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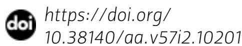

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# *The problem with rebellious hyper-femininity: an analysis of social media's undermining of hyper-femininity as subversive praxis*

## Abstract

This paper analyses a social media phenomenon which I term rebellious hyper-femininity, in which a hyper-feminine identity (involving, for example, embracing the colour pink, self-beautification, or other stereotypically feminine traits and characteristics) is adopted in response to the devaluation of femininity by patriarchal culture. Drawing on the trend bimbocore as an example of this phenomenon, I argue that such an adoption of hyper-femininity is rebellious and involves subversive feminist praxis because, by reclaiming a devalued identity, it engages in a critique of gender norms and anti-feminine sentiment. Rebellious hyper-femininity, as an identity largely performed through the sharing of content on social media, also involves a critique of capitalist society and other socio-political issues by these content creators. Rebellious hyper-femininity has the potential to be the kind of femininity which Marcuse (1974) believed was the antithesis to

patriarchal and capitalist oppression. However, I argue that rebellious hyper-femineity's radical potential as mode of subversive praxis is undermined by its being primarily enacted and popularised on social media. I argue that social media exhibits characteristics which Adorno and Horkheimer identify in their analysis of the Culture Industry and which Marcuse identifies in his analysis of one-dimensional society, such as an emphasis on conformity, standardisation, and the subsuming of that which might destabilise the status quo. In particular, social media turns rebellious hyper-femininity into a trend, a purely aesthetic, easily replicable identity stripped of its subversive intentions. As a trend, it perpetuates the very structures it originally aimed to destabilise, and thus social media undermines hyper-femininity as a potential mode of subversive praxis against patriarchal-capitalist oppression.

**Keywords:** bimbocore, feminism, one-dimensional society, culture industry, social media, femininity

## Introduction

In 1974, Herbert Marcuse argued that feminism and the embracing of feminine qualities are necessary to effectively work against oppressive capitalist society. But with the rise of the neoliberal "girlboss," feminism was subsumed by that which Marcuse had hoped it would negate, reified into a purchasable lifestyle, and femininity avoided. However, in recent years there has been a subversive reclamation of femininity. In this paper, I term this phenomenon "rebellious hyper-femininity". Rebellious hyper-femininity, as epitomised by the social media trend of bimbocore, involves the reclamation of a devalued hyper-feminine identity, engaging in a critique of gender norms, and taking a critical stance towards capitalism, racism and other oppressive structures. The rise of rebellious hyper-femininity appears to be in line with Marcuse's argument that femininity poses the antithesis to capitalism and patriarchy. However, I argue that because rebellious hyper-femininity relies on social media to disseminate its subversive intentions and popularise it as a mode of praxis its radical potential is lost.

I argue this through an analysis of social media as exhibiting features which Adorno and Horkheimer identified in the culture industry, and which Marcuse identified in one-dimensional society.[1] Rebellious hyper-femininity becomes ossified into categories consisting of barely differentiated, easily replicable identities devoid of critical intentions, and, like neoliberal feminism, tied to consumerism. Due to social media's capacity to standardise and subsume anything which appears subversive and to hide context and intention, rebellious hyper-femininity, as a potentially subversive mode of feminist-praxis, is undermined. Rebellious hyper-femininity is thus rendered one-dimensional and ineffective as a subversive mode of praxis. I first consider Marcuse's argument in *Marxism and feminism* (1974) that the Women's Liberation Movement poses the best solution to the end of capitalist society. I then compare his view of feminism in the 1970s, to Nina Power's (2009) and Sarah Louise Bennett's (2024), more recent analyses of mainstream neoliberal feminism, as characterised by consumerism, conforming to capitalist society, devoid of radical potential. I consider hyper-femininity as a response to neoliberal feminism and argue that hyper-femininity presents a mode of feminism that is not about leaning-in and is in fact rebellious.

I then discuss Adorno and Horkheimer's (2016) analysis of the culture industry and aspects of Marcuse's (1968) analysis of one-dimensional society, arguing that social media also exhibits the totalitarian characteristics which Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse identify. I argue that social media has turned hyper-femininity into an easily replicable identity devoid of critical intentions. I conclude by arguing that rebellious hyper-femininity loses its radical potential as a mode of subversive praxis. Despite appearing as a mode of radical, subversive, anti-patriarchal praxis, this potential is undermined by rebellious hyper-femininity's reliance on social media and social media's capacity to neutralise any threat to the status quo.

1 The meta-analysis conducted in this article is philosophical in nature, rather than empirical, conducted through the lens of (particularly first-generation) critical theory. The phenomenon of hyperfeminine identity expressions on social media (such as bimbocore), especially ones with subversive intent, is recent enough that there is limited academic literature on the subject (Sandall 2024), even less of which is of a philosophical bent. Therefore, while I draw from academic literature, I supplement this with non-scientific accounts of bimbocore describing the phenomenon from the perspective of the social media user, and in some cases the content creator themselves. This paper thus also contributes to filling a lacuna in the literature on the subject.

## The de-radicalisation of femininity and feminism

In *Marxism and feminism*, Marcuse (1974: 279) argued that the Women's Liberation Movement of that time was "perhaps the most important and potentially the most radical political movement" that existed. The aims of the Women's Liberation Movement, Marcuse (1974: 281) argued, involved not only the creation of new, more equal social institutions, but also "a change in consciousness," the "negation of the exploiting and repressive values of patriarchal civilisation."[2] These values include those which govern capitalist society, associated with Marcuse's (1974: 282) concept of the Performance Principle, namely profitable productivity, assertiveness, efficiency, competitiveness, the valuing of rationality over emotionality, and displays of strength and virility. Capitalism, according to Marcuse (1974: 282), is a "form of male dominated culture," and these are masculine qualities. Socialism must embody the antithesis to this capitalist and patriarchal society, and to do so must embody feminine qualities, such as receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, and tenderness (Marcuse 1974: 283). To negate capitalism (as a masculine society), what is needed is a *feminist* socialism.

It is those qualities which have been traditionally deemed feminine, Marcuse argues, which are life-affirming and involve the negation of repressive, oppressive society. Once a liberated society is achieved, these qualities would cease to be feminine and would be universalised (Marcuse 1974: 286). What results would be a kind of androgynism, "the masculine-feminine antithesis [...] transformed into a synthesis" (Marcuse 1974: 287). Ultimately, according to Marcuse, if capitalist society is to be transformed into a non-repressive, liberated, socialist society, this can only be achieved by emphasising and employing feminine qualities. Feminism is therefore the best and perhaps only way of doing away with not only patriarchy, but also capitalism.

Nina Power, in *One Dimensional Woman* (2009) (influenced by Marcuse), takes a more pessimistic view of feminism. Power argues that feminism has become, as stated in her title, one-dimensional, uncritical, and complacent. Co-opted by consumerism, it has lost the radical potential Marcuse had seen in it. Instead of female emancipation leading to the end of capitalism, it now appears, according to Power (2009: 1) "[t]hat the height of supposed female emancipation coincides so perfectly with consumerism."

2 Patriarchy refers to a social system which grants and perpetuates masculine power and domination, facilitated and perpetuated by other social structures, including capitalism.

Although she does not label it as such, the one-dimensional feminism Power describes can be identified as neoliberal[3] feminism, which identifies feminine empowerment with "career success, entrepreneurial endeavours, and participation in the marketplace" (Bennett 2024, 47). Bennett (2024) identifies the commodification of feminism as characteristic of neoliberal feminism, wherein brands use feminist messages to appeal to consumers, encouraging the idea that one can become a feminist through consumer choices. Power (2009: 1) too argues that the contemporary feminist is wrapped up in consumption, equating feminine accomplishment with "the ownership of expensive handbags, a vibrator, a job, a flat, and a man." Feminism thus becomes equivalent with one's purchasing power (Power 2009: 55), products fetishised as that which facilitate empowerment. Bennett (2024: 49) also notes that "[p]rofessional success and economic independence" become the "ultimate goals of [neoliberal] feminist empowerment," such that the form of commodified empowerment neoliberal feminism offers is superficial (52). Feminist messages and ideals become depoliticised, "diluted" (Bennett 2024: 51). Beck (2021: 104) similarly argues feminist empowerment has been sanitised away from the radical activism which challenges power, and has become transactional, "something you could buy, obtain, and experience as a product."

Power argues that, like its namesake, Marcuse's one-dimensional society, contemporary (neoliberal) feminism and its consumerist focus become "a barrier to any genuine thinking of work, sex and politics" that is truly liberatory (Power 2009: 2). As Bennett (2024: 52) notes, feminism is reduced to personal consumer and lifestyle choices, its ideals turned into "marketable commodities" and thus its transformative potential (which Marcuse identified) is lost. One-dimensional feminism is Fraser's (2013) "feminism lite," feminism as rendered more mainstream and palatable (Bennett 2024) than the radical feminism Marcuse lauded in 1974.

Neoliberal feminism is often as associated with the "girlboss", a term originally coined by Sophia Amoruso in her 2014 autobiography (Byrne and Giuliani 2025). The girlboss represented a cultural shift in the perception of women leaders and entrepreneurs who aligned with the neoliberal values of individual entrepreneurship, hard work, and self-sufficiency (Byrne and Giuliani

3 Neoliberalism is an economic theory whose influence has spread to permeate public and private life, growing into a social system and ideology (Holborow 2012). Neoliberalism prioritises individual responsibility, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurship (Bennett 2024, Holborow 2012) and is inextricably linked to capitalism (Block, Gray, and Holborow 2012).

2025). Girlboss feminism "laud[s] vague notions of women's 'empowerment' alongside building careers and corporate empires" (Pierce 2022: 204) and was, Byrne and Giuliani (2025: 15) argue, built up as an "inspirational model or feminist heroine". The girlboss's visibility in the media led to her style of neoliberal feminism becoming mainstream and thus the epitome of what the general public understood feminism to involve (Bennett 2024, Byrne and Guiliani 2025). While neoliberal, one-dimensional, girlboss feminism is not the only form of feminism practiced, its hyper-visibility in the media means that it came to dominate mainstream feminist discourse, largely because of its conformity with neoliberal society.

Thus, rather than embodying the antithesis to the dominant masculine, capitalist values, being feminist became about embodying these values.[4] Feminism lost its anti-capitalist teeth and the liberatory potential Marcuse saw in it. However, more recently neoliberal feminism has increasingly been rejected and replaced by a new, hyper-feminine feminism. In the next section, I will situate this alternative feminism within a context of women responding to the devaluation of femininity perpetuated by girlboss feminism.

## Responses to devalued femininity: the fall of the girlboss and the rise of the bimbo

According to Murnen and Byrne (1991: 480), hyper-femininity is the "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role." When I refer to hyper-femininity in this paper, I refer to an adherence to a notion of femininity embodied by the likes of Paris Hilton and Jessica Simpson, and characters such as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (2001), Regina George in *Mean Girls* (2004 and 2024) and Barbie (in the 2023 film as well as the doll and the other animated films), involving stereotypically feminine characteristics such as a love of pink, fashion, and self-beautification.[5]

That which has been deemed feminine has typically been devalued, from domestic and other forms of "women's" work to feminine traits such as sensitivity and feminine interests. The devaluation of the feminine is discussed across feminist philosophy, present in the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and others, including third wave and socialist feminism

4 At least the dominant mode of neoliberal feminism.

5 This is, it should be noted, simply one way in which hyper-femininity can manifest.

(Tong and Botts 2018). Moreover, those feminine qualities, interests, and objects specifically associated with girls and young women have been especially scorned. That which is "girly," hyper-feminine (such as the colour pink, a focus on one's appearance, an interest in fashion and beauty products) is discouraged for anyone who wants to be taken seriously (Francis et. al 2017, Holland and Harpin 2013, Reilly 2024), as are personality traits such as being bubbly, talkative, and uninterested in politics, economics or other "serious" areas (Rosario and Wijaya 2022).

Women and girls can find that they need to reject typically feminine qualities and interests in order to be taken seriously, especially in stereotypically masculine spheres. For example, Francis et. al. (2017: 1103-1104) note that within STEM subjects (they consider physics in particular), the hyperfeminine "girly-girl" is seen as unsuited for pursuing science or engineering. Moreover, they further found that girls within such fields distance themselves from femininity and emphasise their masculine qualities (Francis et. al. 2017: 1105). Holland and Harpin (2015: 306) argue that the "girly-girl" is "often a vilified figure, socially despised, acting as a measurement of what the participants [in their study] were not and did not want to be."

As women have achieved more rights, started to enter the workplace, and found themselves more integrated into the stereotypically masculine spheres of economics and politics, hyper-femininity has thus been seen as something to be avoided if one wants to be considered a productive and active (neoliberal) subject. Instead, there has been an emphasis on modesty, academic intelligence, success in one's career and financial independence as empowering (Rosario and Wijaya 2022). The girlboss excels in her career while (and, the implication is, by) rejecting typically hyper-feminine qualities which may draw attention to her femininity in a masculine professional environment (Holland 2004), and embracing masculine ones, a trend identified as far back as Beauvoir's 1949 work *The Second Sex*. This rejection of femininity to avoid devaluation is always at the same time devaluing those "girly-girls" who have embraced hyper-femininity. Girls and women who adhere to these characteristics and interests are thus taken less seriously, because of their identification with a denigrated femininity.

The girlboss represents the other side of the coin to Marcuse's call for androgynism. Marcuse calls for the introduction of feminine qualities and the sacrifice of masculine ones. The girlboss androgyne, on the other hand, has

sacrificed those feminine qualities which Marcuse believed to be so important for liberation, and taken on more of the masculine qualities that perpetuate a totalitarian and repressive society. But, as mentioned above, the evolution of mainstream feminism does not end with the girlboss, who has seen a fall from grace in recent years (Byrne and Giuliani: 2025). There has especially been pushback against the girlboss narrative on social media (Byrne and Giuliani 2025). In reaction to "a decade of misguided 'girlbosses' in work-ready pant suits" (Knowles and Melo Lopes 2023: 2), there has been a "disavowal [...] of oppressive and elitist forms of feminism" (Pierce 2022: 201) and the emergence of a hyper-feminine feminism, and the rise of the social media "bimbo".

To quote Sandall (2024: 65), the term "bimbo" "is derogatory slang for a conventionally attractive, curvaceous, sexually appealing woman who is perceived as unintelligent," and is "often linked to the 'dumb blonde' trope of highly gullible women" and "typically associated with blonde, white women who wear heavy makeup and revealing clothing." In short, the term has been applied to women who are considered to be "'all looks and no brains'" (Pierce 2022: 203). However, the term bimbo, along with hyper-femininity, has now been reclaimed, reinterpreted, and reinvented to be liberatory, beginning in 2017 with porn star Alicia Amrira's 'Be a Bimbo' movement (Sandall 2024).

Bimbocore[6], as this trend has come to be known, challenges the notion that adherence to a stereotypical hyper-femininity necessarily involves unintelligence (Sandall 2024). Pierce (2022: 204-205) identifies the central tenets of bimbocore to be "self-confidence, inclusivity and kindness, and a left-leaning political ideology," all while "don[ning] stylish, revealing clothing, often in pink," and embracing "hotness". The bimbo thus adopts a "hyperfeminine aesthetic expression" (Pierce 2022: 205).

Bimbocore is explicitly feminist, and a reaction to patriarchal, misogynistic ideals (Pierce 2022, Sandall 2024). While the bimbo does not prioritise academic intelligence, she "remain[s] cognisant of current issues" and is vocal about important causes (Rosario and Wijaya 2022: 55), valuing emotional knowledge (Cortes 2024). The bimbo is also a political figure, "invested in anti-racist, anticapitalist feminist politics" (Pierce 2022: 205, Sandall 2024). Bimbocore is "informed by [...] the failures of neoliberal feminism" and the girlboss (Pierce 2022: 206), in line with its anti-capitalist sentiments. Also common is the

6 Also referred to as BimboTok (Pierce 2022, Sandall 2024) or bimbofication (Rosaria and Wijaya 2022)

discussion and explanation of political and economic topics in terminology that is “for the girls” (Stephens 2024), using slang popular with younger women on social media. Examples of “bimbo” content creators are Nikita Redkar (Instagram and TikTok handle: @nikitadumptruck) and Chrissy Chlapecka (Instagram and TikTok handle: @chrissychlapecka), who also embrace hyper-femininity and bimbocore in general.[7]

In undergoing “bimbofication,” women and girls are adopting a stereotypical hyper-femininity, “but use this femininity as a tool of liberation against patriarchal standards” (Lashbrook 2024). One hyper-feminine content creator, Amira Mohamed (2024), argues “I stand by the fact that there is an inherent sense of feminism in embracing hyper-femininity in a society where feminine things are constantly mocked and regarded as inferior.” Bimbocore, and the adoption of hyper-femininity, emphasises that to ridicule stereotypically feminine things has only succeeded in denigrating women themselves. Bimbocore also involves embracing one’s sexuality and attractiveness, viewing beautification and maintaining one’s looks as a form of self-care (Rosario and Wijaya 2022). This is an attempt at challenging the idea that sexually active and attractive women are nothing more than just that. Dressing provocatively is taken to be a form of self-expression (Knowles and Melo Lopes 2023, Rosario and Wijaya 2022). It is further argued that these women are not dressing for the male gaze but for themselves or other women, and “to critique patriarchal capitalism” (Sandall 2024: 76). Take, for instance, Redkar’s (2023) viral quote, “I don’t dress for men, I dress for little girls who’ve been told at some point in their life that this is not a fashion show, and for old women drunk on their porch.”

Rather than buying into hyper-femininity because she is told she should, the bimbo embraces hyper-femininity precisely because she has been told that she should not (at least if she wants to be taken seriously), as a rebellion against the patriarchal devaluation of femininity. Moreover, by being opiniated, politically active, and critical of patriarchal capitalist society, she does so in a way that is subversive, contradicting the norms of stereotypical hyper-femininity as passive, vacuous, and uncritical.

7 The choice of these content creators in particular is due not only to their large social media followings (Chlapecka has 4.9 million followers on TikTok and 583k followers on Instagram, while Redkar has 912k followers on TikTok and 548k followers on Instagram) , but because Chlapecka is frequently taken to be representative of bimbocore (see, for example, Sandall (2024), Pierce (2022), and Knowles and Melo Lopes (2023)), while Redkar’s content speaks especially to the subversive bent which I, like Pierce, Rosaria and Wijaya, and Sandall, identify in bimbocore.

Popa-Wyatt (2020) argues that derogatory terms, such as slurs, are used by a dominant group as a weapon to exert power over a targeted marginalised group. This weapon can be disarmed, Popa-Wyatt argues, when individuals from the marginalised group use that term to refer to themselves in a non-derogatory way, by reclaiming it. The term loses its oppressive power and, according to Popa-Wyatt, the reclamation of it involves a sense of empowerment for the marginalised individuals. This has been the case with the term "bimbo." However, I argue that the same can be the case when reclaiming an identity or way of being that is identified with a marginalised group and has been devalued in order assert the superiority of the dominant group's way of being. By choosing (through an informed, critical choice) to identify with that marginalised way of being anyway, one is reclaiming it and challenging its devaluation and connotations of inferiority. It is also to challenge the norms that devalue one identity while extolling the superiority of another, rebelling against a system which says that certain ways of being are better than others.

Moreover, Pierce (2022: 208) argues that the bimbo is engaged in a collective act of "disidentificatory performance and ironic cultural critique." Disidentification, according to Pierce, involves marginalised subjects taking on norms of a dominant culture in ways that subvert and re-signify them to be empowering. Bimbocore can be considered to be involved in a process of deconstructing gender through the "over-performance of femininity," drawing on stereotypical notions of femininity to "perform it in ways that reveal its instability and create alternative meanings" (Pierce 2022: 208). Through their adoption of *hyper*-femininity, bimbos parody femininity, an "incorrect femininity" which is almost "threatening" and "which pushes the boundaries of femininity in ways that question the culture which devalues these things" (Pierce 2022: 209). Sandall (2024: 76) echoes this, arguing that in adopting "stereotypically feminine qualities to an extreme" the bimbo reveals "the constructed nature of both the feminine ideal and the bimbo trope itself." Adopting hyper-femininity in this way is a form of subversive feminist praxis, rebelling against misogynistic norms regarding femininity, reclaiming a devalued feminine identity, and subverting stereotypes about said feminine identity, while pushing a feminine empowerment and a critique of patriarchal society. Therefore, I term such an adoption of hyper-femininity *rebellious* hyper-femininity.

Bimbocore involves rebellious hyper-femininity, but rebellious hyper-femininity is not limited to bimbocore. Other "styles" of hyper-femininity are

also prevalent and could be considered cases of rebellious hyper-femininity. For example, there has been the rise of the coquette (Wynne 2024), a popular aesthetic inspired by a "nostalgic view of girlhood" (Lee 2024); ballerina-core, similar to the coquette but particularly inspired by ballet and ballet dancers; and less defined but equally feminine "girly-pop"[8] trends, for instance the flouncy ball gowns that brands such as Selkie specialise in (Fabbrocino 2023) and the "Danish pastel" style of interior design with its bright pastel colours, fun accessories, and softly curved shapes (Pagel 2024). Today, overtly feminist content creators on social media tend to (although not necessarily, and not always) adopt a hyper-feminine aesthetic to some degree, reclaiming femininity as a form of empowerment.

Rebellious hyper-femininity reflects a postfeminist emphasis on sexual liberation (Levy 2005, Melo Lopes 2019), acceptance of conforming to feminine beauty norms, and association of choice with empowerment (Knowles and Melo Lopes 2023, Pierce 2022, Sandall 2024; see also Genz and Brabon 2009). There is thus an element of what is known as choice feminism, which understands "every decision a woman makes as potentially feminist, if given thought and made with a political consciousness," freely choosing who one is and what one does being the most significant element of emancipation (Thwaites 2017: 57).[9] After all, the bimbo actively chooses to adopt the bimbo identity, taking this action to be empowering (Sandall 2024). Rebellious hyper-femininity, as a social media trend, also occurs in the context of increasing social media use to engage in feminist political discourse. Feminists can now share their views with mass audiences with the tap of an icon and engage with other feminists internationally and instantly. This has a certain conscientising impact, as young girls are also exposed to these views, and many find themselves introduced to feminism through social media.

The adoption of rebellious hyper-femininity as a form of female empowerment occurs in a context in which women have become disillusioned with leaning in and working within the capitalist, patriarchal system, and in which women no longer want to be the formidable, neoliberal girlboss (Pierce

8 An internet slang term referring to someone or something which is stereotypically feminine, bubbly, or cute.

9 For example, Knowles and Melo-Lopes (2023) consider the relationship between the bimbo's choice of dress and choice feminism. However, a consideration of the relationship between choice feminism and bimbofication is beyond what can be discussed here, although it does point to interesting areas of future analysis.

2022). There are echoes of Power's feminist who loves chocolate, shoes, and her vibrator, and the "conspicuous consumption" of beauty and fashion products (Sandall 2024, 71), but this is not a one-dimensional feminism, because of its anticapitalist and antipatriarchal focus (Pierce 2022, Sandall 2024). While Power argues that feminism has become about buying products to be truly liberated, rebellious hyper-femininity does not identify empowerment in commodities[10] but rather in reclaiming a devalued hyper-feminine identity and using one's hyper-femininity to publicise their criticism of the status quo, rather than leaning-in and using the status quo to their advantage.

Rebellious hyper-femininity has thus become a mode of subversive feminist praxis, largely performed on social media but also adopted as a way of being offline. However, I argue its intimate relationship to social media curtails its subversive efforts. I now discuss some themes in Marcuse's work *One Dimensional Man,* and in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry. These themes will serve as the framework for the critique of rebellious hyper-femininity conducted in this paper. I will then identify ways in which rebellious hyper-femininity is problematic and finally turn to the ultimate argument made in this paper, which is that rebellious hyper-femininity's reliance on social media undermines its radical potential.

## The culture industry and one dimensionality

Adorno and Horkheimer's (2016, 2011) analysis of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is strikingly relevant to an analysis of culture in the 2020s. This applies also to an analysis of (rebellious) hyper-femininity as a social media trend.

Adorno and Horkheimer (2011: 95) argue that "[c]ulture today is infecting everything with sameness." They refer specifically to the cultural media of their time – films and novels all had the same plot, music all sounded the same, and magazines shared the same basic formulae. There is "a constant reproduction of the same thing" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 134). Everything has become mechanised in order to be mass produced, sorted to appeal to the standardised categories people themselves are sorted into (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 121, 123). This effects not only cultural products – the consumer is shaped by what they consume, such that "[t]he whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 126).

10 Sandall (2024) recognises a tension between, for instance, Chlapecka's anti-capitalist beliefs and a lifestyle characterised by overconsumption – this tension will be picked up again later in this paper.

Everyone consumes the same thing, according to their assigned category of preference, and begins to share similar aspirations and interests. “Pseudo individuality”, standardised and approved “originality”, is “rife” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 154) and individuals are stripped of all that makes them individuals, until “personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 167). Even those who seem to be original are either subsumed by the culture industry, repackaged to be excitingly novel but still completely subject to the uniformity of the laws that govern culture, or they are “rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 133). Conformity is necessary for survival, and anything which does not conform is eradicated (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 132-133). The culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer (2016: 148) argue, refutes any objections “made against it just as well” as those objections made “against the world which it impartially duplicates,” and so “[t]he only choice is to either join in or to be left behind.”

Those lucky few who end up on screen are intentionally normal enough that the audience can identify with them, but the message that it is almost impossible that the audience could ever be them is still clear (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 144-145). Moreover, the actors and actresses which the public admire and aspire towards are not truly the unique individuals they appear to be. They too are subject to conformity and standardisation (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 154-155).

Adorno and Horkheimer (2016: 159) further note that “[t]he inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker’s word [...] absolute.” The same tendency can be seen on television and social media. When a word is mentioned repeatedly on the radio (or television, or social media), this word is soon “blind[ly] and rapidly” repeated, such that people repeat and use words that they do not understand, because they “trigger off conditioned reflexes” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 165-166). Finally, Adorno and Horkheimer (2016: 163) note that in magazines (and now, arguably, other areas of media too), advertising cannot be distinguished from the actual content of the magazine.

Turning to Marcuse (1968: 11), he notes that “[c]ontemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change,” and that this is largely achieved through the way in which “[t]echnology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion” (Marcuse 1968: 13). Technology has made life so easy, so comfortable, that there is no longer any motivation to doubt or question it or society, and so “a comfortable,

smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails" (Marcuse 1968: 19). This reliance on technology within advanced industrial society is exacerbated through the creation of false needs and an emphasis on consumerism. Individuals are encouraged to believe that they cannot live without consumer products, and that it is these products which make the individual who they are, which will fulfill them. Thus, individuals are encouraged to consume in accordance with what is advertised to them (Marcuse 1968: 22). Individuals start to identify with the products, to be indoctrinated and manipulated by them into consumerist attitudes, and go along with the unfreedom that allows the purchase of these products (Marcuse 1968: 26). Individuals develop a false consciousness, a "Happy Consciousness", believing themselves to be as happy as they could be, in the best possible situation, and so to conform is the most rational course of action (Marcuse 1968: 77).

The media facilitates much of the advertising of false needs and makes the acquisition of these products seem all too possible and necessary (Marcuse 1968: 24). It is not the media that causes the need to assimilate and gratify through consumption– individuals "enter this stage as preconditioned receptacles" (Marcuse 1968: 24). Nevertheless, the impact of the media is significant, and when individuals attempt to describe a political situation, Marcuse argues that they simply parrot back what their mass media of choice has told them. The "technological controls" of society "appear to be the very embodiment of Reason", and so Marcuse (1968: 25), like Adorno and Horkheimer, argues that resistance to the status quo is deemed irrational, "neurotic and impotent". And so, society becomes one-dimensional, wherein any thoughts, ideas, or actions which do not affirm that status quo are "either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe" (Marcuse 1968: 27). Thought becomes shallow, orientated around consumption and comfort, unable to distinguish between what society is and what it ought to be.

There are echoes of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis in Marcuse's, particularly in a shared recognition that individuals conform to a general norm, influenced by the media, and that anything or anybody which is contrary to this conformity is rendered impotent, subsumed by the totalising rationality of society. We can see how Bennett's and Power's neoliberal feminism is one-dimensional, leaning into consumerism and conforming to an oppressive, repressive society, affirming what is rather than working towards a new, more liberatory society.

Rebellious hyper-femininity, at least at its root, does not affirm the status quo. Instead, it questions mainstream norms and values through the reclamation and reinterpretation of a traditionally hyper-feminine identity in a way that critiques oppressive structures of society while challenging the devaluation of femininity. But although this is the intention at the source, it is not, as I will argue in the next section, the intention behind the adoption of this hyper-feminine identity as a trend at large. Ultimately, the intention behind rebellious hyper-femininity is lost the more it is reproduced, and it has become as one-dimensional and standardised as any cultural product that Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse analyse.

## The problem with rebellious hyper-femininity: social media and the neutralisation of the radical

There are problems with the idea of rebellious hyper-femininity itself, as a mode of praxis. It is at risk of essentialising femininity by promoting a specific way of being feminine and a tendency to imply that this is *the* way that most girls and women experience femininity. It also plays into harmful stereotypes, as, for example, bimbos on social media tend to be thin, stereotypically attractive, and promote beauty standards associated with whiteness, although there is an active effort to avoid this and to be inclusive (Pierce 2022, Sandall 2024). Its post- or choice-feminist tendencies are another cause for concern, as both post and choice feminism have been subject to critique (Knowles and Melo Lopes, Sandall 2024). But the focus of this paper is not the problems with rebellious hyper-femininity itself, but rather the way in which social media undermines it as a form of subversive praxis. This will be illustrated through an analysis of rebellious hyper-femininity and social media, drawing upon Adorno and Horkheimer, and Marcuse's analyses.

Social media exhibits many of the issues Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse identify in the culture industry and the media of advanced industrial society. Social media, as another, newer manifestation of the culture industry, also stamps everything with sameness. Trends are replicated, aesthetics imitated, sounds and songs used across thousands of videos, such that one can spend hours scrolling through videos of people doing the same dance to the same song, the same action to the same sound. There is once again "a constant reproduction of the same thing" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016: 134). Conforming to this replication and imitation is how one gets more views, more followers, and is more successful.

Anything which does not conform to what is popular wallows in obscurity or, for the lucky few, might become popular enough to become a new trend, which can then also be replicated and imitated until the creator is forgotten. The popular social media sound, dance, or action is alienated from their creator and reified into a trend which no longer belongs to anyone, used by and influencing everyone. As Adorno and Horkheimer identified in radio, popular words and phrases are repeatedly uncritically and unironically, without understanding of what they mean or what the implications of these terms might be. For example, consider the popular use of the phrase "very demure, very mindful" (Lebron 2024) as applied to anything from a make-up look to remembering to take one's contraceptive pill. The idea that anyone can become famous is made stronger by the concept of social media fame. The influencers on your screen really are just like you, even more so than the actors and actresses Adorno and Horkheimer discuss, and anyone can try to be an influencer. But this is barely a more realistic ambition than appearing on the silver screen was 80 years ago.

As Marcuse noted, anything new, radical or contrary to the norm is contained, either through subsuming it into the norm by repackaging it as something non-radical, or through ensuring that it is never garners enough attention to be effective. Social media encourages the consumerist attitude and infatuation with false needs which Marcuse identifies in one-dimensional society, through advertising and influencing. "Haul" videos, in which influencers buy and display large quantities of clothes or beauty products, captioned "run, don't walk to [insert brand]," or "Get Ready with Me" videos involving multiple products, are popular, encouraging viewers to buy products in order to achieve the perfectly curated lifestyle the influencers present.

The use of hashtags and labels conveniently sorts the stream of almost identical videos into categories so that one can endlessly watch nothing but #mondaymotivation or #grwm (get ready with me) videos. One is assigned certain categories of videos to watch, based on your demographic and what you have shown interest in. The same applies to products and advertising. Everything is done for the social media user, everything they like (or are supposed to like) served up on their For You Page instantly and effortlessly, without the need to think or question. Social media use is made comfortable, easy, standardised, rational, uncritical, and ultimately one-dimensional.

I argue that the problem with rebellious hyper-femininity today is precisely that it is a mode of praxis largely performed on social media. One embraces hyper-femininity (i.e. through bimbocore) and seeks to embody this through

one's appearance and lifestyle. While the trend of hyper-femininity starts with popular content creators embracing hyper-femininity as a means of reclaiming a devalued feminine identity, and, through this identity, promoting feminist, anti-capitalist and other critical views of the status quo, this is not necessarily how it continues. Social media is very good at removing context. TikTok videos and Instagram reels, for example, are too short to provide much background information, and algorithms channel videos into your For You Page based off a number of factors, such that these videos often appear without the motivation behind adopting (a rebellious) hyper-femininity. As more people adopt a trend or aesthetic, it becomes simpler, more obviously replicable, until any context or nuance is lost. This, I argue, has been the case with rebellious hyper-femininity - it has become ossified into a one-dimensional (uncritical) and performative trend.

Bimbocore, and other expressions of hyper-femininity, are immediately based on looking and living a certain way. There is a focus on dressing in a hyper-feminine, sometimes provocative, and fashionable way, and looking a certain way, typically conventionally attractive. Implicit (and often explicit) in this is the aesthetic labour and product consumption required to achieve this (Sandall 2024). Hyper-femininity on social media also involves using certain catchy slang words and terminology, and an intentional (and feigned) vacuousness. This is an easily replicable identity. Of course, what is missing is the disidentificatory social critique and radical political discourse discussed above, the rebellion.

The more rebellious hyper-femininity gains traction on social media, the more it becomes reduced to what is easily replicable. Everything subversive about it gets left behind, becoming more about performing the latest popular social media aesthetic, and less about doing so as a radical reclamation of a devalued feminine identity. Even when there is the recognition that hyper-femininity comes with being a feminist, the actual intentions behind what started as rebellious hyper-femininity are lost, and it is adopted uncritically, such that the feminism that accompanies this trend is equally uncritical and more akin to the neoliberal, purchasable, one-dimensional feminism that Power and Bennett discuss.

As noted above, rebellious hyper-femininity has not escaped consumerism (Sandall 2024). While, as I argued earlier in this paper, rebellious hyper-femininity does not identify empowerment in commodities but rather in adopting hyper-femininity, it still involves looking and living a certain way.

A trend very much focused on a visual effect, to be replicable, it necessarily involves the consumption of products. Moreover, the content creators who popularised hyper-femininity enforce the consumerism inherent in it by advertising certain products and promoting lifestyles characterised by consumption (Sandall 2024), in order to make content creation a viable form of self-employment. These content creators toe a fine line between social critique and buying into that which they criticise, a tension Sandall (2024) recognises between anticapitalist sentiments and consumerist habits.

Thus, the fetishised false needs of feminism which Power identified remain, albeit updated. While Power's neoliberal feminist was empowered through the consumption of handbags and shoes, today's hyper-feminine feminist associates being empowered with a certain easily replicable lifestyle, to be achieved through the purchasing of certain products. One is now a feminist because one embraces their femininity, wears pink, and finds value in self-beautification. Although the focus is no longer on one's purchasing power, purchasing products is an implicit part of achieving a rebelliously hyper-feminine identity. Bennett argued that feminism had become about purchasing a feminist lifestyle. Likewise, in adopting a hyper-feminine identity through the purchasing of a hyper-feminine lifestyle, one is purchasing a feminist lifestyle because of the link between a hyper-feminine identity and the holding of feminist view and opinions. Because this hyper-femininity was popularised by those with feminist intentions and views, the identity has feminist connotations. Whether the person purchasing this hyper-feminine feminist lifestyle holds those feminist views and has given any critical thought to their situation is irrelevant, purchasing the lifestyle is sufficient.

Moreover, as rebellious hyper-femininity becomes reduced to an easily recognisable, replicable aesthetic, it becomes static, such that every adoption leads to a performance of the same thing. Even as it splits into sub-trends, like bimbo- or ballerina-core, these are, to draw from Adorno and Horkheimer, standardised categories to pick from. Every hyper-feminine feminist is just one almost identical iteration of a sub-trend of hyper-femininity, involving similar tropes, themes and motifs, repeating the same buzzy slang terms ("I'm just a girl", "girl math", etc.). Sameness and pseudo-individuality prevail, and, to (mis) quote Adorno and Horkheimer (2016: 167), hyper-femininity scarcely signifies anything more than a pink wardrobe and freedom to like pretty things.

While the aim of this paper is not to critique neoliberalism, rather drawing on the concept of neoliberal feminism to contextualise the girlboss, that rebellious hyper-femininity does not find itself untouched by neoliberalism should be noted. Sandall (2024) points to arguments that feminist, influencer activism (such as that of Chlapecka and Redkar) is unlikely to remain uninfluenced by neoliberal values, and Bennett's analysis of neoliberal feminism includes many similarities with what I argue has become of rebellious hyper-femininity. This can be seen in the way that the aesthetic of hyper-femininity comes to be valued over a rebelliously hyper-feminine activism (Bennett 2024). Moreover, by reducing rebellious hyper-femininity to a look which can be purchased, the more radical roots of rebellious hyper-femininity are "stripped away", rendering it less effective in being subversive (Bennett 2024: 51).

Rebellious hyper-femininity therefore slips back into one-dimensionality. As argued above, one-dimensional society is very good at absorbing and pacifying anything that contradicts it. Such has happened to rebellious femininity. While social media facilitated its rise, social media also ensured that any radical intention is quashed the more it gains traction. What began as a subversive way of thinking and being is co-opted, popularised and pacified. Consumerism becomes an implicit aspect of hyper-femininity, and, in an echo of Power, products remain central to feminine empowerment. The subversive intention is lost as hyper-femininity is reduced to a replicable trend, more about performing an easily recognisable style of femininity than adopting said femininity as a radical reclamation of a devalued identity.

## Rebellious hyper-femininity: dead in the water?

Rebellious hyper-femininity is rendered impotent by the nature of social media, its primary source of publicity and dissemination. This begs the question, does this problem with rebellious hyper-femininity mean that, as a mode of subversive praxis, it is dead in the water? Do the original radical intentions retain any impact despite social media's neutralisation of these intentions the more the identity is spread?

When someone adopts a rebelliously hyper-feminine identity to actually denounce a devaluation of femininity and partake in social critique, the hyper-femininity adopted is not one-dimensional and the radical intentions not rendered null and void. However, an individual, or even a few individuals, who retain very real radical intentions behind their adoption of hyper-femininity do

not constitute a movement significant enough to shift perspectives, particularly when their rebellious adoption and even their subversive content appears in social media users "For You Page" alongside a stream of non-critical adoptions of a one-dimensional hyper-femininity which, from that social media users perspective, are identical and interchangeable. Thus, as anything more than rebellion at an individual level, on a larger scale, social media, in popularising and spreading the concept of rebellious hyper-femininity, has disarmed it. The radical critique is lost, and the threat to the patriarchal norm contained.

How this can be reversed (if it can be), or avoided, is beyond the scope of this paper, which seeks simply to identify the problem with rebellious hyper-femininity as a social media-based mode of subversive praxis. Ultimately, this problem is due to the nature of social media, as that which pacifies, standardises, and conforms.[11] This, I argue, is a feature inherent to social media at this stage in its development, and insofar as social media retains this feature and rebellious hyper-femininity relies on social media to spread its message, rebellious hyper-femininity will be pacified and reduced to one-dimensionality.

## Conclusion

Marcuse (1974) believed that feminism and the embrace of the feminine would liberate society from the oppression of capitalism and patriarchy. However, within less than half a century, feminism and femininity has lost the radical and liberatory potential that Marcuse identified. Instead, feminism became synonymous with a neoliberal consumerist individualism (Bennett 2024, Power 2009), about rejecting femininity and leaning-into masculinity and capitalism. Femininity was either commodified or rejected due to its being devalued. The reclamation of hyper-feminine identities, such as the bimbo, in rejection of the neoliberal girlboss identity and its masculine, anti-feminine bent, seemed to indicate that Marcuse's belief in feminism and femininity's radical potential was not unfounded. Here is an embracing of femininity which rejects the valorisation of the masculine, has feminist intentions, critiques gender norms and capitalist-patriarchal society, is inclusive, and has radical, subversive intentions (Pierce 2022).

11 Further exploration of social media's capacity to standardise, pacify, and conform deserves further research, especially in the field of critical theory.

And yet, rebellious hyper-femininity has been rendered as one-dimensional as the feminism Power and Beck identify. Reduced to a range of categorised social media aesthetics, identifiable by their visual markers, hyper-femininity has become an easily reproducible trend, an identity one can adopt simply by looking a certain way and purchasing the products which allow you to do so. The radical intentions behind rebellious hyper-femininity are subsumed by a mass of identical reproductions, captured through conveniently short videos or striking photographs, none of which convey the radical intentions behind the adoption of a hyper-feminine identity. Rebellious hyper-femininity, as a mode of subversive praxis conducted largely via social media, becomes subject to a Marcusean one-dimensionality and the features of the culture industry identified by Adorno and Horkheimer. Standardised, categorised, twisted to promote the consumption of hyper-feminine products, hyper-femininity loses its radical potential and is reduced to an uncritically adopted, unquestioning trend. Thus, rebellious hyper-femininity too does not answer Marcuse's call for the embrace and universalisation of feminine qualities as the only way to liberate us from capitalist, patriarchal society. While there is the recognition that feminine qualities and characteristics have been devalued compared to masculine ones, and of the importance of these qualities and characteristics, this recognition is not one made by the majority of those who adopt hyper-femininity. Moreover, hyper-femininity has not foregone ties to consumerism, and has descended back into one-dimensionality, with no intention of questioning or working against oppressive, totalitarian society. Social media, through exhibiting characteristics of the culture industry and mechanisms of advanced industrial society, has rendered hyper-femininity, as a mode of subversive praxis, passive and impotent.

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