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Capstone

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February 22, 2026

Prospectus

INTRODUCTION

In the past year, TikTok has become a key site for the circulation of condensed aesthetic identities that combine visual style, affective posture, and behavioral instruction into replicable subject positions. Among these formations is “dark feminine energy”, a category that circulates under hashtags such as #darkfeminine and #darkfeminineenergy. While often framed as an aesthetic; dark clothing, muted palettes, control facial expression, it is more accurately described as a pedagogical discourse that instructs women on how to manage emotion, intimacy, visibility, and desire. Existing scholarship on postfeminist media culture has established that contemporary femininity is frequently framed as empowered choice while simultaneously demanding intensified self surveillance and self discipline(Gill, McRobbie). However, less work has examined how TikTok’s algorithmic architecture and short form video format compress these dynamics into hyper replicable “energy” identities that operate as moral technologies of the self.

This project examines three TikTok videos posted within the past year: an aesthetic montage video by @vogueglamourr, a a critical response video by @4ngelss1 that sparked debate in its comment section, and an instructional video by @serafinaproject titled “How to Unlock Your Dark Feminine Energy.” Together, these videos represent three distinct but

interrelated dimensions of dark feminine discourse: aesthetic construction, discursive contestation, and behavioral codification.

This project asks

- I. How does dark feminine TikTok content construct a coherent feminine subject defined by emotional restraint, strategic detachment and aesthetic discipline?
- II. How do aesthetic montage, instructional discourse and comment interaction work together to normalize emotions, restraint, detachment and self discipline as forms of feminine power?
- III. How does dark feminine discourse mobilize post feminist language of empowerment while simultaneously intensifying practices of self surveillance and regulation?

The significance of this project lies in its focus on how contemporary digital platforms structure the production of gendered subjectivities. While scholars have examined postfeminist media culture, influencer economies, and aesthetic labor, less work has addressed how short form algorithmic video environments condense these dynamics into highly replicable micro identities framed as “energies”. By analyzing dark feminine TikTok content as a communicative formation, this project contributes to scholarly conversation about postfeminism, platformed selfhood and the regulation of femininity in digital culture.

LIT REVIEW

Postfeminist Media Culture and Empowerment Discourse

Rosalind Gill’s concept of postfeminist media culture argues that postfeminism is not simply a historical moment after feminism but a sensibility characterized by individualism,

choice, self surveillance, and the makeover paradigm. In this formation ,women are positioned as autonomous agents who freely choose self improvement but are simultaneously compelled to constantly monitor and regulate their bodies, emotions, and desirability. Empowerment becomes inseparable from discipline.

Angela McRobbie extends this argument by suggesting that postfeminism works through a “double entanglement”: feminism is acknowledged and incorporated but rendered unnecessary. Women are told that they are already empowered; therefore any remaining struggle becomes a matter of personal optimization rather than structural inequality.

Building on this, Sarah Banet Weiser argues that feminism now circulates as a visible, marketable brand. Empowerment is aestheticized, commodified, and made consumable. Importantly, popular feminism coexists with popular misogyny, revealing that visibility does not guarantee liberation

Dark feminine TikTok discourse strongly echoes these patterns. Creators frame emotional restraint, boundary setting, and aesthetic coherence as empowering choices. However, empowerment is often articulated through disciplined self management. This project enters the postfeminist media conversation by examining how TikTok’s short form structure intensifies these dynamics through algorithmic repetition and visual compression.

Gender performativity and the Repetition of Feminine Scripts

Judith Butler’s concept of gendered performativity emphasizes that gender is constituted through repeated acts that become naturalized over time. On TikTok, repetition occurs not only through individual performance but also through platform wide limitations. When dark clothing, controlled affect, and references to “energy” are repeatedly paired together they begin to solidify

into a recognizable feminine script. However Butler's framework does not account for algorithmic amplification. My project extends performativity theory into platform culture, arguing that TikTok's For You Page functions as a repetition machine that rapidly stabilizes micro identities.

Masquerade, Gaze, and the Organization of Desire

Joan Riviere argues that femininity can function as a mask, an exaggerated performance deployed strategically within patriarchal structures. Femininity is not essence but display. This insight is expanded through gaze theory.

Clifford T. Manlove revisits Lacan and Mulvey to argue that visual representation organizes desire through what he calls "drive". Cinematic framing does not merely depict subjects; it structures affective momentum and visual attachment through repetition and formal arrangement.

Dark feminine TikTok videos mobilize similar strategies. Slow motion glances, muted palettes, luxury imagery, and symbolic motifs produce visual intensity. Desire is organized not through linear narrative but through looped repetition. By using Riviere and Manlove, this project argues that dark femininity operates simultaneously as masquerade and aesthetic engine, staging controlled power while structuring viewer desire through algorithmic looping .

Discipline and the Presentation of Self

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* conceptualizes social interaction as theatrical performance, where individuals manage impressions before an audience. Dark feminine discourse explicitly instructs users to manage their "front state": maintain composure, limit availability, embody mystery.

Michel Foucault's work on discipline and self regulation provides a framework for understanding how subjects internalize norms and govern themselves accordingly. Dark feminine instructional videos explicitly function as what Foucault calls "technologies of the self". It encourages viewers to monitor their speech, availability, emotional expression, and bodily presentation.

Taste, Distinction and Aesthetic Hierarchy

Pierre Bourdieu argues that taste functions as a marker of social positioning. Aesthetic preferences are not neutral; they encode classed dispositions. Dark feminine style, minimal speech, controlled affect, muted luxury aesthetics, can be read as a cultivated disposition than mere fashion. Bourdieu helps explain why dark feminine content often emphasizes exclusivity, restraint and selectivity. These are markers of distinction. By presenting detachment as refinement, dark feminine discourse constructs a hierarchy of feminine taste. This paper extends Bourdieu into digital micro aesthetics, showing how TikTok enables rapid circulation of taste codes detached from traditional class markers but still functioning as distinction.

Class, Gender, and Respectability

Paul Johnson's review of Beverly Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender* highlights Skeggs' argument that femininity is often constructed through respectability and moral worth. Femininity is not simply aesthetic; it is ethical and evaluative. Dark feminine discourse similarly frames certain behaviors, emotional restraint, silence, non availability as morally superior. Women who are overly expressive or emotionally available are implicitly positioned as lower value.

Influencer Culture and Visibility Labor

Crystal Abidin's concept of visibility labor describes the ongoing work required to remain relevant in digital economies. Theresa Senft's work on micro celebrity culture highlights the strategic calibration of intimacy and mystique in online self presentation. Elizabeth Wissinger's notion of glamour labor demonstrates how visual presentation becomes continuous work. Dark feminine creators frequently engage in aesthetic consistency, curated, mystique, and stylized presentation. However, this project extends influencer scholarship by focusing not only on creators but also on how aesthetic labor is framed as self improvement advice for audiences. Rather than remaining confined to professional influencers, dark feminine discourse invites viewers to adopt similar practices of branding and emotional regulation in their everyday lives.

Platform Culture and Algorithmic Amplification

Patrick Jagoda's review of Jose Van Dijck's *The Culture of Connectivity* foregrounds how social media platforms structure interaction through connectivity logic and algorithmic mediation. TikTok's infrastructure is not neutral as it amplifies repetition, aesthetic clustering, and rapid trend formation. This project incorporates platform studies to argue that dark feminine identity is not only culturally produced but technologically intensified. The algorithm accelerates sedimentation, making identity scripts appear normalized.

METHODOLOGY

This project employs feminist critical discourse analysis combined with rhetorical and visual analysis. Methodology here consists of two interrelated components: close textual analysis of the three TikTok videos and theoretical interpretation grounded in postfeminist media theory and Foucauldian understandings of disciplinary and subject formation. Butler's theory of performativity will illuminate how repeated stylistic elements produce recognizable feminine scripts.

First, I conduct a close reading of the three TikToks, analyzing visual elements (lighting, clothing, editing style, montage), audio choices, textual overlays, and hashtag usage. Attention is paid to how meaning is produced through juxtaposition, repetition and aesthetic cues. Then, I analyze the comment sections as sites of participatory norm enforcement. Comments defending or critiquing dark feminine discourse are treated as communicative acts that reveal how audiences negotiate authenticity and desirability. The goal is to interpret how these communicative practices construct a disciplined subject framed as empowered.

PROJECT CONTRIBUTION

This project contribute to scholarly conversation mainly three ways:

- I. It updates postfeminist media analysis for the TikTok era, where algorithmic repetition accelerates identity codification.
- II. It bridges influencer labor scholarship with feminist theories of discipline by showing how aesthetic labor becomes moral instruction.

III. It identifies “dark feminine energy” as a contemporary site where empowerment discourse and self surveillance converge.

Rather than treating dark feminine TikTok as a superficial aesthetic trend, this project positions it as a communicative formation that shapes contemporary understandings of femininity, power, and emotional regulation.

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