From 'girlboss' to #stayathomegirlfriend: The romanticisation of domestic labour on TikTok

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Abstract
Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, romanticised depictions of domestic work have proliferated on social media sites. In particular, the increasingly popular TikTok platform is replete with images of domestic labour centred on repetitive routines, catharsis and feminine aesthetics. The #stayathomegirlfriend trend exemplifies this phenomenon. Rooted in tradwife ideology, which advocates a 'return' to a male breadwinner model of domesticity, the #stayathomegirlfriend aesthetic espouses a romantic ideal of feminine domesticity as an escape from the 'double shift' and represents a backlash to popular feminism's failed injunction to 'lean in'. Under this trend, domestic labour is romanticised as an aesthetically pleasing self-care practice for a generation who have watched their mothers suffer through the grind of the neoliberal labour market, and who are themselves incited to become a 'girlboss' to survive it. Through a thematic analysis of popular videos under this hashtag trend, this article reveals that stay-at-home girlfriends unwittingly mimic the popular feminist doctrine of 'empowerment' through their depictions of domestic self-care and channel 'girlboss' culture through their work as social media influencers. Thus, despite purporting to reject popular feminism's celebration of the 'girlboss' and repurpose tradwife ideology for Generation Z, stay-at-home girlfriends accomplish neither: subjugating themselves within the 'double shift' and denying the value of their own labour on both fronts.

Keywords
Domestic labour, popular feminism, #stayathomegirlfriend, TikTok, tradwives

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Introduction: a 'crisis of care' and the turn to domesticity

Domestic labour comprises the tasks involved in running a household, including shopping, budgeting, cleaning and cooking. It is also often intertwined with the work of caring for children or other dependents. Such work forms part of a wider network of social reproduction labour, which comprises 'the activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally' (Laslett and Brenner, 1989: 383). These are the 'activities' that enable the worker to go to work, that reproduce the workforce and therefore facilitate the functioning of capitalist society. The vast majority of this work has historically been carried out by women, and, since the industrial period, has been ideologically separated from the masculine-coded sphere of the paid labour market (Fraser, 2017). While this gendered division of labour has long been contentious and is a well-established locus of feminist struggle, recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have brought renewed attention to domestic labour, as home-working policies and rising living costs have placed greater attention on the time, cost and labour involved in running a household and caring for those within it. Such events have also highlighted the fact that social reproduction labour is explicitly classed and racialised as well as gendered. Reports (The UK Women's Budget Group, 2020) reveal that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women were disproportionately affected by increased demands on paid care labour during the Covid-19 pandemic, making up a significant proportion of the health and social care workforce. Regarding unpaid work during this time, research (Warren et al., 2021) has found that working-class women were left bearing the brunt of increased domestic and care workloads at home, being less likely to benefit from flexible working policies and furlough schemes than middle-class women or men. Moreover, recent reports (Scottish Women's Budget Group and The Poverty Alliance, 2022) on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis reveal that women in low-paid work, asylum-seeking women and women with caring responsibilities have been among the worst affected by escalating living costs in the United Kingdom. As a result of these events, coupled with long-term trends such as the dismantling of welfare provision by neoliberal governments, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom are facing an ongoing 'crisis of care' (Fraser, 2016, 2017), in which the unpaid female labour that sustains capitalist states is consistently undermined and undervalued, even while it grows ever more visible and vital.

Representations of domestic labour within the media bear little resemblance to the reality of this crisis. The #stayathomegirlfriend trend on TikTok sits within a milieu of romanticised domesticity that is becoming ever more pervasive within mainstream and social media. Increasingly celebratory portrayals of thrifty homemaking and the figure of the crafty housewife on UK television reflect an entrenched austerity culture, which has resurged since the Covid-19 pandemic (Forster, 2008; Martin, 2021). Equally, US film and television has seen a rise in narratives of female domestic 'retreatism' (Negra, 2009). Such narratives have been entangled with discourses of domesticity in the popular press and social media. As Boyce Kay (2020) has observed, the early lockdown phases of the pandemic saw the politically sanctioned idealisation of the home as a space of safety and retreat, with celebrities taking to social media from their vast living rooms to extol the

virtues of 'staying at home'. Presently, social media continues to be at the epicentre of this celebratory turn to domesticity: from the immaculate homes of 'cleanfluencers' like Mrs Hinch (Casey and Littler, 2022), to Khloe Kardashian's vast, uniform pantry shelves (Pendergrast, 2023) to cathartic CleanTok content, the Internet is replete with images of an idealised and highly aestheticised domestic life. On TikTok, the stars of such content are young women who epitomise conventional Western beauty standards, and who film themselves carrying out such domestic tasks as methodically decanting their shopping into glass containers, organising bathroom cabinets, or stacking identical Tupperware in expansive kitchens. Each action is carried out methodically, with slow precision, often to a backdrop of ambient music. These domestic routines exude ease, presented as therapeutic and aesthetically pleasing for both the creator and the viewer. As Casey and Littler (2022; Casey et al., 2023) have suggested, the increasing popularity of such content in recent years might reflect a desire to assert order and control over one's personal space amid contemporary economic and political upheaval. Nonetheless, such idealised domestic content belies the demanding work of running a household that is the reality for women living at the sharp end of persistent austerity and rising living costs. The idealisation of the domestic space as safe retreat, particularly with relation to the lockdown phases of the pandemic, also obscures the potential of the home to be a space of danger and conflict (Boyce Kay, 2020). The mediated romanticisation of domesticity, therefore, reflects and perpetuates the disavowal of women's social reproduction labour and obscures the turbulent reality of domestic life under the 'crisis of care'.

The #stayathomegirlfriend hashtag on TikTok epitomises this genre of romanticised domestic content. A subgenre of the tradwife aesthetic, the trend depicts female creators who have chosen not to work and instead dedicate their days to carrying out the domestic labour involved in running a household and caring for its inhabitants. Videos under the stay-at-home girlfriend trend's most prolific hashtags (#stayathomegirlfriend and #sahgf) depict scenes of domestic bliss, where tasks such as cleaning and tidying, cooking, shopping and doing laundry are effortlessly interspersed with stereotypically feminine-coded self-care and leisure activities that complete an image of traditional domestic femininity which is celebrated under tradwife ideology. This romanticisation of domesticity symbolises an attempted rejection of the 'double shift' (Hochschild and Machung, 2012) and the mainstream feminisms which have perpetuated it. By rejecting paid work and embracing domestic labour, the stay-at-home girlfriend purports a supposedly liberating ideal of a slower life where women might put their time and energy into caring for themselves and their homes instead of 'leaning in' to their careers. In this article, I argue that this attempted rebellion ultimately fails. My analysis of TikTok videos under the #stayathomegirlfriend trend reveals that the romanticisation of domesticity mirrors popular feminist incitements for women to be 'empowered' through self-work (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and ultimately serves to exacerbate the societal disavowal of social reproduction labour under neoliberal capitalism.

Girlbosses, tradwives and stay-at-home girlfriends

Unpaid domestic labour has historically been both a locus of subjugation and a site of resistance for feminists, from the Wages for Housework Movement in the 1970s

(Federici, 2020) to Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory (Bhattacharyya, 2017), anti-work scholarship (Weeks, 2011) and feminist activism, including the recent International Women's Strikes (2016–2018) (Arruzza, 2017). However, these resistance movements have existed alongside more dominant, mainstream feminist sensibilities which have not had the same demands. Recent scholarship (Eisenstein, 2015; Gill, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2017, 2018; McRobbie, 2009, 2015, 2020; Orgad, 2019; Orgad and Gill, 2022; Rottenberg, 2018, 2019) has traced the erosion of feminism as an oppositional movement since the 1990s, in place of a series of new, depoliticised forms which have served to perpetuate unequal gendered labour relations rather than oppose them. The most recent iteration of these sensibilities, and the most relevant to this research, is popular feminism. Stemming from inequality within corporate industries and widely capitalised upon by businesses brandishing shiny celebrity ambassadors, popular feminism is highly visible, highly marketable and takes social media as its primary platform (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Its simple demand of 'more women at the table' fails to critique the fundamentally patriarchal structures of the workplace, elides intersectional oppressions and completely abandons the struggle against unpaid labour exploitation (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 10). The ubiquitous figure of the 'girlboss' epitomises the popular feminist ideal: she is able to 'lean in' to the fundamentally unequal labour market, advancing her professional career while simultaneously maintaining an impeccably well-managed home life, and a healthy and positive (feminine) body image (Banet-Weiser, 2018). While its focus is on corporate attainment, middle-class stay-at-home mothers are incorporated into the 'girlboss' ideal through the interrelated entrepreneurial figures of the 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013), the 'mompreneur' (Orgad, 2019; Wilson and Yochim, 2017) and the 'mommy blogger' (Taylor, 2016), all of whom embrace the gig economy and the proliferation of media technologies to balance multiple 'side-hustles' alongside full-time parenting. Rather than collectively challenging the gendered labour relations that subjugate women to the 'double shift' of paid work outside the home and a mounting load of unpaid domestic labour within it, popular feminism sees the unequal structure of labour as an inevitability to be managed individually: women are incited to practise personal self-care and self-love in order to become 'empowered' to 'hustle' for a seat at the table, regardless of the systemic intersectional inequalities that render this goal unattainable for many, and at the expense of collective feminist struggle (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

This article is concerned with the place of the #stayathomegirlfriend trend within a growing backlash to popular feminism and the figure of the 'girlboss'. At the centre of this backlash is the tradwife community, which presents its lifestyle as an attractive alternative for women. An abbreviation of 'traditional wife', a tradwife advocates for a 'return' to a heteronormative male breadwinner model of domesticity, in which the husband goes out to work and the wife dedicates her own working day to homemaking and caring for her husband and children (Cooksey, 2021). Having emerged around 2016 and initially grown its fanbase on YouTube (Cooksey, 2021), tradwife content is now prolific across social media platforms, not least TikTok. Domestic labour is central to tradwife content, with the home positioned as 'the ultimate arena in which [they] can express their competence as women' (Zahay, 2022: 175), and feminine aesthetics are pivotal to the tradwife image, with some influencers even choosing to dress in the style of a 1950s housewife. Crucially, tradwives view their domestic femininity as a radical departure

from feminism, which they see as having failed women, and they have a particularly strong appeal within Generation Z.[1] As Cooksey (2021) states, 'Gen Z girls have watched their mothers lean into unequal workplaces only to earn less money in a capitalist system that also devalues their domestic workload'. The appeal of tradwifeism therefore lies in its promise of retreat from the failures of popular feminism and recovery from the damage caused by 'hustle' culture. As Lewis (2023) writes in their compelling essay on tradwives: 'Only a fool would underestimate the sexiness for women of being delivered from the double shift'. Within the tradwife community, domesticity is presented as an attractive alternative to the 'double shift', and, under the mounting 'crisis of care', its appeal is growing (Fraser, 2015, 2017).

The #stayathomegirlfriend trend has its roots in tradwife ideology, but there are marked differences which are crucial to this article. Principally, tradwifeism has been associated with the rise of the far right and is popular within white supremacist circles, particularly in the United States (Cooksey, 2021). However, the algorithmic nature of social media platforms such as TikTok have enabled its problematic roots to be concealed, as tradwife ideology is transformed, or 'memeified', in 'fun, musical video bites, easily digested [. . .] in 30 seconds or less' (Cooksey, 2021). The feminine domestic aesthetics that epitomise tradwife content and share similarities with other popular 'cleanfluencer' content have obscured the racist, misogynistic, alt-right tenets of the ideology, enabling tradwifeism to spread its appeal to the wider public. This is the context within which the #stayathomegirlfriend trend emerged; a 'memeified' version of tradwifeism which went viral on TikTok in the summer of 2022 and has remained popular since. Within this trend, domestic femininity is detached from its sinister origins in regressive tradwife ideology and has morphed to appeal to wider, and younger, circles of women. In so doing, the representation of domestic labour within this trend takes on a new form. For original tradwives, domestic labour is a woman's 'natural' work, which she should choose to 'lean into' in the absence of paid employment. For stay-at-home girlfriends, however, as this article explains, domestic labour is presented as the antithesis of work altogether. Furthermore, while they embrace domesticity as a lifestyle, the patriarchal ideology of submission to their male partner is notably absent from stay-at-home girlfriend discourse. Stay-at-home girlfriends are not married, do not commonly have children, and, crucially, many of them still take on paid work in some form – most commonly as a social media content creator. Under the #stayathomegirlfriend trend, as this article argues, domestic labour is thus decoupled from its status as gendered work and morphed into an ostensibly liberating self-care regime for the TikTok generation. In doing so, it represents a unique subdivision of tradwifeism which tries (and fails) to articulate its own distinct rejection of popular feminism and the 'double shift'.

TikTok and domestic space

Media scholarship has been duly attentive to the ways in which social media sites represent gendered identities. As the most downloaded app in recent years, surpassed by TikTok in 2021 (Fiallos et al., 2021), Instagram has received particular attention from social media scholars (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Drenten et al., 2020; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Gill, 2021), particularly surrounding topics such as the

commodification of feminism, influencer culture and issues surrounding body image and beauty standards. Domestic labour has not been a prominent feature of social media scholarship so far, with Casey and Littler's (2022) aforementioned work on Mrs Hinch and the rise of the Instagram 'cleanfluencer' being a notable exception. However, the growing sector of media scholarship concerned with the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic – a time in which media use 'dramatically increased' (Gill, 2021: 13) – has emphasised the close connection between social media and domestic space. As Hermanova (2022: 184, 181) argues, lockdown restrictions instigated the 'politicisation of the domestic', as 'the most basic everyday acts and decisions, such as where to shop for food, how to organise playdates for children, [and] if and where to go on holiday' became political discussions in which social media influencers were invited to weigh in. Within this context, TikTok experienced exponential growth, as a platform whose videos are largely filmed within the home, often focusing on the 'mundane' routines of everyday domestic life (Kennedy, 2020). As such, my use of TikTok to examine representations of domestic labour within this article reflects its unique relationship to domestic space within the shifting landscape of social media.

TikTok scholarship itself is still a relatively young field of study, and to my knowledge there is as yet no academic scholarship which explicitly deals with representations of domestic labour on the platform. Given that teenagers account for a high proportion of TikTok users (32.5%) (Doyle, 2023), TikTok scholarship has largely focused on youth culture and politics, covering topics from intergenerational education, communication and conflict (Pomerantz, 2022; Pomerantz and Field, 2022; Zeng and Abidin, 2021) to issues of privacy, control and the protection of children (De Leyn et al., 2022). There has also been significant interest in TikTok-based activism (Aldama, 2022; Martinez, 2022; Skinner, 2022; Zhao and Abidin, 2023), with the platform being increasingly mobilised as a space for collectivisation around social justice issues, particularly within LGBTQ+ communities and among anti-racist campaigners.

Even while domestic labour remains all but absent from TikTok research, the significance of the platform's unique relationship with the domestic space has been a recurring, underlying theme throughout the scholarship so far: Han and Kuipers' (2021) study provided important insights into Chinese women's experiences of raising children while working from home during lockdown. The domestic space also has a presence in Pomerantz's (2022: 69–70) collaborative work on TikTok with her daughter, in which she writes that 'TikTok generates feminism close to home – at home – where parents and children may be sitting at the breakfast table trying to make sense of what does not make sense'. Furthermore, Sweeney-Romero's (2022: 113) study on wellness TikTok trends emphasises the importance of domesticity to TikTok lifestyle influencers, for whom the home is 'the site that makes tangible [the creator's] systematic approach to perfection'. While domesticity often features in TikTok scholarship, the domestic labour conducted within the home has not been the focus of this research. This article seeks to address this gap by investigating representations of domestic labour within the popular #stayathome-girlfriend TikTok trend. In doing so, it builds on scholarship which has highlighted TikTok's inextricable relationship with the domestic space and offers novel insights into wider discussions surrounding domestic work and its relationships with feminism and media.

Investigating the #stayathomegirlfriend trend

After conducting preliminary research surrounding popular TikTok trends dealing with themes of domesticity and domestic labour, I chose the #stayathomegirlfriend trend for the focus of this article as it bisects both idealised domestic content within 'cleanfluencer' and CleanTok communities, and the romanticisation of domesticity within tradwifeism. The data collection for this project was undertaken by myself and a sixth-form student, Megan Kaur, as part of her participation in the Nuffield Research Placement Scheme, in which I designed and supervised a research project for her based around representations of domestic labour on TikTok. Between 26 July 2023 and 28 July 2023, we searched the hashtags #stayathomegirlfriend and #sahgf on the TikTok app and selected the 'Top' category, which showed us the most relevant videos related to these hashtags. We watched the top (80) videos under these hashtags taking our cue from other recent social media scholarship (Sweeney-Romero, 2022; Zeng and Abidin, 2021; Zhao and Abidin, 2023) employing the use of hashtag searching to examine popular trends on TikTok. As we watched, we excluded content which was satirising or offering critical commentary on the trend in order to focus our sample on creators who were intentionally representing the stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle. We then employed purposive sampling to focus our analysis, taking inspiration from Zhao and Abidin's (2023) research into the 'Fox-Eye' trend on TikTok. We focused in on videos which included visual and/or verbal representations of domestic work, namely cooking, cleaning, shopping, home decorating, home organising and general tidying. This left us with a final data set of 30 TikTok videos under the #stayathomegirlfriend and #sahgf hashtags. This small data set facilitated a detailed analysis of each video, while being varied enough to draw out themes within the data set and facilitate comparison within the sample.

Once the data set was finalised, we independently watched all 30 videos again and made notes of recurring themes, features and narratives, which we then discussed. Following this, Megan went on to produce a report and a poster detailing her findings from the project and her own interpretation of the data. As a result of Megan's assistance in the research collection, and her valuable contribution to the discussion of recurring themes within the trend, what follows in this article is my own thematic analysis of the data set, which I have collated into four main areas of examination. Following the ethical recommendations for social media research set out by Ahmed et al. (2017), in recognising that the intended publicity of social media content is ambiguous and consent from creators has not been obtained, I have chosen to exclude all identifiable information from the data set, including names, TikTok handles, direct quotes (of two words or more) and images. This has enabled me to focus on the thematic patterns and recurring narratives of domestic labour presented under this hashtag, rather than the personal perspectives and experiences of individual creators. This style of analysis also reflects the unique form of notoriety that distinguishes TikTok from other social media platforms, in which viral trends and memes are prioritised over curated online identities and personal brands (Abidin, 2020).

The analysis that follows is divided into sections detailing the four themes I observed in the data set. First, I unpack the 'clean' aesthetic of #stayathomegirlfriend content and its promotion of an unrealistic, highly curated image of domestic life. In the next two

sections, I explain how this aesthetic is used to repackage domestic labour as an 'empowering' alternative to work and a self-care regime. The final theme deals with the stay-at-home girlfriend's embroilment within the 'hustle' of the online creator economy and her consequential failure to extract herself from 'girlboss' culture.

The 'clean' aesthetic

The aesthetic representation of domesticity within the #stayathomegirlfriend trend reflects a popular brand of influencer content which is defined by simple, neutral-toned home décor and fashion, sometimes called the 'clean girl' or 'that girl' (Sweeney-Romero, 2022) aesthetic. In addition to 'beige' (Manavis, 2023) aesthetics, common features of this content are regimented, repetitive daily routines with an emphasis on health and fitness, presented through 'day in the life' vlog content. Its icons (celebrity or otherwise) are almost exclusively 'thin, white girls and women' (Sweeney-Romero, 2022: 113). This 'clean girl' aesthetic is extremely prominent throughout the #stayathomegirlfriend data set. Almost all videos follow the popular 'day in the life' vlog format, within which the stay-at-home girlfriend films her daily routine. The first few seconds of these videos vary very little from one vlog to the next, commonly beginning with the stay-at-home girlfriend waking up in a neutral-toned bedroom, making her bed, opening the blinds, walking leisurely into a vast, immaculate, white kitchen and making a morning drink, such as a coffee or smoothie. The creator then goes about her morning, usually beginning with one or a combination of the following activities: going to a workout class, carrying out a skin care regime, making a healthy breakfast or journalling. In line with the 'clean girl' aesthetic, a significant proportion of stay-at-home girlfriend creators in the sample reflect the stereotype of 'thin, white girls and women', including the most prevalent creator within the sample, who also has over 500,000 followers. However, there is a little variation from this stereotype among smaller accounts. Three videos in the data set (all by the same creator) feature the hashtags #blackgirlluxury and #blackgirllifestyle as well as #stayathomegirlfriend and adhere to the 'clean girl' aesthetic with their vlog style content and repetitive daily routines. Indeed, there is a growing number of Black women creators within the tradwife movement in the United States, some of whom describe the lifestyle as a way to reclaim historically denied feminine domestic roles and seek liberation from overwork through the institution of traditional marriage (Burton, 2022). Given these motivations, combined with tradwifeism's rootedness in white supremacy, the presence of Black creators within the 'clean girl' aesthetic and the #stayathomegirlfriend community reflects a complex racialised dynamic within this community which requires further investigation. This in turn could reveal further insights into the racial dynamics at play within popular feminist discourse and discontent. While such an investigation is beyond the scope of this article, its necessity reflects a broader need to interrogate and unpick dominant narratives of whiteness within these sectors of feminist media studies (Dosekun, 2023).

For all creators who follow the 'clean girl' lifestyle, domestic labour is a central tenet of the daily regimen and thus of the wider #stayathomegirlfriend aesthetic. Filming for the 'day in the life' vlog format is focalised on the domestic space where, following their identical morning routines, the stay-at-home girlfriends go about the work of looking

after their households and their partners. Under the #stayathomegirlfriend trend, the 'clean girl' aesthetics translate into 'clean' representations of domestic labour. The most common depictions of domestic work within the sample are cooking, tidying and laundry, each carefully edited so that the mess, untidiness or uncleanliness of these processes is very rarely shown on camera. Cooking is shown in snippets, represented by the brief stirring of a pot or the artistic arrangement of food on a plate. The work of tidying takes place in rooms which appear already immaculate: the stay-at-home-girlfriend wipes down surfaces, plumps cushions, puts out candles and arranges flowers. Tidying is thus more akin to decorating and creating ambience than the organisation of misplaced or discarded possessions. The process of doing laundry is most commonly represented by the stay-at-home girlfriend carefully and leisurely folding uniform piles of clean, neutralcoloured clothing. To return to Casey and Littler's (2022: 500) work on Mrs Hinch as an example, the careful use of editing in this 'day in the life' vlog content 'presents us with a kind of magical housework femininity rather than showing us the labour of [. . .] "dirty work"'. Indeed, any 'dirty' or arduous aspects of domestic work are concealed from view: we rarely see the dirty clothes that become the clean piles of perfectly folded laundry in the video. Likewise, unwashed crockery, used cooking equipment and leftover food are almost never shown on camera. The editing techniques that create the impression of a 'magical housework femininity' present a 'clean', highly curated and idealised image of domestic labour, where such work is reduced to an aesthetic rather than a series of laborious and often tedious tasks which require time and effort. Furthermore, with the exception of one video in the data set, which shows the stay-at-home-girlfriend looking after a friend's baby for an afternoon, there are no instances of care work within the data set, and none of the creators appear to have children. Thus, not only does the domestic labour shown within this trend espouse an unrealistic, romanticised ideal of domestic work; it also represents a narrow sample of social reproduction labour which does not reflect the breadth of tasks carried out on a daily basis by women, particularly parents and women with caring responsibilities. Such limited, aestheticised representations of domestic labour belie the demanding and time-consuming reality of housework and thus reflect the wider societal disavowal of this work under the ongoing 'crisis of care'.

Furthermore, this separation of 'clean' aesthetics from 'dirty' domestic labour and care work, enabled by the 'thin, white' figure of the stay-at-home girlfriend, points to wider issues surrounding privilege and the societal division of social reproduction labour. The historical connection between the exploitation of women's domestic labour and racialised capitalism is well-documented (Duffy, 2007; Glenn, 2010; hooks, 2000), and the Covid-19 pandemic further highlighted the ongoing outsourcing of 'dirty work' such as domestic cleaning along racialised and classed lines (Orgad and Higgins, 2022). The implication in the careful editing of these videos is that the stay-at-home girlfriend is undertaking the less aesthetic household tasks herself behind the scenes and simply presenting the finished product. Certainly, if these creators do employ domestic help, there is no mention of it within this sample. Nevertheless, the obscuring of 'dirty work' by the 'thin, white' stay-at-home girlfriend in the service of an aestheticised, 'clean' domesticity reflects a culturally entrenched division of domestic labour into 'dirty' invisible housework tasks and feminine homemaking, enabled by the classed and racialised organisation of social reproduction.

Domestic labour as 'empowering'

As I have already explained, the romanticisation of domesticity under tradwife culture purports to offer women an escape from the oppressive 'double shift' perpetuated by the alliance of neoliberal capitalism and popular feminism. Domesticity is represented by the #stayathomegirlfriend trend as the opposite of productivity – an antithesis to the 'hustle' culture – and the stay-at-home girlfriend herself as the antithesis of the 'girl-boss'. However, the 'clean' aesthetic, with its repetitive, methodical routines, sparse landscapes, and the slow, deliberate fulfilment of domestic tasks also espouses an uneventful, repetitive 'lobotomised vision of life' (Manavis, 2023), devoid of the strain of the workplace, but also seemingly devoid of variation, spontaneity and fun. Indeed, in addition to the #stayathomegirlfriend hashtag, other hashtags used by the creators in the sample include #softlife, #slowlife and #slowlifestyle, which characterise this domestic monotony. Some creators even explicitly describe their daily lives as 'boring'. The adjective 'soft' calls up stereotypical feminine traits, reflecting the root of this trend in tradwife ideology. The message being communicated by this lifestyle is that women should embrace the 'soft', slow and calm aspects of femininity and should not exert themselves, but instead fill their days with the aesthetically pleasing, repeated rhythms of domestic labour. The use of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Responsse (ASMR) techniques is popular in the data set, reflecting the characteristics of CleanTok content (Pendergrast, 2023), where sensory stimuli add to the atmosphere of relaxing monotony. Combined with monotone voiceovers, relaxing background music and mood lighting, such techniques create the impression of a 'soft', serene and feminine domestic space, curated and presided over by the feminine girlfriend. In doing so, the #stayathomegirlfriend aligns domesticity with rest and self-preservation, detaching domestic labour from its status as gendered work. This aspirational doctrine to live a 'soft' domestic life serves to deny the value of domestic work as work and thus perpetuates the societal devaluation of social reproduction labour.

Furthermore, this 'lobotimised' way of living, with the 'clean' aestheticisation of domestic labour at its heart, fails in its rejection of the 'girlboss' lifestyle by feeding into the popular feminist ideal of individualised 'empowerment' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Within the domestic lifestyle, the perspective and needs of the stay-at-home girlfriend are privileged over all others, including those of the 'boyfriend'. The home is the domain of the girlfriend, reflecting the separate spheres ideology that joins the #stayathomegirlfriend trend and the tradwife aesthetic at the root, but it also puts the needs of the girlfriend in centre stage. Unlike the tradwife, who emphasises the importance of servitude and obedience to her male partner, the stay-at-home girlfriend does not appear to carry out domestic work in service of her household, family or relationship, but for the benefit of herself alone. Despite choosing to define themselves in relation to their boyfriends, placing their status as 'girlfriends' at the centre of their identity, the absence of the boyfriend is notable in every video within the data set. While the presence of the 'boyfriend' is often implied, mainly through the use of the pronoun 'our' to describe domestic tasks ('our laundry', 'our dinner'), the boyfriends remain largely off-scene in videos, save for the occasional disembodied hand receiving a coffee or a retreating figure leaving the house for work. The #stayathomegirlfriend lifestyle, then,

is represented as one which fundamentally prioritises the girlfriend, and the 'slow life' is presented as a way for women to be 'empowered' to focus on their needs in a society which consistently ignores them. While purporting to reject popular feminism through the prioritisation of rest over workplace 'hustle', stay-at-home girlfriends thus unwittingly parrot the language of individualised self-investment which is key to the popular feminist sensibility.

Crucially, the notion of 'empowerment' through domesticity appears attainable to the stay-at-home girlfriend, just as 'empowerment' through 'hustling' does to the popular feminist 'girlboss', because of their shared privilege to choose. As Lewis (2023) powerfully articulates, while tradwifeism and popular feminism appear to be ideologically opposed, the capability to 'imag[ine] the gender division of labor as a matter of simple choice' compels a depoliticised feminist to 'respect' tradwifeism, the two poles propping each other up under the false discourse of free choice. As I expand upon in the subsequent section, the aspirational stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle requires considerable material capital that is only available to an extremely narrow sector of society. Equally, the entrepreneurial focus of popular feminism promotes a narrow ideal of professional success and dismisses intersectional inequalities. For both the 'girlboss' and the stay-at-home girlfriend, then, the attainment of individual 'empowerment' relies upon having the privilege to ignore systemic classed and racialised oppression, and the material capability to curate one's lifestyle according to a specific aspirational ideal. Where 'girlbosses' lean into the 'double shift', and tradwives and stay-at-home girlfriends renounce it, both lifestyles belie the systemic inequalities that create this relation of labour, as only a narrow demographic of women are 'empowered' to choose.

Investing in self-care

The #stayathomegirlfriend trend's representation of housework as an 'empowering' antidote to work facilitates the framing of domestic labour as a form of self-care. The stay-at-home girlfriends' presentation of monotonous domestic tasks as soothing and restorative reflects Casey et al.'s (2023) observation that cleanfluencer content 'recast[s]' housework as 'a form of self-care' or 'therapy' to cope with the turmoil of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, the language of caring for oneself is common within the data set, expressed variously as getting enough sleep, staying hydrated, going to the gym, cooking healthy meals and taking care of one's skin. One creator cites the benefits of the stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle for her mental health 'journey'. The most common way that this self-care manifests itself within the stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle, however, is the care taken over one's physical appearance. All 'day in the life' videos within the data set show the stay-at-home-girlfriend attending to her appearance in some way. Some creators film themselves getting beauty treatments at salons, such as manicures, blowouts and facials, whereas others carry out elaborate skincare rituals in the bathroom at home, using a vast array of luxury beauty products. These beauty regimes are seamlessly interspersed within the domestic labour routines of the stay-at-home girlfriends, facilitating the curation of the domestic space as one of traditional 'soft' femininity and, crucially, further distancing domestic labour from its status as gendered work. Rather than rejecting the popular feminist injunction to work, this conflation of self-care with the maintenance of conventional

feminine beauty perfectly mirrors popular feminism's ideal of 'empowered', self-confident beauty (Banet-Weiser, 2017), which is cultivated through the media-driven consumption of beauty products. This in turn reflects the wider transformation of self-care from its roots in Black feminism as an 'act of political warfare' (Lorde, 1988: 96) to a regime of feminised consumption under the mainstream feminisms of the 21st century (Wiens and MacDonald, 2021). Thus, beauty consumption is presented as part of the therapeutic regime of self-care that marks the stay-at-home girlfriend's departure from work. Creators within the #stayathomegirlfriend trend therefore reflect the popular feminist agenda of 'empowerment' through feminised consumption and the perpetuation of narrow beauty standards.

Furthermore, the presentation of feminised consumption as self-care emphasises the unrealistic, aspirational nature of the stay-at-home girlfriend aesthetic, in that it necessitates considerable spending power. In some videos within the set, it is made explicit that the money the stay-at-home girlfriends require to curate their feminine domestic aesthetic comes from the income of the boyfriend. One creator even shows her audience the wad of cash that her partner has left her to spend while he is at work. Even where this arrangement is not made explicit, the assumption within stay-at-home girlfriend content is that, in line with the tradwife ideology from which it stems, the lifestyle of the female partner is funded by the paid work undertaken by the male breadwinner boyfriend. In terms of domestic labour, this spending power is presented through an emphasis on shopping for the household. As with other forms of domestic labour, food shopping within the data set is heavily aestheticised and is often interspersed with, or replaced by, shopping for home décor (usually feminine-coded, such as flowers, candles and ornaments) or clothes, jewellery and makeup for the girlfriend. Some creators film 'hauls' of their purchases, presenting each new item to the camera for the TikTok viewer to admire and aspire to own themselves. The imagery and language of consumerism creates the impression that the stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle is one of extreme wealth and luxury. The emphasis on acquiring and possessing the accoutrements of a luxurious lifestyle reflects the centrality of feminised consumerism within the social media industry (Duffy, 2016), where female creators' success relies on the constant buying and advertising of branded goods. It also reflects the centrality of female purchasing power within the self-care industry, as previously outlined. The luxurious stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle further serves to expose romanticised domesticity as an unrealistic representation of domestic labour, bearing little resemblance to the financial strain and time poverty that epitomises the 'double shift' for the working-class women bearing the brunt of the care crisis.

Wages for housework?

The ultimate irony of the retreat from work under the #stayathomegirlfriend trend, and the embracing of domestic labour as a form of self-care, is that the stay-at-home girlfriend *is* working. In addition to domestic labour (though, as I have established, this is denied as labour), stay-at-home girlfriends must perform the work required to produce their social media content. The #stayathomegirlfriend trend comprises videos which are carefully planned and curated, filmed and edited, often with voiceovers recorded separately and layered over the top, and almost always with the addition of music. Lighting,

camera angles and set staging all must be considered. This is the time-consuming, skilled labour that must be carried out in order to create the illusion of the 'magical' housework and leisurely domesticity that define this trend. Much of the content within the data set is produced by TikTok-verified creators who monetise their platform and might more accurately be described as 'content creators' or 'influencers' as opposed to stay-at-home girlfriends. For these stay-at-home girlfriends, 'PR unboxing' sessions often feature as part of their daily routines, where they open and show viewers products sent to them by companies seeking exposure on their platforms. Despite professing to eschew paid work in favour of a 'soft' life, then, the #stayathomegirlfriend trend reveals that these women are in fact working for pay on a regular basis, precarious though this work may be (Duffy, 2010, 2015). As such, the #stayathomegirlfriend reveals that these women, far from rejecting 'girlboss' culture and the compulsion to 'hustle' one's way to independence, are well-entrenched within the female-dominated content creator economy.

As with domestic labour, however, the work of content creation is hidden from view within the #stayathomegirlfriend trend, in service of the narrative of a 'soft', 'clean' lifestyle unhindered by work. The labour of content creation, and its renumeration, is only mentioned explicitly by one video in the sample, in which the creator states that she has a job in social media and does not rely financially on her partner. One other creator identifies herself as a 'content creator' in her TikTok bio, while still referring to herself as a stay-at-home girlfriend in her videos. For the vast majority of stay-at-home girlfriend creators in the data set, the work of being a content creator goes unmentioned, playing second fiddle to the unpaid labour of running a household and attending to the needs of the boyfriend. We are never told in the voiceovers of #stayathomegirlfriend 'day in the life' vlogs that creating and editing content is part of their daily routine, though evidently it must be. The impression being created is that content creation, just like domestic work, is not labour at all, but part of the leisurely, luxurious lifestyle of the stay-at-home girlfriend. The elision of such labour is typical of work within the creative industries (McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016), where women are required to develop an entrepreneurial mindset in which their 'passion' for work dissolves the boundaries between work and leisure. Such 'passionate work' (McRobbie, 2016) may be wedged in alongside other jobs or education commitments, forming 'side hustles' (Allen and Finn, 2023) with the aim of enhancing one's value in an increasingly uncertain labour market. In the world of social media specifically, despite this reality of precarity and overwork, the work of content creation is often romanticised or 'mythologize[d] [. . .] through discourses of fun, authentic self-expression, and creative freedom' (Duffy, 2015, 2016; Duffy and Wissinger, 2017: 4657). Such narratives obscure the persistent labour involved in achieving success within a precarious industry. Ultimately, then, stay-at-home girlfriends inadvertently imitate 'girlboss' culture by monetising their domestic labour as entrepreneurs within the social media creator economy, while simultaneously denying this work through their romanticisation of domesticity as a lifestyle of self-care and feminine 'empowerment'. In addition to carrying out this creative labour, they are also taking on the lion's share of the domestic labour load, as per the male breadwinner model. The result is that, while acknowledging neither their domestic nor their creative labour, being neither a 'girlboss' nor a tradwife, stay-at-home girlfriends ultimately do the work of both.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explained how the #stayathomegirlfriend trend modifies the reactionary ideology of tradwife culture for a disillusioned Generation Z, painting feminine domesticity as a liberating alternative to the grind of the neoliberal labour market. Within this lifestyle, which embraces therapeutic monotony over productivity and professional 'hustle', domestic labour is transformed from unpaid gendered work into a carefully curated and aesthetically pleasing self-care regime. Far from liberating women, however, I have argued that this trend shares similarities with the 'girlboss' ideal in exposing the inherent privilege within the narrative of female 'choice'. Furthermore, the stay-at-home girlfriend lifestyle simply subjects its proponents to the 'double shift' in a new form, as creators balance their unpaid domestic work alongside their creative labour as social media influencers. Even their 'empowering' self-care regimes reveal themselves as privileged feminised consumption in the service of narrow beauty ideals. As such, rather than providing therapeutic respite for a generation burned by the failures of mainstream feminism and tired of the injunction to 'girlboss' its way out of them, the #stayathomegirlfriend ideal unwittingly parrots the ideals of popular feminism and perpetuates the 'hustle' culture it seeks to reject. Furthermore, and most importantly, their denial of labour on all fronts, in the service of romanticised domesticity, obscures and undermines the harsh reality of domestic labour as it exists within the current crisis moment. For the majority of women without the means to choose a 'soft' life, the 'dirty work' of household labour remains arduous, time-consuming, unaesthetic and often juggled alongside paid work. This in turn feeds into the societal disavowal of social reproduction labour that historical feminist movements fought to overturn.

While this article has focused on the #stayathomegirlfriend TikTok trend and the wider romanticisation of domesticity on social media to articulate a backlash to popular feminism, there are multiple angles to this cultural rejection of mainstream feminism that must be examined. For example, future work must consider to what extent and in what ways phenomena such as the rise of alt-right antifeminist groups such as 'femcels' (Boyce Kay, 2021) fit into this turn away from popular feminism. Similarly, further research must be conducted into the reclamation of 'bimbo' culture (Elliott, 2022; Santiago Cortés, 2020) and the revival of hyper-feminine aesthetics, epitomised by the hugely successful Barbie film (Fletcher, 2023), and the extent to which this, too, reflects a rejection of 'girlboss' culture. The backlash to popular feminism is thus multifaceted and raises important questions for feminist researchers as to the future of the movement. The romanticisation of domestic labour as revealed through the #stayathomegirlfriend trend emphasises the centrality of gendered work to these debates, and the role played by new social media platforms such as TikTok in their cultural dissemination, but it constitutes just one branch of this turn. In addition, while I chose to omit satirical responses, parodies and critiques of the stay-at-home girlfriend trend from the sample for the purposes of this article, the extent to which the romanticisation of domesticity is being challenged by social media users on TikTok, as well as in the wider social media sphere, would be a useful avenue of further enquiry. In this sense, the stay-at-home girlfriend trend and the wider romanticisation of domesticity can be understood as one key facet of a complex landscape of mediated feminist and antifeminist discourse, in which TikTok emerges as a key player.

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Data availability statement

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Note

1. Generation Z refers to the group of people born from 1995, 1996 or 1997 (the start date is contested) to 2010 (Seemiller and Grace, 2019).

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