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Context Description Paper

This paper establishes and contextualizes the focus on the dark feminine aesthetic as it circulates on TikTok. The research object consists of a curated corpus of TikTok videos that collectively construct and circulate the “dark feminine” aesthetic as a contemporary feminine subjectivity. As digital platforms increasingly function as primary sites where gendered identities are produced, performed, and evaluated, TikTok offers a particularly generative space for communication studies scholars to examine how femininity is mediated, normalized, and disciplined through visual, embodied, and discursive practices. The dark feminine aesthetic, which has gained prominence through TikTok hashtags such as #darkfeminine, #darkfeminineenergy, and #divinefeminine, represents a distinct configuration of femininity that blends visual styling, affective orientation, and moralized self conduct.

The research object for this project is six analyzed TikTok videos posted under the hashtags #darkfeminine, #darkfeminineenergy, and #divinefemine. These videos collectively articulate what is commonly referred to as the “dark feminine” aesthetic. While individual videos vary in tone, style, and creator identity, together they participate in a shared discursive formation that defines dark feminine femininity as a recognizable way of being, not merely a fashion trend or visual style. Unlike broader lifestyle aesthetics, the dark feminine is consistently framed as an identity oriented subjectivity rather than a temporary trend. TikTok creators frequently describe it as an “energy”, “mindset”, or “state of being”, positioning it as something that must be

cultivated through disciplined self work. The aesthetic typically combines visual elements such as dark or neutral color palettes, fitted or flowing silhouettes, heavy sculpted makeup, and controlled body movement with emotional and behavioural prescriptions, including confidence, emotional restraint, mystery and detachment. The selected videos were chosen because they explicitly reference dark feminine femininity and offer guidance, instruction, or motivation related to how it should be embodied and performed. Rather than representing isolated expressions, these videos function as part of an intertextual field in which creators draw on shared language, symbols and value to define what dark feminine femininity is and how it should be enacted.

TIKTOK AS A SITE OF CIRCULATION

TikTok provides the primary platform through which dark feminine discourse is produced and circulated. Launched in 2018, TikTok has become one of the most influential social media platforms for visual culture, particularly among Gen Z and young millennial users. Its algorithm driven “For You Page” facilitates rapid content circulation and trend formation, allowing specific aesthetics and discourses to gain visibility through repetition and engagement rather than centralized curation.

Jose van Dijck describes social media platforms as systems that structure connectivity through technological affordances and algorithmic design. TikTok exemplifies this structure by amplifying content based on engagement metrics such as watch time, shares, and interacts.

Dark feminine content is shaped by TikTok’s technical affordances, including short form video, vertical framing, audio reuse, hashtag aggregation, and algorithmic recommendation systems. These features encourage creators to distill complex identities into brief, visually legible

performances. As a result, dark feminine videos often rely on immediately recognizable cues such as fashion choices, facial expressions, or textual declarations to signal their aesthetic alignment within seconds.

The hashtag system is particularly significant as it allows dark feminine content to function as an intertextual archive. Users encountering one dark feminine video are quickly directed to others, reinforcing aesthetic norms and creating a sense of coherence across disparate creators. This hashtag based organization also facilitates comparison, imitation and evaluation, contributing to the normalization of specific performances.

THE ECOSYSTEM OF DIGITAL FEMININITIES

The dark feminine aesthetic exists within a broader ecosystem of TikTok femininities. Over the past several years, the platform has seen the rise of multiple aesthetics oddities including “clean girl”, “coquette”, “soft girl” and “baddie”. Each of these aesthetics combines fashion, behavior, and affect into recognizable identity packages.

The presence of multiple aesthetics femininities suggests that TikTok functions as a site where gender is categorized into stylized micro identities. These identities are not entirely fixed but are recognizable through repeated visual and discursive patterns. The dark feminine distinguishes itself within this ecosystem through its emphasis on restraint, mystery, emotional control, and strategic self presentation. Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gil describe contemporary media culture as characterized by postfeminist sensibilities in which femininity is framed as a site of choice, empowerment and self fashioning. On TikTok, aesthetic femininities are often presented as self selected identities that individuals can adopt through consumption and self discipline.

Rather than existing outside mainstream femininity, the dark feminine appears to function as one variation within a broader digital femininity marketplace. It is positioned as aspirational and attainable provided that one adopts the correct visual and behavioral cues.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The dark feminine aesthetic does not emerge in isolation but draws from longer histories of femininity, fashion, and cultural symbolism. Cultural references to the “femme fatale”, gothic femininity and archetypes of dangerous or seductive women appear frequently in Western literature, film and fashion. These figures are often associated with allure, emotional restraint, and perceived power, qualities that resonate with contemporary representations of dark feminine femininity.

However, the contemporary dark feminine aesthetic differs from these earlier representations in its emphasis on self optimization, emotional discipline and aspirational selfhood. While historical depictions of dark or dangerous femininity often positioned such figures as transgressive or morally suspect, TikTok’s dark feminine discourse frequently frames the aesthetic as aspirational and self directed.

The rise of the dark feminine aesthetic on TikTok coincides with broader platform trends that emphasize personal branding, self improvement and aesthetic coherence. TikTok’s algorithmic organization encourages the circulation of content that is visually striking, emotionally resonant, and easily categorized through hashtags. As a result, aesthetics such as clean girl, coquette, and dark feminine emerge not only as styles but as communicative shortcuts through which users can quickly signal identity, values, and social positioning.

Dark feminine discourse also intersects with popular self help and motivational cultures. Many videos frame dark femininity as a strategy for empowerment, healing or personal transformation, often drawing on language associated with therapy culture, manifestation, and confidence coaching. This framing positions the aesthetic as both aspirational and corrective, suggesting that adopting dark feminine traits can remedy perceived deficiencies in confidence, desirability or emotional control.

INFLUENCER CULTURE AND VISIBILITY

TikTok aesthetics operate within influencer economies. Crystal Abidin's concept of "visibility labour" describes the ongoing work influencers perform to remain seen and relevant. Although not all dark feminine creators identify as influencers, many engage in similar practices of aesthetic consistency, audience engagement, and personal branding.

Theresa Senft's early work on micro celebrity culture highlights how online self presentation often involves strategic self disclosure combined with curated image management. Dark feminine creators frequently balance intimacy with controlled mystique, limited emotional vulnerability. This balance contributes to the aesthetic's internal coherence.

Elizabeth Wissinger's discussion of glamour labor further contextualizes how visual presentation becomes a form of ongoing work. The dark feminine aesthetic often requires specific styling, lighting, and makeup. These scholars help situate dark feminine TikTok content within broader histories of self presentation, branding, and aesthetic labor.

PRODUCTION, CIRCULATION, AND CONSUMPTION ON TIKTOK

The production of dark feminine TikTok content is primarily driven by individual creators rather than institutional actors. These creators often position themselves as guides, mentors, or exemplars, using first person narration and direct address to instruct viewers on how to embody dark feminine traits. Authority is frequently established through confident delivery, aesthetic coherence, and claims of personal transformation. The videos frequently employ familiar TikTok formats, such as “things that make you dark feminine”, "habits of a dark feminine woman” or motivational voiceovers paired with slow motion visuals.

Circulation occurs through hashtag based discovery and algorithmic recommendation. Hashtags such as #darkfeminineenergy and #divinefeminine functions as organizing tools that cluster related content and allow users to encounter multiple videos articulating similar norms. Through repeated exposure, viewers come to recognize the aesthetic's conventions and internal logic.

Consumption of dark feminine content is both passive and participatory. Viewers may watch videos for inspiration or entertainment but they are also encouraged to adopt the aesthetic themselves by changing their appearance, behaviour, or mindset. Comment sections often function as sites of affirmation, evaluation, or clarification, where users ask whether they are “doing it right” or praise creators for embodying the aesthetic correctly. In this way, audience interaction becomes part of the process through which norms are reinforced.

POSTFEMINIST MEDIA CULTURE

Rosalind Gill defines postfeminist media culture as characterized by an emphasis on individualism, choice, and self surveillance. Similarly, McRobbie describes postfeminism as

incorporating feminist language while redirecting attention toward personal responsibility and self improvement. Dark feminine TikTok videos often frame transformation as a personal project. Creators present behavioral change as empowering and necessary for success in relationships, work, and self confidence.

INITIAL CONCLUSION

This suggests that the dark feminine aesthetic functions as more than a visual style on TikTok. It operates as a structured feminine subjectivity that combines appearance, affect, and behavior into a coherent identity framework. The aesthetic's emphasis on discipline, control, and aspiration positions it within broader patterns of digital femininity that privilege self regulation and personal responsibility. Several questions emerge from this. How do creators and audiences negotiate what counts as an authentic or successful performance of dark feminine femininity? How do instructional and motivational discourses contribute to the normalization of specific emotional and behavioral norms? And how does dark feminine discourse interact with other TikTok femininities, such as clean girl or coquette, to produce hierarchies of value? These questions point toward the need for closer analysis of the communicative practices through which dark feminine femininity is constructed and policed.

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