello, 2022:493). Also the tension of being in between differing emotional states of "hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Corbett, 2023:2).

This can particularly be seen in the introductory snap-short of my Tiktok for-you-page to enter into this emotional state of being, setting the tone for the following thesis. It can as well be seen in the very last sentence in the final conclusion, from how it ends with two periods '..' like so. This as exhibiting the feminist principle of challenging standard practice as well as the Metamodern core of an unresolved tension. It ends in such a way to note how the knowledge produced herein does not cease after the dot of a period, rather it is continuous. It is not as far away as three dots would indicate, which neither suggest the tension of the uncommon and discordant use of two dots. I illustrate an abstain from periodizing this knowledge against future research. There is no final period, no neat exit, closing of the curtains, with holding the waves' movement, rather a lingering hold of one's breath.

4.2 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Visual Methodology

To preface, this is a qualitatively focused research from the movement of how theory is inductively guided from your study, which in this way can be seen as making use of grounded theory (Patton, 2002:11). Qualitative study means seeking cases which vastly demonstrate an in-depth understanding instead of stating “this hypothesis we have tested holds the truth no matter context and therefore can be generalized” (Patton, 2002:40). It is also about how to approach the material in an open and ‘very mindful’ way toward who or what is researched (Patton, 2002:40).

Firstly I have used the methodology of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis which begins with a research focus on discourse or text. Text is everything that is ‘saying’ something about society (Burnett, 2024:362). The core of FCDA stands on five aspects, firstly, an explicit core of liberation and rejection of ‘objective’ standpoint. Secondly, the complexity and differences in oppression and thirdly, gender as a construct to deconstruct and as a performance, not diminishing and invalidating the materiality and experiences behind it (Burnett, 2024:367-368). Fourthly, gender as maintaining a naturalized binary of an unequal cisheteropatriarchal system and, fifthly, to pull the curtain from how there are uses and constructions of feminism that can have opposite constructive effects, to be reflexive (Burnett, 2024:368-369).

The epistemology it stands on and its research focus is discourse. Discourse is conceptualized as the well treaded path, the claimed accepted way to travel, to think, which further constitutes what it is leading to (Burnett, 2024:361). FCDA turns away from empirical truths such as ‘is that elephant pink or grey?’ towards ‘what does it mean if the elephant is pink or grey? Who says it is which colour and what implication does that hold about its colour and further society?’ (Burnett, 2024:362). It opens up the research focus of social actors from their behaviour towards such discourses and the following construction, constitution of those discourses (Burnett, 2024:363).

The ontology it stands on is that the social actor is constructed through their negotiation between discourses and agency, which further influences such discourses (Burnett, 2024:363). However the emphasis of an agentic choice can be seen as undermined by the epistemological focus on the implications such behaviour entails (Burnett, 2024:364).

Additionally as I have stated FCDA does not oppose the truth claim of a material reality, however it posits that the material world is affected, constituted by our discourses (Burnett, 2024:362).

I have used both FCDA and Critical Visual Methodology to illuminate the discourses and constructions whilst using a visually-backed methodology as bolstering the more textually originated FCDA. This increases the relevancy towards my research focus of visual material. Solely focusing on one means a piece of meaning in the puzzle of knowledge would be missing, I endeavour to see the dimensions the whole picture holds. The benefits of mixing methods are supported by Cole and Stewart (2012:369-370) drawing on 'two minds are greater than one', two methods give a stronger basis for the results of your research. These two methodologies further fit with each other from their overlapping themes and the feminist methodological aspects mentioned. The match between visual methods and discourse analysis has even previously been recommended (Rose, 2023:6). Critical visual methodology understands visual imagery as having social effects and not being created in a vacuum, it sees the importance of its audience and the importance of being self-reflexive towards what you see (Rose, 2023:43-44). In terms of minimizing the distance towards the data, Mason (2017:99-101) argues for visual methods, for in comparison to other methodology's views on text it allows for a greater multi-dimensional view of data.

Critical Visual Methodology provides a similar stance on ontology and epistemology therefore I only provide a succinct description. It posits that visual materials are part of our social actions that construct ourselves and society, and by looking at the context of creating, distributing and viewing images we must reflect over power and knowledge vis-à-vis the imagery as constitutive (Rose, 2023:4-5). It stands on how visual culture has reached a point in contemporary postmodern society as now being interwoven in social life (Rose, 2023:20), and that such visual culture as social media is further interwoven with our bodies and emotional state (Rose, 2023:30). The epistemological focus is joined with a discursive one, it views visual material as weaved together with the text written in/on/about it where the meaning produced further stands in relation (Rose, 2023:43).

Another core epistemological standpoint for visual methods is the question of the gaze, wherein *who* is gazing at the art has an implication on the meaning interpreted (Suneson, 2024:414). To explain, who is thought to be able to identify or disidentify with the visual

material is questioned, where the idea stands on how some identifying gazes may result in a suppression of other gazes (Suneson, 2024:415-416). An identifying gaze towards non-normative content and worldview can create friction against the normative and dominant ways to construct the world, subsequently destabilizing it (Suneson, 2024:415-416). Here we see the multiple ways of how one can be constructed toward the visual material, whether it is adopting, opposing or both against the normative constructed discourses (Suneson, 2024:421). Together, this disidentification highlights the complexity in identifying *and* opposing the dominant discourse for it allows, usually a minority, to exist within the culture of the majority whilst unraveling ambivalences and subsequently the normative discourse (Suneson, 2024:425). Here posited is the impossibility of finding a sole truth for the truth is one that is bracketed by whomever is taking part of its constructed interpretation (Suneson, 2024:422).

4.3 Method

4.3.1 Sample

I have made use of purposive sampling as it ‘fits the vibe’ of qualitative research, its focus is on seeking material that is rich in information that is relevant and deeply enlightening of one’s research question (Patton, 2002:230). Within this sampling strategy I have added criteria sampling (Patton, 2002:238) to heighten the quality of my sample as belonging to the research focus and having an importance and relevance to it. The chosen criteria have at part been likes and search words. Using likes is supported by Rose’s reasoning in regards to visual methods, the audience's interaction with an image matters for it conveys their appreciation for said meaning, it is something they wish to identify with (2023:68). The use of search words are drawing on the use of keywords as mentioned by Rose (2023:360-361) where they can be used in a search bar to be able to arrive at content that is related to one’s research focus.

The search words decided were “Generation Z”, “fashion”, “core”, “trend”, “feminine”, “masculine”, “gender”. I used these in different amalgamations with each other to see what provided me with the most relevant videos. Most of these terms are part of and have been explained as relevant to my already specified research focus, however the term “core” was decided based on my own previous engagement with Tiktok where multiple fashion trends are typed as being part of a “-core”. Therefore I decided to include “core” to touch on this way of interacting and communicating on the app. The amount of likes decided was made

after a search of the material to see the scope of likes already made on relevant videos. I decided on ten thousand likes as in the minimum afforded to relevant videos towards my research focus. Another criteria has been from what time the video was made, in between 2023 to 2025, this was decided post my preliminary engagement with the relevant videos. For it was when the majority of the videos that were relevant were posted.

From observations on the population on Tiktok, I considered the possible Tiktok-ban for US users (Perez, 2025) and subsequent movement toward the alternative chinese sociala media platform of Xiaohongshu, also known as RedNote. Although numbers have shown the majority of US daily users on RedNote dropping off with the pausing of the ban (Perez, 2025). This could alleviate the influence of this ban on the perspectives represented in the research material. Even so, Tiktok is a global platform (Perez, 2025). This emphasizes its reach to a global population. In previous discussions, qualitative research do not focus on generalizability. Together this further minimizes the effect this could have on this research. However the results must be understood from a limitation on the possible population represented if one wants to draw a wider analysis regarding the population rather than an in-depth study on cultural phenomena.

4.3.2 Data collection

I questioned if I should create a new tiktok account to use for data collection, however from a reflexive reasoning I chose to use my own personal account, for the purpose of my study was not to erase my presence but rather illuminate and be reflexive of it. Subsequently. the videos recommended on my for-you-page are based on how I have previously engaged (Tiktok, n.d.a) with videos in terms of likes, commenting, watching, sharing, how new the video is, if I follow a creator, the national popularity of a video and the length of a video. However, I have chosen videos from the use of Tiktok's search function and this has fewer algorithmic recommendations, such as my previous interactions with videos on the platform, how closely tied the video is to what I have searched for, and my own settings in terms of language (English), device (Samsung S22) and location (Sweden) (Tiktok, n.d.b). Other algorithm features are as follows.

The search feature gives weight to the term searched and how well this fits with videos recommended (Tiktok, n.d.b). The possible videos shown on the search function could be

further shaped by the community's guiding principles of freedom of expression, no harm, individual integrity and diversity (Tiktok, 2024a). Tiktok also deletes videos if they include any behaviour that is criminal, violent, hateful of a specific group, or any videos by or on an organisation or a person that take part of such, videos that have sexual exploitation of minors and adults, harassment and trafficking (2024b). Lastly, they have restrictions on political promotions and AI-content, unoriginal content, fake or spammed engagement and misinformation (Tiktok, 2024c).

The tool I have used to decide the scope of the videos collected through the use of the search function, that are relevant towards my study is theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is a guide on when to stop collecting data, meaning when the data that starts to appear diminishes in its illustration of new perspectives, dimensions and aspects to what you have previously collected and understood (Holton & Walsh, 2017:103-104). The process of such data collection was as follows.

I went through multiple rounds where I searched videos and where the searches were further influenced by what was found to be a relevant and interesting aspect in the previous searches. This drawing on the concept of theoretical saturation. Additionally, I chose to add the relevant videos to a folder on Tiktok, and continuously made sure they followed the previous chosen criterias as well as had a minimum of ten thousand likes and the date posted to be within the year 2023 up till 2025. The spread of likes were up to millions of likes, with the majority of videos falling in the tens of thousands of likes. The amount of videos chosen as relevant ended up at 250, again following theoretical saturation of when I found the discovered relevant themes to be met in the chosen videos.

4.3.3 Analytical framework

The analytical framework chosen is a mix of FCDA and Critical Visual Methodology. To start with there are three analytical levels with corresponding questions that I make use of (Burnett, 2024:370). Firstly I look at the text, at the material and empirically describe the visual elements portrayed, what is their composition and what implication does this hold for the interpreted meaning? Can I see an ambivalent meaning? and what is the cultural background posited and what does this do with the interpreted and constructed meaning? (Burnett, 2024:370). Secondly we have the discursive level that questions what forms of truth

are constructed, both hidden and clearly stated? Does the 'text' show a support or opposition or a mixed view on discourses on constructed norms? What are the possible discourses prevalent and what does this do to the meaning constructed? (Burnett, 2024:370). Thirdly, what societal implications can be seen? What is the aim of the 'text'? What does it mean for society? Is there an unbalance in power between what groups that are negated, supported or in a mixed way uplifted? (Burnett, 2024:371).

I have selected this format because it uses scale as a dimension (Ramasar & Kolankiewicz, 2024:96). Here, the social phenomena being studied has implications on multiple scales of levels, and shows the complexity of the constructions made through fashion on Tiktok, how they are tied to other societal structures and constructions of meaning. Additionally, this movement between different analytic levels or scales is beneficial as it replicates how such levels drift together like waves up onto a sandbank and back again in perpetual motion (Ramasar & Kolankiewicz, 2024:96). What these analysis questions also posit is an example of reflexivity where we open ourselves up to the discomfort of discordant truth (Gunaratnam, 2024:143-144). My intention is not to pursue a final harmonious truth but seek to understand the ways in which truth is contested and constructed. Another reflexive reflection, from how meaning is interpreted and is sitting in relation with 'who' it is designed for and the institutional, structural connections, it is meaningful to note how 'who' together with the institutions take part in creating this research, they have a crucial part of being where the knowledge interpreted is interpellated from (Rose, 2023:246).

However there are other analytical aspects that have been considered to meet the visual dimension of the research material. I make use of the question of overlapping aspects of the audience as noted by Rose (2023:243) and of seeing by Suneson (2024:413). I have noted how who the intended audience is, the implications this has on the construction, interpretation of the image's meaning, and the explicit or implicit gender/sexuality understanding of the intended audience (Rose, 2023:62-63). I look at the compositionality of the production of the video/image (Rose, 2023:51), as the genre of an image? is it art or similar to street photography, is it a vlog? what are the meanings/truths constructed? The technology of production (Rose, 2023:50) is an analytical aspect where the format of Tiktok is analysed, as a medium which enables certain forms of images and meanings constructed. I have also turned towards intertextuality (Rose, 2023:216) I have used intertextuality to analyze the

different trends and how they are drawing on other contextual and structurally shaped meaning, what is being referenced and in what way, and the implications this has on the meaning constructed in the videos. Rose posits a question of ‘when do you stop making intertextual connections?’, this highlights the difficulty in keeping your interpreted meaning and further associations grounded to the material (2023:246). I have met this by using the mentioned specified questions which closely ties the meaning interpreted first in an empirical description of the data.

Hereafter the analysis provided will be further done in a thematic sense where the themes chosen will each be explained with the use of these three levels of questions and the additional aspects stated (Burnett, 2024:370-371). The videos I have made use of more specifically in these descriptions and themes are those I have found to explain the overall construction, the theme most and having the most relevance towards the research focus.

4.4 Ethical considerations

My empirical material comprise videos published online. To ethically consider their use in my thesis I have decided to not share links or publish their sources due to copyright claims, since I do not own the videos I do not have the right to show them in such a way (Rose, 2023:84-85). Instead I have demonstrated the videos’ content by textually, empirically describing the visuality of them in detail as part of my analysis. With the nature of my material being publicly posted data I have followed the guideline by Papademas and IVSA (2009:255) where research without consent is allowed when the data is public. This is further reasoned by Lunds Universitet (Fakultetsstyrelsen, 2023:4) where if personal information is published on social media, consent is deemed bracketed. The nature of consent (Rose, 2023:76-77) could have been provided when such material was posted however this does not mean consent was made for this research purpose. The AoIR, Association of Internet Reseracher (Franzke et al., 2020:10) further opens the possibility of when consent is difficult or not possible in terms of internet research you must bolster the surrounding ethical choices in regards to anonymity and how data is stored. This will be discussed below.

Therefore I have anonymized (Rose, 2023:81-83) all my material to further increase the protection of the individuals portrayed in the videos collected. I made sure to not explicitly disclose any specific age, only a broad age range, and no names or usernames. Also in my

analysis I coded each video with the use of other characteristics than their usernames to further increase their anonymity. I made sure to not include videos or creators who may be under eighteen years of age. Whenever there has been uncertainty, I have taken those videos out from my research. I have further followed recommendations by Lund University (Fakultetsstyrelsen, 2023:5) where the storage of the collected material, information has been on an external encrypted USB drive and after the thesis's examination the raw personal/sensitive information is erased.

This also follows the recommendations by AoIR, Association of Internet Researcher (Franzke et al., 2020:8) where one needs to make sure to store one's data in a correct and protected manner. Additionally the key for the coded material must be on another encrypted USB drive to further minimize the risk otherwise possible for the creators' identity being revealed. My analytical descriptions have been done in a more generalized manner and whenever some key identifying descriptions have been left out. The descriptions provided primarily focus on the constructions and the discourse of what is happening. The social identity markers, such as sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity have been mentioned only when they have analytical implications. Also, using images or quotes from the videos have been left out for the sake of the individuals' protection, so here the risk is not worth the research benefit it may have otherwise provided to my thesis.

Personal and sensitive information from the videos that was processed was gender, political opinion, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation. The research purpose in such cases has more significance than erasing them based on their sensitive nature. The purpose here is to illuminate how gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, political opinion are connected to the content and the meanings constructed. They have a core connection to my research, its theoretical and methodological frames of how gender and fashion correlate. Although, to be mindful of their sensitive nature I only reference these aspects in a broad terminology and not in regard to specific individuals depicted or creators. For example, I write that in the videos there is a person who is younger or may have a non-caucasian background.

Additionally, I have been 'very mindful, very considerate' in my writing, taking into account the effects of this text and how the study may impact on people engaging with it or through its dissemination, as recommended by Israel (2015:2-3). I have drawn on creative feminist writing and reflexivity on multiple points, firstly by using non-binary pronouns or authors'

own surnames in my referencing to abstain from a limited binary reading of their name and how it codes their gender identity. The second way I have drawn on feminist writing and reflexivity is by being inspired from my own knowledge of the practice of dealing with sensitive subject matters on Tiktok. I have therefore included a content warning in the beginning of my thesis to further allow for possible readers' choice in reading this thesis and its mentioning of sensitive subjects. To not absolve my responsibility of the text otherwise written I have aimed to be mindful of the subject matter, my focus has been one of critically engaging the research topic on these issues and not to invalidate any individuals' own opinion, experience, construction of themselves through fashion.

This together follows the principle of AoIR (Franzke et al., 2020:8) where one must be mindful of the group one studies, how vulnerable they are. To further support my choice of anonymization and using the specific content warning. Other ways I have used creative feminist writing was in the structure of the thesis's introduction. It takes inspiration from the visual medium of movies, or scripts, although the possibilities of such inspiration are limited by the specified thesis guidelines such as font choice. And also to follow similar inspiration that additionally comes from booktok, videos of showing what the dedication or acknowledgement of a book is, to incorporate an acknowledgement in my own writing. This continues to be a challenge of the norms of formal academic writing and to be inspired by the chosen research material.

5. Results

The analysis is constructed in an integrated manner to complement the qualitative research and the sociocultural framing that ties empirical discussion and analysis together in one. Under each theme there are empirical sections describing the specific trending aesthetics with a visualisation of them, what follows is an analysis on the trends with an application of theory and earlier research on the material to provide context, comparison and discussion. I note the period of time of an aesthetic to indicate when they were popular. The first theme starts with an overview of a contemporary conservative tendency, the second starts a discussion on the spectrum of clothing regarding trending gender-neutral fashion, how men and women practice the full spectrum of gendered aesthetic expression. The third is a theme that questions if people are dressing 'for' men, followed by discussions on how dressing form is connected to dressing for attraction, and who one's gender expression is for. Fourthly, the theme is about keeping up with trends, noting how there is a location based boundary to gendered aesthetic expression. Lastly, the fifth theme lifts the dynamic of homogenized versus non-conforming aesthetic expression, separated into a fashioning of one's identity, how there is a creative aesthetic use, followed by the mentioned tension being crystallized between two aesthetic constructions of -girl. The allocation of sub themes have been done in the manner to distinguish different yet relevant aspects discussing said theme, therefore some themes have one subtheme and others have one. Each theme provides a significant analytical dimension on gender through contemporary aesthetic self-construction.

5.1 Conservatism is back in fashion?

5.1.1 Bounded by time, and timelessness unbound

Trends such as #oldmoney and #quietluxury reflect contemporary conservative politics, indicating how conservatism is back in fashion. In multiple videos, what is #trending is the boho chic of hyper-feminine coded flowy billowy long a-line skirts and blouses worn with cowboy boots. The classy styles of #quietluxury and #oldmoney are depicted as neutral colored modest garments that are more formal attire-based. We can see beige pressed suit pants, a white shirt paired with a knitted cashmere sweater chicly tied around the shoulders, a watch and a pearl necklace, backdropped by a sound of a song from the 1950s. #Oldmoney

can be found in videos during the end of 2023, seems to hit a peak during 2024 and then is possibly dialed down a little bit during 2025. #Quietluxury seems to have followed the same pattern and made a slight revival of #oldmoney. These all have a tendency to be visually portrayed through such garments worn by people who appear to be white, skinny and fit.

Fashion trends can be suggestive of the social and political climate (Goncu Berk, 2023a:54). This relation can be seen from how conservative politics with characteristics of upper class and traditional hyperfemininity is depicted through #oldmoney and #quietluxury. An upper class style is shown through the quiet, unassuming, pre-existing wealth, compared to explicitly branded items as associated with middle to lower class. The desire to reach a higher social station is seen as gauche, as something reserved for the 'lesser than'. The elitism of #quietluxury and #oldmoney is met by the #bohochic's hyper-femininity, both facets from differing aesthetics which lean towards conservative inclination in contemporary trends.

Yin and Binti Abdullah (2024:93) illuminate that stereotypical norms are practiced on Tiktok. This dynamic of being bound by a previous era and its norms is seen through how conservative facets are represented in the trending aesthetics. The hegemonic norms that conservatism perpetrates are replicated through fashion. This is also reflected in other studies where there is a trend of a traditional normative way of dress in Tiktok videos as shown by Lascity (2024:254-255) and Brewster (2024:1). To suggest that the idea of conservatism is 'back in fashion' implies it was 'out of fashion'. Here with the movement 'back in fashion' I mean the proliferation of contemporary trendiness of conservatism through #oldmoney and #quietluxury and the associated traditional binary gender norms and hierarchical class dynamics.

Contrastingly, other videos also illustrate fashion and aesthetics from multiple different time periods visually portrayed as worn on bodies of differing ethnicities, such as #y2k's skinny/flared jeans paired with baby t-shirts/croptops layered with a long sleeve underneath and Von Dutch trucker hats. We see #90sminimalism followed by a 70's edgy rocker coded style of messy free flowing hair, multiple necklaces and rings, black boots and band tees. The 80's oversized boxy suit silhouette and the medievalcore and castlecore's incorporation of armour styled on young women. A recurrent theme is the use of tattoos and piercings along with these time coded outfits. These visual depictions of various time coded aesthetics have been found in videos from 2023 to 2025.

Continuing on the discussion on unboundedness, here we see fashion unbounded in regards to time. In these above mentioned trends, the homogenic influenced conservatism takes a back seat and here we see a tension between alternative aesthetics and associated social positions. I am critical of Goncu Berk's (2023a:54) noting of the influence the social context has on fashion, for I see a possible lack of a deeper discussion on the intricacies of how influences on trends can intermingle and not all indicate the same trend. For these differing aesthetics and mix of the influence of different time periods in fashion is challenging the firm hold of conservative coded #oldmoney, #quietluxury and #bohochic. However, this limitation can be negated from how Goncu Berk (2023a:61) notes the existence of counterculture fashion practices, which these aesthetics can indicate. A complex interaction can here be seen in the two opposing trends of the homogenized culture of conservative fashion and the alternative aesthetics from different time periods.

We can see the unboundedness of norms from how time seeks to unbind them. Tirocchi and Taddeo (2024:399) enlightens us on how the practice of norms takes place in the creation and reception of Tiktok videos. This earlier finding supports the possible challenging of norms that is taking place from the spread of alternative aesthetics whilst conservative coded fashion is back as a contemporary cultural tendency. Additionally, the countercultural framing together with recurring depictions of tattoos and piercings, and their possible association with subcultural punk and rock fashion, draws on the sentiment of being unsatisfied with current norms and the social climate.

The conveyed pull of these alternative aesthetics seems to speak to the tension of constructing oneself in a conservative society, where instead of the conservative coded fashion and perspective one rather identifies with the subversively coded aesthetic from other time periods. This stands on Goncu Berk's (2023b:71) noting how fashion can be used as a medium to express one's identity. Hence, the younger generation here who identify with an alternative position which the conservative coded aesthetics is not able to capture or bound.

5.2 The spectrum of clothing

5.2.1 Trending Gender-neutral fashion

Videos show multiple fashion items that are trending for both men and women depicted through visual imagery of these items on both women and men's gendered bodies, portraying a cross-boundary gendered aesthetic expression. Specifically we see the clothing items of cropped t-shirts/tops/sweaters/shirts, wide legged oversized jeans, jorts as in longer and oversized jean shorts, use of rings and necklaces, knitted sweaters, boxers peeking out from the waistband and keys clipped hanging unto the belt loops of the jeans/jorts. These are used with different hashtags like #trending, #mensfashion, #ootd (meaning outfit of the day), #outfitinspo, #fashiontiktok, #womensfashion, #fashiontrends, #itgirl, #fashiongirl and #springtrends.

We see the possible spectrum of performing gendered aesthetic expression. The notion of gender being a performance is discussed by Schippers (2007:92; West and Zimmerman 1987:126). We see Butler (2006:34) who criticizes the perception of gender's fixed nature, and follows this with noting the temporality of gender, how it is something procedural and not something pre-existing or absolute (Butler, 2006:45). In the Tiktok videos, we see this performance clarified by the trending mix of feminine coded cropped tops and the more masculine coded oversized silhouette across these differently gendered bodies. This indicates a deconstruction of the binary barriers between what is fashion for men versus women. There's a characteristic of not being bound by solely masculine gendered aesthetic expression as a man and vice versa for women, which I return to in the subsequent sub-theme.

Now, we can turn our gaze to the trending concept of a 'subwayshirt'. This 2023-2024 phenomenon is depicted as wearing a large and oversized shirt over one's perceived attention-grabbing outfit in public spaces, such as the subway. This is reasoned by wanting to avoid being harassed and subsequently, to feel comfortable and safer. A recurring reason to continue to dress with an outfit underneath is to be seen as fashionable, which the 'subwayshirt' could hinder. The shirt also has a seasonal aspect as it often occurs in videos during the warmer months of summer. Women wear skirts/dresses/tank tops which show skin, and put on a 'subway shirt' on top to cover up the more revealing outfit underneath. The reason otherwise conveyed in videos for a man choosing to wear a shirt was to be less attention-grabbing as in covering the more fashion forward and unconventional coded

clothing underneath. In addition, the ineffectiveness of this subway shirt actually stopping unwanted advances for women is remarked upon. Mens' posted comments under videos portraying a woman's use of the 'subwayshirt' have been invoking violence against women, implying that they deserve and should be sexually harassed.

This questions the neutrality of clothing from the dimension of what gendered body wears it and for what reason, showing another aspect of the spectrum of clothing. Earlier findings note how recognition is afforded on Tiktok, that other users on social media can criticize the self-construction by others through their fashion in Tiktok videos (Cano & Sklar, 2024:240; El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:13; Tirocchi & Taddeo 2024:399). This is also theorised regarding the power relations implicated in what is deemed 'recognizable' (Butler, 2004:3), implying whether or not such recognition is wanted and by whom. From this we see a discourse of how women's bodies are sexualized more than men based on the differing conveyed reasonings of the 'subwayshirt'. We see how 'subwayshirt' is used to challenge the norm of how men and women 'should' dress whilst policing the aesthetic expressions of oneself and others.

This policing can be understood through Lunt's (2022:201-202) discussion on how digital space is used for self-construction, noting that social media comments are part of how recognition is afforded. The contextual value-ladenness in the gendered use by women of this 'subwayshirt' is shown through how even in its portrayals online a virtual safety is encroached upon and met by violence-invoking comments by men, reinforcing the ubiquitous male violence against women, which further validates the need of said 'subwayshirt'. Here recognition is implicated within power relations, in a discourse where women are controlled by men. Therefore, the use of a 'subwayshirt' can be a social commentary on the sexualization of women's bodies, pervasiveness of male violence against women and simultaneously how men and women challenge normative ways of dress. Altogether, this can indicate the "common culture" that digital space affords from the space's characteristic of crossing boundaries (Lunt, 2022:198). The culture here conveyed as common can be that of a tension between norms. Generation Z is in the middle of norms that seem restricting and are depicted as challenging and deconstructing them. There is a questioning of the normative way of dress and subsequently challenges the society where such a dress needs to exist.

5.2.2 Women and men on the full spectrum of gendered aesthetic expression

Some trending fashion items which are specifically associated with women in videos throughout 2023-2025, are the explicitly masculine coded oversized silhouette of baggy oversized wide legged jeans or suit pants, an edgy rocker-associated 'harder' style of black coloured clothing exemplified by black leather boots and silver jewelry. Along with these are the more feminine coded clothing with frills and ruffles, bloomers, bohemian aesthetic of flowy billowy skirts and blouses with lots of jewelry. These have been paired with a voiceover and an explanation of these being fashion trends, or they've been under hashtags such as #styleinspo, #fashion, #outfitinspo, #fashiontrends.

This aspect of mixing various feminine and masculine coded clothing or aesthetics is further crystallized in 'blokkettecore'. Here, feminine coded 'coquettecore' of pastel-pink, bows, lace, frills is combined with masculine coded 'blokecore' of football-jersey/scarf, sporty looking sneakers, jeans. Blokkettecore is demonstrated in videos under the hashtag #blokkettecore or in videos using a sound speaking on what blokkettecore is and accompanied by depictions of a person following the fashion recommendations of the sound. This is portrayed with the use of a sports or football jersey/top/t-shirt with a flowy ruffled white lace skirt and bows. The mix of masculine coded sport-associated clothing items like sneakers and sports jerseys with feminine coded items of bows, frills, lace and skirts. Here we see multiple videos of people read as young women mixing both masculine and feminine coded clothing items into this one aesthetic blokkettecore-d outfit.

This shows how women themselves identify with feminine and masculine coded fashion, drawing on Goncu Berk (2023b:71) noting how fashion is a medium used for self-identification. They do not solely prescribe to a feminine aesthetic expression but also a masculine one. These two gendered expressions are used simultaneously in the same outfit, possibly deconstructing that one gender can only use one specific gendered aesthetic expression and further questions such a restricted use of gendered aesthetic expression and performance. However, similar but not quite the same is reflected in how men dress.

The trending fashion items constructed for men throughout 2023-2025, have been oversized suit pants, oversized wide legged jeans, jorts, cropped tops/t-shirts/shirts. There has also been the previously mentioned classy and neutral coloured styles of #oldmoney and #quietluxury aesthetic. There is a #softboy aesthetic depicted as a preppy more innocently coded look of

knitted sweaters with jeans or suit pants, as associated with reading a book or going to school/university. The trending usage of #guyliner could be dated back to the 2000s from how it is often conveyed with sounds and music from early 2000's songs and movies. This has been revived in videos from 2024-2025, guyliner combines the prefix guy- with the suffix -eyeliner and illustrates visual portrayals of men wearing a smudgy eyeliner messy, edgy, rocker associated look. We can also see the trending usage of more feminine coded bags as a man, the foregoing of a focus on a briefcase type of style as well as the adding of bag charms taking influence from south korean culture of k-pop, the prevalence of k-pop coded bag charms.

We see here a possible tension between a more suit-clad traditional masculine gendered aesthetic expression and a more feminine coded one from a softer look of using makeup, bags, and croptops. We can draw on Schipper's (2007:90-91) notion of hegemonic masculinity and its procedural performance as seen in these illustrations of traditionally masculine gendered aesthetic expression. Yet, we also see a contemporary embrace of softness in masculinity, even though such a tendency has previously been found localised in Asian culture (Steains, 2025:1). However men do not seem to be making use of as much feminine coded clothing compared to women making use of explicitly masculine coded clothing. These different degrees of men versus women combining masculine and feminine coded clothing further goes against a traditional binary, it subsequently illuminates the full spectrum of gendered aesthetic expression on TikTok.

A common theme is how those positioned hierarchically higher adhere to a hegemonic subjectivity in earlier research (Sykes, 2024:14; Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:399-400; Lascity, 2024:254-255; Brewster, 2024:1). This can be shown in the Tiktok depictions of men, who are higher in the social hierarchy, adhering to a greater degree than women to a hegemonic gendered aesthetic construction. Although the hegemonic constructions of gendered aesthetic expression has a significant influence on whether to dress cross-normatively, it is not absolute, this as seen from men's use of feminine coded fashion items. Reinforcing the performative aspect of gender construction through aesthetic expression.

Yet, the emergence of men's identity construction outside of hegemonic masculinity is beneficial in challenging a patriarchal, phallogocentric and similar ideas of society of which hegemonic masculinity is constitutively part of from supporting men's hierarchical position (Schipper, 2007:91). Also, Hall (1997:31-32) criticizes the reductiveness of how we

understand things based on a semiotic oppositionary dynamic, meaning if we have x it is conceptualized as the opposite of y, it is x for it is the opposite of y. Schippers continues to (2007:93-94) note the theoreticized constitutive fluidity of gender construction. All of this speaks to the contemporary character of an upheaval of the gendered binary. This from the binary's disruption from men and women dressing in a cross-boundary expression that's different from their own gender. It illuminates Generation Z's public perception of gender identity to be open to a dis-aligned constitution, further paving the way of a differently structured society characterised by a disruption of norms.

5.3 Dressing for men?

5.3.1 For men; for attraction

There has been a trending aesthetic of #manrepellent outfits throughout 2023-2025 depicted through visual imagery of women's gendered bodies across different ethnicities. It includes verbal mentions of using bold or unapproachable makeup of bleached/too-thin/too-bushy eyebrows, a dark fierce smoky eye look, or colorful creative heavy-makeup look. It is also pictured by wearing baggy oversized non-formfitting silhouettes, large bug looking 2000's sunglasses, big chunky shoes, masculine coded sport t-shirts/shorts. There is a mismatched feeling throughout the visual depictions. This from portrayals of both masculine and feminine coded clothing, of different textures such as polyester/leather/satin/fur/jeans, and different aesthetics worn together in one outfit, for example a sporty t-shirt together with a rocker-esque red tartan maxi pleated skirt. This has then in many instances been matched or stitched with a sound that speaks about a choice of dressing for the girls and the gays rather than looking attractive to a male gaze. Alternatively, some videos use sounds that describe an outfit which could potentially attract a man, and then it is parodied with a visual depiction of women dressing the opposite of those recommendations.

A common theme is the challenging of the norm of dressing for men, meaning a tension towards dressing by centering the male gaze and subsequent heterosexuality, this which I will further discuss in a later theme. To start, the mixing and mismatched tendency conveyed in the #manrepellent aesthetic could be analysed through Butler's (2006:22-23) informing on the importance of cohesiveness in performing one's identity. Butler (2006:45) mentions the perception and comprehension of a woman in order for her to achieve temporal success in

being a woman. This aesthetic construction questions the purpose of such a success from its identification with an incohesiveness, and illustrates a refusal to be bounded within perceived gender. Although the cohesiveness can then be seen in the continuance of incohesiveness and the continued effort of using different mismatched fashion pieces in one's identity construction.

Other trending aesthetics has been the 2024 #mobwife with sunglasses, a luxurious fur coat, leather gloves, formal-coded red/black form-fitting dress, gold jewellery and animal print, emulating being in a casino or a lavish restaurant in the arms of 'your' mafia husband. Differently, 2023 gave us #rockstargf wearing a rock band t-shirt, black/red corset/lace style top, cross iconography, leather jacket, leather boots, messy dark makeup, as if going to a rock concert, being the girlfriend of one of the rock artists.

The challenging of the norm of dressing for men is here posited from how these aesthetics together with the #manrepellent aesthetic speak on (de)centering men in women's aesthetic self-construction. Butler enlightens us on the societal tendency of phallogocentrism and its connection to heterosexism (2006:44-46). We can here see a tension between depictions of firstly, #mobwife and #rockstargf which stand for the aesthetic normative influence of heterosexual relationships and a centering of men and secondly, the #manrepellent decentering a want for a male gaze, an implied male partner in women's self-construction. This effect of decentering could however be mitigated from #manrepellent's focus on men even if it is a rejection of them. This illuminates the possible difficulty for women to (aesthetically) construct themselves outside of men from the contemporary pervasiveness of a constitutive male gaze.

The disruption of normative dressing for men is further brought into how women and connected masculinity/femininity are conceptualised. Butler (2006:25) brings up another philosophical dimension, how being a Subject means the exclusion of women, of femininity. Therefore, women can be constituted as the antithesis to Subject. This is challenged from #manrepellent's deconstruction of the tendency for women to aesthetically center men, and from what the previous findings has shown, that women and men both use feminine and masculine coded aesthetic expression. Even though men have been pictured to dress in the other's gender coded fashion to a lesser extent than vice versa, we see a challenge of the conceptualized tendency for the (male) Subject to solely dress in masculine coded fashion, to solely construct oneself through masculinity. Therefore, the essentialized binary of

men/masculinity and women/femininity is further deconstructed which also resonates with the earlier theme's on challenging hegemonic masculinity. This is subsequently reflected in previous research (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:1; Nashid, 2024:86) which analyses how aesthetic based self-construction challenges hegemonic normative discourses on Tiktok. This emphasizes how women strive to deconstruct themselves as the antithesis to the (male) Subject in contemporary society. Indicating that the cultural tendency that is recurring is one where a deconstruction of the gendered aesthetic expression of men and women is common. That there could be a deconstruction of society and it is permeated by construction constituted by a male-centeredness and separation of femininity and masculinity.

5.3.2 Who is one's gender expression for?

To continue reflections on who we dress for, if not solely for men, and what do these gender expressions imply and attract. Videos by self-identified femme women show how they dress to attract other femme women. This involves wearing lots of layers and masculine coded clothing of baggy oversized tops, buttoned down shirts, sweaters, and oversized baggy jeans/pants together with chunky, platform shoes. This is described as 'futchification', the mentioned process of dressing in a way where the result is to be perceived as 'futch' coded in one's expression. Although compared to previous trends, the spread of popular videos mentioning 'futchification' were significantly fewer.

A characteristic facet of heterosexuality could here be enlightening. Butler (2006:44-46) connects heterosexuality and phallogocentrism, while Schippers (2007:90-91) understands heterosexuality as a process which maintains the hegemonic construction of masculinity. Hegemonic heterosexuality is seen from constructed alignment of femininity as feminine gendered expression, and masculinity as masculine gendered expression and these are assumed to attract each other. When femme women wear masculine coded clothing to attract a femme woman, this speaks to the continued hegemony of aligned sexuality with gendered aesthetic expression, of 'masculinity attracting femininity'. Yet, findings show "a 'dis-identifactory performance' of gender norms that denaturalises hegemonic norms of gender and femininity" (Sandall, 2024:4). This identification with femme implies a dis-identifiacion with 'futch' in contrast. For instance, when a woman performs and

embodies masculine coded aesthetic symbols, it also indicates the deconstruction of the hegemonic construction of ‘masculinity as attracting femininity’.

To provide a male dimension, in compared to #manrepellent and #rockstargf themes, there were fewer visible videos throughout 2023-2025 aimed at the male audience, where men explicitly dressed for a (female) romantic partner, a female gaze. They instead mention recommended clothing or aesthetics based on their trendiness, how fashionable they were. However, other videos illustrate the phenomena of men ‘dressing slutty’. Some recurrent trends included, short shorts/linen pants/oversized jeans, a buttoned down shirt, a croptop and glasses. It seems mixing the traditionally masculine coded success-associated formal shirts with the feminine leaning croptops and the intellectually coded glasses and overall fashionability. These are then discursively constructed as appealing to, to a ‘dressing slutty’ for an imagined (female) romantic partner.

The influence of heterosexuality and hegemonic norms are further emphasized. Findings from previous research (Brewster, 2024:3; Patouras & Tanner, 2024:5) show Tiktok’s algorithmic disparity regarding which identities are recommended in favour of hegemonic normative ones. This is evident, for example, in videos which convey non-hegemonic constructions of femme identified women from the possible dis-identificatory use of ‘futchification’, as well as the fewer mentions of men’s aesthetic expressions that are ‘dressing slutty’ for a female gaze. Who men are pictured as ‘dressing slutty’ for, can uphold the discussion on heterosexuality as structuring gendered aesthetic expressions. Here we see the influence of hegemonic construction both in the content conveyed as well as the effect of the Tiktok algorithm that recommends videos containing hegemonic subjectivities, which subsequently became trendy.

Butler (2006:23) points out that the hegemonic societal tendency is to withhold recognition from people who disrupt traditionally aligned norms of gender identity and sexuality. This together with the tension of constructing oneself differently than the hegemonic norm, is seen from a dis-identificatory performance of a ‘futch’ gendered aesthetic expression. Yet men’s ‘dressing slutty’ for a (female) romantic partner, informs us about the hegemonic pressure to align one’s performance of gender with sexuality. It indicates a support for earlier theme’s reasoning on the challenge of performing dis-aligned gendered aesthetic expressions.

Butler (2006:23) also shows that power relations shape who is recognized and in what way. There is a tendency to not provide recognition to those who do not follow societal norms. Here we can note the dominant tendency where recognition is generally altogether not constructed for men by women as much as it is for women by men, as seen in the less visible 'dressing slutty' phenomena than videos of #rockstargf/#mobwife from previous theme. Although, in the videos portraying men, 'dressing slutty' illustrates a recognition of being successful, smart and being both feminine and masculine. What is recognized here is both the traditional masculine coded aspects of success and masculinity, and the less normative coded aspects of femininity and intellectuality, for a man to ascribe to. Here, recognition of what, is both a normatively aligned and non-normatively aligned gendered expression with gendered identity. This further points out the power relations and implications in recognition yet the ambivalence of what constructed (normative) identity is afforded it.

5.4 Keeping up with trends

5.4.1 A local boundary to gendered aesthetic expression

There have been videos of some trending aesthetics of #tomatogirl, #coconutgirl, #islandgyal alongside #strawberrygirl and #eurosummer. #Strawberrygirl around 2023 was aestheticized as a specific freckled blush look associated with strawberries and lots of red gingham print, #tomatogirl seemed to peak in 2023 and portrays also an associated red blush makeup look. Although tomatogirl was backdropped with images of Southern European women wearing bohemian clothing and a location of a warm sunny country like Italy or Greece from the flourishing yet dusty hillsides with olive plants and white house facades, together with an added sound on some videos of italian songs or songs by Frank Sinatra which evoked a similar soft jazzy warm night abroad. Aesthetics of the 2000's coded #coconutgirl during 2023/2024, #islandgyal for 2025 and similar #islandgirl for 2024 all follow with visual imagery of women with light brown to darker skin living in a tropical country, lying at the beach with salty tousled brown curly/wavy hair, together with iconography of hibiscus flowers, seashells and starfishes. For 2024 following into 2025 #eurosummer is often wearing beige or white flowy long skirts and dresses, linen pants, sometimes some colour whilst being on vacation to a European country soundtracked with mamma mia songs, birds chirping over a soft piano, or jazzy/bachata type of Spanish/Italians song dancing in the late night at a

restaurant overseas. Additionally, during the latter part of these aesthetics, multiple videos conveyed a sentiment regarding their short trendiness cycles and questioned the public's want for aesthetics that rose and fell quickly.

Here we see different locally coded experiences being aestheticised. These examples demonstrate exploitation and accessibility. To contextualize, only a minority can afford to take part in this continuous supply of microtrends such as visiting and experiencing Europe over the summer, visit a tropical island, or as from previous aesthetics, come from old money, to watch a sports game in the UK, or be a mobwife/rockstargirlfriend. This demonstrates and builds on the interconnection between fashion trends and social hierarchies. The accessibility of these location-bound experiences are increased through their commodification, it is a limited yet an increased closeness to feeling the sand on your skin, smelling the smoke in the air at a rock concert or hearing the screams at a football game when a team scores.

There is an aspiration pictured to be White and affluent, from being able to afford a lifestyle of lying on the beach or going on summer vacations to Europe. This aestheticised exploitation can be informed through how historically the Other has been seen as less than a White, upper class, Western Subject (Lugones, 2010:743), and how what is dominant knowledge is understood and shaped from conflicting forces (Lugones, 2010:748). In these portrayals we see traces of such a historically constructed Other from 'who' is being aestheticised and commodified, particularly the Other to the possible White, Western consumer. This speaks to the hegemony of such a hierarchical and colonial societal construction, together indicating a colonial act of reduction of these Other coded experiences into aesthetics made for the White Western consumer. However, subjectivities not pictured as Other are also aestheticised, as seen in the hegemonically coded #oldmoney and #quietluxury drawing on Whiteness and upper class dynamics. This demonstrates the relation between fashion trends and larger social dynamics (Goncu Berk, 2023a:54), from how contemporary practices of hyper-aesthetification meets hegemonic histories of construction, illuminating this tension.

Lunt (2022:198) theorizes digital space as where boundaries of locality, privacy and the social cultural context are challenged. This is supported by findings on how boundaries on hegemonic normative self-construction are challenged on Tiktok (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:1; Nashid, 2024:86), and that Tiktok is seen as a 'third space' conceptualized by an upending of boundaries (El Sayed & Hotait, 2024:4). This demonstrates

how individual style and gendered identity practices are reflexive to public trends and recognition, how Tiktok as an institution has an influence on individual's lives through the possible influence on their fashion choices. How the authority is constructed from what is deemed as trending and therefore validates or legitimises how fashion is standing in relation to individuals' own autonomy of how to dress oneself. Applying this, we see a disruption of local boundaries from how location-based gendered aesthetic expressions are brought to a global scale of trending aesthetics on Tiktok. A femininity, a type of -girl, as locally conceptualized is here seen as a globally available gendered performance for people to take part in. This speaks to previous themes' discussed depictions on how contemporary culture is characterized by a crossing, deconstructing, disrupting of boundaries. It further suggests and builds on, as noted in previous themes, that this is the common core conveyed as Generation Z's cultural sentiment.

There can be a difference in the time span of different trending aesthetics (Goncu Berk, 2023a:53), this is evidenced from #tomatogirl #coconutgirl #islandgyal #strawberrygirl and #eurosummer generally having a shorter trend cycle, in comparison to trends mentioned in other theme's. Diverse findings show that the achievement of social change through social media has been questioned (Yin & Binti Abdullah 2024:93), which challenges the support shown of the possibility of changing gender norms through social media (Tirocchi & Taddeo, 2024:402). The first of which is seen through the tendency of -girl constructed aesthetics that show women as consistently being aestheticised. Drawing on Connell's (1987:183) construction of how women are being situated as lower than and in support of a hierarchically higher positioned man. This altogether signify a tension between a strive for societal change, for non-normative construction and the implicit colonial dynamics of constructions of Whiteness, Western consumer-driven trending aesthetics.

5.5 Homogenized versus non-comforming aesthetic expression

5.5.1 Fashioning one's identity; creative aesthetic use

Videos about the younger generation's fashion choices show a creative aesthetic use. We see safety pins used to make a shirt fit tighter, a satin ribbon used for shoelaces, a sewed cutout of a suitjackets back, making your own hairstyle accessories of bobby pins and other metal embellishments, a #upcycled top sewn out of ties, using a necklace/scarves/bracelets or

glasses even as a bag charm decoration, making a skirt out of a bunch of old belts, cropping your own tops and t-shirts with your own scissor at home, using a scarf and tying it differently to look as a top, making something new or altering thrifted items, doing a #thriftflip.

This can be framed through how counter-trends stand in relation to popular trends, being an opposite reaction to them (Goncu Berk, 2023a:61). This can be seen through the depiction of a 'slow-paced' reuse, recycling and remaking of what fashion pieces you already have and fashioning itself towards one's own aesthetic expression. This is a counter-trend towards the previous themes' illustrations of what's trending is the aesthetics of #tomatogirl, #manrepellent, #oldmoney or #softboy and #blokketcore, a way of dress and associated lifestyle. The pressure to homogenize oneself into one of these pre-packaged aesthetics. Therefore the countercultural practice would be to challenge the norm of assimilating to such aesthetics and rather practice an agentic creative aesthetic expression outside of the trending aesthetics available.

To look further into the practice of this creative agentic aesthetic experimentation, we see aspects of performance, authenticity and inauthenticity. There has also been trending videos pictured as people interviewed on the street on their fashion choices and opinions where many note that their fashion items come from a mix of high-fashion luxury brands to fast fashion to thrifted, and that their own and other's outfit choices can be less or more trendy, succeeding being fashionable. They mention fashion dos and don'ts, and the people's own fashion style and their experiences, many talk on failed fashion instances as them being unhappy with a previously worn outfit. Also in the videos, the fashion opinions portrayed are both about the joy of joining in on trends yet the inauthenticity of them, not looking like yourself, an individual, not like the mass.

Earlier findings convey fashion or aesthetics on Tiktok as used to fashion a non-normative identity, meaning a challenge of a hegemonic normative construction (Santaolalla-Rueda & Fernández-Muñoz, 2024:1; Nashid, 2024:86). Additionally, one's expression of one's identity is conceptualized as the enactment of it, a performance (Schippers, 2007:92; West & Zimmerman, 1987:126). These help show how an aesthetic expression can 'fail' from not being authentic to one's identity or to the norm of what is fashionable, yet how this failure does not stop one from continuing with the practice of fashioning one's identity. This

dynamic of the success of aesthetic construction seems like an ebb and flow, this can be connected to Metamodernism.

One idea is that fashion today is just a reference of a reference. However, earlier findings describe the cultural era of Metamodernism as the interpellation between different modes of being (Ceriello, 2022:489-490). This is indicative of these contemporary illustrations. First, what is agentic and creative can be to partake in such interpellation, to both engage in trending aesthetics and to reuse, recycle, #thrifthflip one's second-hand bought clothes. Only doing one, no matter if one is constructed as more creative, is still reducing one's aesthetic engagement to one side of the spectrum. This further illuminates the tension between these two practices, how one is deemed creative/agentic and one is not. This choice between two binary constructed practices seems limiting.

Metamodernism also brings to light an awareness and an absurdity of contemporary society in earlier findings (Corbett, 2023:6; Ceriello, 2022:493). This, together with previous interpellatory dynamic and conceptualization of performance, can be recognized from the discongruent, uncohesive depictions of both wanting an aesthetic authenticity yet still partaking in the inauthentic deemed engagement with trends. In conjunction, earlier findings portray contemporary connections to Metamodern dynamics of the great extent of aesthetification to routinized life, meaning a hyper-aesthetification (Vujošević, 2024:148-149), and Metamodern-associated fragmentation (Ceriello, 2022:489-490), the fragmentary dynamic of which is described as the fracturing into parts which conveys the whole (Vujošević, 2024:155). Altogether, these all facets are implicated in previous themes' mentions of 'subwayshirt' from its awareness of an absurd reality of male violence against women, and the hyper-aesthetification from blokkettecore's mixture of two pre-existing aesthetics, also portrayed from the fragmentation in the multiple, varied yet specific aesthetics and -girls of #tomatogirl, #coconutgirl #islangyda, #softboy, #guyliner and #oldmoney. Contemporary illustrations in this theme and previously, speak to our society being a culturally Metamodern one, that what is common for a younger generation, the Generation Z, is the upholding of many of these associated dynamics. This will be discussed further below.

5.5.2 *Tension crystallized between two aesthetic constructions of -girl*

Two differing aesthetics can be exemplified in cleangirl and bratgirl. #cleangirl is depicted throughout 2023-2025 peaking in 2024, in videos of visual imagery and mentions of cisgendered, white and skinny women. A #cleangirl is shown through visual and verbal descriptions as someone who has glowy, 'natural', healthy looking slightly blushed skin, never wearing too much makeup, has a straight slicked back bun alongside a neutral or pink pastel coloured minimalist aesthetic of yoga/pilates clothing set, a morning planner together with cucumber or lemon infused water. It is paired with visual illustrations and mentions of skincare products and healthy eating with a structured, organized neat looking home.

Hegemonic norms are portrayed in #cleangirl. Theories note the hegemonic norm of a White Western cishetero ablebodiedness (Bremer, 2010:99-100) and how the construction of heterosexuality and ablebodiedness are sustaining one another's normative hold against alternatively constructed bodies (McRuer, 2006:31). This is here illuminated in mentioned depictions of #cleangirl standing on a White cishetero ablebodied subejctivity, showing the limited groups of people that are able to attain such a #cleangirl identity construction. This is in line with earlier findings on the upholding of norms of a small body size and feminine gendered expression as a woman (Brewster, 2024:1), and maintaining norms of female domesticity (Sykes, 2024:14).

We also see an emphasized femininity, meaning an embrace of a traditional femininity (Connell, 1987:187), and the constitutive support emphasized femininity has for hegemonic masculinity as two peas in a patriarchal pod (Connell, 1987:183). This femininity can be seen from the traditional feminine coded aspects of a smaller and fit physique, a female domesticity of an organized home, connections to the colour pink, and the overall upkeep and cleanliness of one's appearance and beauty. It is drawing on discussions in previous themes on how femininity aestheticised stands in relation to hegemonic and conservative associated norms of male centeredness, a White, Western hegemony and heterosexuality.

'Bratgirl' is conceptualized from the associated mix of #bratsummer #brat and #hotgirl, these all seen as conveying a type of girl, a 'bratgirl', which is depicted on a variety of gendered bodies and ethnicities. It is visually conveyed through a maximalist more edgy style of black leather, iconographic brat neon green, silver studded bracelet, black sunglasses, crottops, clubbing attire soundtracked by Charli Xcx's 2024 released album titled 'brat' of

club-focused songs. We see bratgirl accompanied with a feeling of messiness, of healing, of letting loose, a bic lighter and cigarettes, bold colours, revealing outfits and the haze of a night out. An amalgamation of common scenes conveyed in videos, is a bedroom haphazardly strewn with makeup products and different outfits lying on the floor, all from getting ready to go out clubbing with your friends, fastforward to a grimy club bathroom with graffitied walls and dirty paper towel covered floor, and then succeeded by the gritty, blurry late night pictures taken with the flash of a camera on you and you friends dancing at the club, all sweaty with your makeup smudged. And then on your way home afterwards, with your pretty heels exchanged for comfortable sneakers, your hair no longer holding its previously styled appearance, you pick up some fastfood to ease your hunger from partying the night away.

Here, 'bratgirl' can stand for a counter-trend towards #cleangirl. It draws on counter-trend dynamics, to popular trends exhibit an opposite reaction to them (Goncu Berk, 2023a:61). It conveys in comparison an embrace of dirtyness, disorganization, an acceptance to the 'failure' of one's aesthetic expression, of it becoming less perfect as the night progresses, and the 'unhealthy' habit of drinking alcohol, not getting enough sleep and eating fastfood. Here, bratgirl together with previous mentions of trending gender-neutral clothing for men and women and a cross-boundary of gendered aesthetic expression for men and women, stands for a questioning of what happens when #cleangirl or a hegemonic normatively-aligned gendered expression is no longer sought to attain to such an extent. It could mean a possible beginning of the end of the hegemony of such a White able-bodied cisheterosexuality of a hegemonic or rather emphasized femininity.

To delve deeper into non-hegemonic depictions. Bratgirl instead enlightens a contemporary character of an alternative femininity (Schippers, 2007:97-98) which opposes man's and masculinity's dominant societal position. From illustrations of bratgirl differentiating itself in opposition to aspects associated with #cleangirl, it could be implying that bratgirl is opposing the associated #cleangirl norms of emphasized femininity and congruent hegemonic masculinity and a male-centered society. Bratgirl could here mean a challenge of hegemonic norms, a possible disagreement with them. Although a difference to earlier findings is that the influence of a different ethnicity or of a non-white subjectivity on gendered aesthetic construction is not as explicit in depicted constructions of bratgirl. This because such influence is seen from the explicit mentions of a non-white gendered construction in the soft

masculinity that's influenced by Asian culture (Steains, 2025:1) and the construction of a Soft Black girl aesthetic (Nashid, 2024:86).

Even so, the tendency of bratgirl opposing such hegemonic norms is previously discussed, this unattainability of the still trending aesthetic of #cleangirl and the bratgirl's embrace of a 'failed' aesthetic performance could altogether lean into a tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic norms. Where such tension can come from is because it is easier to grasp dichotomies in X or Y, as noted by Hall (1997:31-32), that there is a tendency to grasp absolute opposing hierarchical categories as a human. Although, Hall (1997:31-32) mentions a criticism of how meaning gets left out if we do not look at the area in between, if we do not see the spectrum of meaning. Therefore, this can explain where this tension comes from, there is a tendency to conform to dichotomies, to prescribe to #cleangirl's hegemonic construction, yet it is not absolute for an opposing tendency exists to construct and identify with a bratgirl's non-hegemonic construction. To describe a clear picture of the cultural tendencies, we see together a spectrum of non-hegemonic and hegemonic self-construction, and that there is contention between these two that is unresolved, no one has won the number one spot on the contemporary cultural tendency board. The flowing movement of one is not washed over and wholly wiped out by the ebbing movement of the other. This leads me to believe that the cultural tendency is one of interpellation, of an unresolved tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic construction in the modern zeitgeist.

5.6 Discussion of the main findings

To summarize my analysis and its five themes. I have first discussed how conservatism is back in fashion, the dual tendency of first upper-class coded #quietluxury, #boho-chic and #oldmoney's boundedness by a conservative time and secondly the timelessness unbound found in the trending aesthetics from different time periods of medievalcore, 70's edgy rocker style and #y2k fashion. Here the hegemonic norms associated with conservatism are posited through an aesthetic expression that emphasizes traditional gender constructs, whiteness and upper class. Following this I discuss a spectrum of clothing, of performing gendered aesthetic expression as seen in trending gender-neutral fashion for women and men, possibly deconstructing binary binaries of who can perform what gendered aesthetic expression. The 'subwayshirt' illustrates however the questioning of the value-neutrality of clothing from

how different bodies are policed differently by themselves and others, that there is a tension between prescribed versus desired way to dress. The policing of women with a 'subwayshirt' further depicts the encroachment of male violence against women in the digital space. Subsequently I discuss how women and men make use of the full spectrum of gendered aesthetic expression, although the grasp of hegemonic masculinity could explain why men do not use the full spectrum of masculine to feminine coded aesthetic expression as much as women have been portrayed doing. Speaking to a cultural tendency of a cross-boundary, dis-aligned gendered aesthetic expression.

In the first subtheme under dressing for men, we see a hegemonic norm of heterosexuality through #manrepellent and #rockstargf/#mobwife, whilst the former depict an ambivalence from how there is an effort to not conform to such norms although the results of such efforts can be mixed. Even so, the questioning of a male centeredness, of phallogocentrism in self-construction indicates a deconstruction of a binary of femininity versus masculinity. Suggesting a challenge to the idea of women, femininity being constituted as the antithesis to what it means to be a 'Subject'. The second subtheme pictures the power relations and implications in recognition yet the ambivalence of what constructed (normative) identity is afforded it. From portrayals of first a dis-identifactory performance of futch gendered aesthetic expression and then men's 'dressing slutty' for a (female) romantic partner, there is together a tension to hegemonically construct one's performance of gender as aligned with one's sexuality.

The subsequent theme discusses keeping up with trends. We see a local boundary to gendered aesthetic expression where accessibility and exploitation are aspects which illuminate which subjectivities are aestheticised and subsequently reduced, as concurring with a White, Western consumer. This as seen from #eurosummer, #tomatogirl, #islandgyal, and #coconutgirl. Here, the historical constructions of the Other meet contemporary cultural aesthetic dynamics. Together, the digital space of Tiktok depicts a deconstruction of local boundaries of what genderd aesthetic expression is now globally available to others. This local boundary-focusness in construction of trending aesthetics with Tiktok's crossing of local boundaries in people's self-construction indicates a tension between societal change or not.

The fifth and last theme discusses homogenized versus non-conforming aesthetic expression, people exercise a creative aesthetic use from #thriftflipping second hand clothing or #upcycling old clothing. This depicts a counter-trend of a 'slow-paced' reuse of fashioning

one's own identity instead of the quick cycles of buying into a prepackaged #tomatogirl and #islandgyal. Emerging is the tension between engaging with trends, and simultaneously foregoing them based on their inauthenticity. This dynamic of fashion practice is also seen in a Metamodern framing of interpellation between these two and associated tendencies of fragmentation, hyper-aesthetification and absurdity of life. The last subtheme exhibit a tension that is aesthetically crystallized between the hegemonically normative #cleangirl and the counter-trend of non-hegemonically normative 'bratgirl'. The unattainability of a White cishetero ablebodied subjectivity is oppositioned by an embrace of a failure of one's aesthetic expression. This suggests a contemporary cultural era of Metamodernism from its core of an unresolved tension, here exhibited in the modern zeitgeist of aesthetic self-construction on Tiktok.

Together these speak to the self-constructive tendencies of a contemporary generation. As mentioned in the introductory section of the thesis, there is a consecutive rise in the visibility of LGBT+ identification, of a questioning of gender and sexuality in one's self-construction, with its highest numbers seen in Generation Z (Ipsos, 2024a, In Summary, Living in colour). Generation Z has a non-conformist tendency of gender fluid fashion (McKinsey & Company, 2023:18), and Gen Z has a tendency to use social media, to use Tiktok as a frame of reference for fashion inspiration (McKinsey & Company, 2023:56-57).

This together with the findings contextualize the recurring theme of an unresolved tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic norms in a gendered dimension of aesthetic self-construction of individuals on Tiktok. Generation Z is fashioning a complex gendered construction, that binary gender identification is reproduced yet challenged, there is a deconstruction of the gendering of clothing. A deconstruction of binary boundaries of gendered aesthetic expression. Emergent is a cross-boundary tendency and one's gender identity being dis-aligned with one's gendered aesthetic expression. This indicates a challenge of how gender identity and femininity/masculinity in and of themselves are constructed.

As I have previously discussed, the Metamodern cultural tendency of an unresolved tension as portrayed between hegemonic and non-hegemonic aesthetic self-constructions on Tiktok is indicative of a Metamodern cultural era. Therefore, whenst the trendiness of the conveyed aesthetics perish, the cultural undercurrent of unresolved tension as seen between hegemonic and non-hegemonic aesthetic self-construction may persist.

This persistence can speak to the procedural success of resisting hegemonic norms if we conceive persistence as not succumbing to the pressure, to the gravitas of which hegemonic constructions hold from their situated hegemonic character. Nevertheless, we can pinpoint an altogether all pervasive frustratingly hair-pulling unresolved feeling of the simultaneous existence of hegemonic conformities and numerous challenges to it. Metamodernism captures this and subsequently eases the frustration of ambiguity. It allows one to catch one's breath and see the big picture. By naming the contemporary cultural paradigm, it provides clarity. It further questions the purpose of resolvedness. For if we say the tension is resolved to a conformity to either side of non-hegemonic or hegemonic norms, we are reductive. It is a futile argument for what is non-hegemonic today can be the hegemonic construction of tomorrow. If we are to truly be non-conformist we must not reduce the spectrum of construction practices to one polar side. Non-conformity is here the continued asking of the question, the continued tension that inhabits a constant interpellatory movement between question and answer, where an answer is never satisfactory outside of the practice of persistent questioning.

There is a contemporary pertinent to sit in such hair-pulling unresolvedness and instead of fighting it, fostering it. To feed it with wood and lighter-fluid, to gently rock it back and forth in one's warm embrace, to boldly face it in the mirror's reflection. For a tension is constituted by a movement, it evokes a response from its unresolvedness. Movement is change and therefore it is hope. It is the trends cruising on the waves flowing up against the sandy structure of beach banks and back again into the vast ocean of social constructions. A continuous cycle of culture.

Together, this research's study of today's cultural cycle illuminates an aesthetic dimension of contemporary self-construction. It suggests the existence of an unresolved tendency between hegemonic and non-hegemonic norms, furthering the notion that the contemporary cultural core is change, or rather change core-ified.

6. Conclusion

In a context of the onset of a conservative right-wing global wave, I wanted to contribute and turn my research gaze to the fresh perspective of digital media, social/cultural research and fashion research together with the burgeoning platform of Tiktok. I have fashioned research as a response to the question of what construction of contemporary gendered aesthetics can be perceived in fashion trends within the social media platform Tiktok. In my analysis I have used a mix of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) and Critical Visual Methodology for their relevance to meet the material spread across different research fields and from the multi-dimensional format of Tiktok videos using visuals, text and sound.

The key research contribution is this analysis acting as the umbrella catching the drops of trending aesthetics, perceiving their flow into the societal tendency of a Metamodern unresolved tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic norms in aesthetic self-construction. Earlier research focused on specific trends and suggested a boundary-crossing character to contemporary self-construction through aesthetics on digital media. With a wider lens, I capture the overarching tendencies of a contemporary cultural zeitgeist where emerging within the context of trending aesthetics on Tiktok is the fashioning of a dis-aligned gendered self-construction. I have used both theory and earlier research to situate and analyze my material within relevant and illuminative frameworks. Here the previous research on metamodernism has been used in a reflexive manner from it providing significant clarity to capturing the cultural zeitgeist and therefore been significant in its part in the analysis.

This thesis contributes to emerging discussions within gender studies and digital media, fashion studies and gender perspectives on changing technologies and their use. This research lends a gaze to the social practices of younger generations, their serious engagement with the social media platform Tiktok. A space where gendered expressions are constantly constructed, contested and core-ified. I am also part of contributing to the knowledge production around how Metamodernism is connected to the culture of today and how it can be used to form contemporary textual practices. I have further illuminated how -core and the contemporary aesthetic constructions in Tiktok videos can be associated with Metamodernism and possibly a metamodern encapsulated cultural art movement from the visual and artful portrayals of -core, fashion and implied social commentary and construction.

Metmodernism has been conceptualized within a contemporary hemisphere. Another contribution is how the epistemological understanding of truth, of constructions is contested, and the embrace of such tension. This has inspired the choice to contest the traditional standard way of writing an academic paper, for the writing itself to be reflexive towards the research focus and the principles of Feminist creative writing.

A challenge has been applying visual methods without showing the actual visual material. At first glance it sounds like an oxymoron, however this was chosen to adhere to the ethical principles of anonymity, it was accommodated through descriptive visualisations of the trends studied. Another challenge was to capture the cultural zeitgeist, for trends outside this research's limited scope could give further analytical understanding. Subsequently, suggestions for future research would be a deeper analysis of non-binary identities and their aesthetic construction, the influence of commodification of trends in contemporary self-construction, and an explicit connection to patriarchal societal structures in a reflexive relationship with contemporary gendered self-constructions. Beneficial would be a longitudinal research to analyze a greater timespan on trend cycles, to see a greater breadth of trends and their implication on self-construction and society.

To conclude, the research illuminates how change can be seen as core-ified. On the Tiktok platform, '-core' is a prevalent descriptive medium used as a suffix for the modulated prefix that denotes an aestheticised construction, a fashion trend. 'Core' provides the context of the research done here to further illuminate the chosen platform, the aesthetic dimension, and noting the research aims to reach the core of what gendered aesthetic constructions can be seen. The core tension found between hegemonic and non-hegemonic gendered aesthetic construction, capturing the cultural contemporary zeitgeist. Change crystallizes these findings, the contemporary cultural tendency of an unresolved tension and therefore a continuous movement where what is constant is change, change core-ified..

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