

Algorithmic Feminism: TikTok's Role in Shaping Young Women's Perceptions of Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok shapes young women's views on gender equality. By focusing on the interplay between algorithmic curation and identity formation, the study investigates the dual role of TikTok as both a space for empowerment and a platform that reinforces traditional gender norms. Drawing on feminist media theory, postfeminism, digital feminism, and algorithmic bias, the research is grounded in a qualitative design through semi-structured interviews with ten women aged 20–25. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: Algorithmic Curation and the Personalization of Feminist and Anti-Feminist Content; Feminist Identification and Ambivalence; Anti-Feminist Content and Internalized Misogyny; and Body Image, Beauty Norms, and the Performance of Femininity. Findings suggest that TikTok's algorithm creates highly personalized experiences, often reinforcing existing beliefs while occasionally exposing users to contradicting viewpoints. Participants expressed both appreciation and concern regarding trends like “girl dinner” or “women in male fields,” reflecting the complexity of digital feminism. Furthermore, the study highlights how algorithmic exposure to romanticized traditional roles or misogynistic figures like Andrew Tate contributes to internalized contradictions among users. Ultimately, this thesis reveals that TikTok is a contested space where progressive and regressive narratives coexist, shaping young women's understanding of feminism and gender roles in nuanced and sometimes conflicting ways.

Keywords: Digital Narratives, TikTok, Feminism, Gender Equality, Algorithmic Curation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Topic of research

The rise of social media has transformed how gender is understood and communicated, reshaping the norms and expectations surrounding it (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 8). TikTok is a video-sharing platform that emerged rapidly and has become one of the leading social media apps among young people since the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhu, 2023, p.1). As an integral part of users' daily lives, these platforms encourage active participation, shifting individuals from passive consumers to engaged producers of gendered content (Dolan et al., 2019, p.3). The content on TikTok ranges from entertaining to constructive, including dances, vlogs, and more nuanced discussions on social issues. Importantly, it also influences how gender is perceived and discussed, shaping public attitudes towards femininity, womanhood, and broader gender roles through repeated visual and linguistic cues.

For example, the phrase 'girl's girl' has emerged as a call for solidarity among women, emphasizing the importance of supporting and uplifting each other. This sense of female online unity is particularly important in a society where patriarchal structures remain deeply embedded and women are often conditioned to view one another as rivals (Berry, 2023). While TikTok features trends and content that empower women, it also displays material that reinforces gender stereotypes, creating a complex ecosystem where feminist and anti-feminist narratives coexist and compete. Trends such as "soft girl aesthetic" emphasize traditionally feminine traits, suggesting that to be a woman is to be gentle, delicate, and submissive. This aesthetic promotes a lifestyle centered around "cute", "girly" behavior (Gul, 2024). Similarly, viral phrases, like 'girl dinner', which refers to minimal or nutritionally lacking meals, and 'girl math', used to justify impulsive or impractical spending (Roy, 2023), might appear playful. However, they also risk trivializing women's behavior and reinforcing reductive gender stereotypes. In this study, feminist TikTok is defined as content that does not diminish the female experience or convey an underlying misogynistic implication. While these trends may seem to celebrate girlhood or aspects of the female experience, they can inadvertently uphold patriarchal ideals. Thus, analyzing the intersection between empowering and regressive narratives on TikTok seeks to uncover how digital platforms contribute to the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

The intersection between social media and feminist discourse has highly evolved and increased over the past years through the evolution of technology and new social media

platforms, but also through the shifts in sociological ideologies (Harnois, 2012, p.1). Thus, the evolution of feminist activism and social media platforms enabled the global phenomenon of digital activism and feminism. The digitalization of feminism began to emerge through internet forums and blogs around 2009, enabling text-based activism and fostering online debates on issues such as women's rights and gender inequality (Novoselova & Jenson, 2018, p.1). Academic studies highlight how these platforms helped democratize feminist discourse, for instance, Keller (2012) argues that early blogs like *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, and *Feministe* provided marginalized women a voice to express their feelings of exclusion (Keller, 2012, p.9). Digital feminism is revolutionary in its ability to transcend geographical borders and reach a global audience with internet access (Keller, 2012, p.15).

However, following the era of blogs and forums, the 2010s saw the rise of social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, where hashtags became powerful tools for activism. These tools enabled movements like #MeToo (2017) and #TimesUp (2018), which exemplifies the impact of digital feminism as these campaigns not only amplified the voices of survivors and victims of sexual harassment and assault but also sparked widespread public discourse. (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 239). The #MeToo movement, in particular, was a watershed moment as it drove significant institutional shifts, especially in the workplace, leading to increased accountability, policy changes, and a reevaluation of power dynamics (Murphy, 2019, p. 63).

TikTok's emergence in the 2020s marked another paradigm shift: its AI-driven "For You Page" (FYP) algorithm prioritizes hyper-personalized, emotionally charged content, accelerating the spread of feminist and anti-feminist narratives alike (Zhu, 2023, p. 12). Nguyen (2022, p. 88) argues that users are directed into ideological echo chambers that amplify either feminist or anti-feminist content. This duality risks normalizing regressive norms as "entertainment" while fragmenting feminist solidarity, a phenomenon understudied in TikTok's context. Additionally, TikTok's hyper-visual, short-sized content prioritizes emotional resonance over critical reflection, potentially reshaping how young women internalize gender politics (Nguyen, 2022, p.88). By interrogating these dynamics, this study bridges gaps in feminist media theory and algorithmic governance literature, offering insights into AI's role in contemporary gender discourse.

New media, like TikTok, operate at a much faster pace compared to traditional media, both in terms of accessibility and the spread of content, which is why new media is considered much more influential (Zain, 2014, p. 9). Unlike its predecessors, TikTok's short-form video format and addictive design, tailored to Gen Z's media consumption habits, have

redefined feminist discourse, blending activism with entertainment while amplifying polarization (Qin et al., 2022, p. 3). This structure allows complex gender-related issues to be distilled into quick, engaging, and emotionally charged content. Making it more accessible but also more liable to be oversimplified or misinterpreted. As a result, TikTok not only democratizes feminist expression but also amplifies polarization by rewarding controversial or extreme takes with visibility and engagement (Qin et al., 2022, p. 3). TikTok also includes content that has a real purpose and can have a real impact on its audience. Especially since its users are younger and newer generations, the naivety of individuals can be challenged and influenced. Ultimately, TikTok becomes ground for both: raising awareness and breeding misinformation, highlighting the platform's duality in shaping feminist perspectives of a new generation.

Moreover, movements like #MeToo exemplifies how digital platforms can unify isolated personal accounts into powerful collective activism, forging an online feminist solidarity that bridged global divides (Keller, 2019, p. 5). These spaces empowered marginalized voices, particularly queer communities and women of color, to confront mainstream feminist discourses historically centered around white, middle-class ideals. However, early digital feminism faced significant barriers: dial-up internet restricted accessibility, and platform moderation policies frequently censored critical conversations (Caldeira et. al., 2024, p. 76).

From the early days of social media, it has served as a powerful tool for advancing gender equality and fostering more inclusive spaces for women all around the world. However, the very influence that makes these platforms effective for activism also makes them vulnerable to reinforcing harmful narratives. As seen on TikTok, content can simultaneously promote feminist ideas and challenge patriarchal norms, while also perpetuating stereotypes and anti-feminist rhetoric (Yin & Abdullah, 2024). Thus, demonstrating the platform's complex and often contradictory role in shaping young women's perception of gender equality.

1. 2. Societal relevance

Because of social media, women have a platform, thus power to give a voice to individuals and discuss gender related issues that seek attention (Kumari, 2020, p.1). Through such media and global exposure, equal rights for women are being discussed and advocated. Nevertheless, since social media is argued to be a tool of social control (Megarry, 2020,

p.26), there is relevance in studying how the coexistence of feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok can shape young women's views on gender equality. The importance of this research is essential to understand how new technologies and platforms such as TikTok perpetuate or challenge narratives related to feminism. Even though social media allows platforms to share thoughts and has been integrated into society as well as becoming a part of people's daily lives (Boethius et al., 2022, p.1). The media is usually a double-edged sword where conflicting points of view coexist, causing a clashing environment for its users and victims. Mostly, social media platforms allow freedom of speech, and people tend to spread hate or hurtful messages as it is easier to do behind a screen (Zhang & Kizilcec, 2024, p. 3). Thus, victims can have difficulty seeing unsupportive messages and content regarding their combat.

While social media platforms like TikTok democratize feminist discourse, their algorithmic architectures often amplify both empowerment and regressive backlash, creating a fragmented digital landscape. For instance, TikTok's (FYP) algorithm, prioritizes engagement over ethical considerations, equally promotes feminist hashtags like #WomenSupportingWomen and anti-feminist trends like #NotAllMen, fostering ideological polarization (Baumann et al., 2025, p. 4). This duality reflects what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms the "popular feminism–popular misogyny" paradox, where platforms profit from both progressive movements and patriarchal backlash (p. 1-2).

Studies show that exposure to conflicting narratives, such as feminist critiques of systemic sexism alongside anti-feminist memes trivializing gender inequality, can confuse young women's perceptions of agency, normalizing internalized misogyny as "entertainment" (Keller, 2019, p.4). TikTok's moderation biases exacerbate this tension: feminist content discussing sexual violence or reproductive rights is disproportionately flagged or shadow-banned under vague community guidelines, while regressive trends like 'Tradwife' aesthetics thrive due to their viral appeal (Zhu, 2023). In brief, 'Tradwife' or 'traditional wife' defines a woman who practices traditional gender roles. (Proctor, 2022, p. 8).

Meanwhile, influencers like Florence Given, who built her platform on feminist ideas, declares that she has "fallen out with modern feminism because it is too woke" (Khan, 2024). She believes that these days, feminism is overly focused on political correctness, to the point where it stifles open conversations. On Fearné Cotton's podcast episode "Get Comfortable with People not Liking You!" Given argues that a movement that is based on inclusivity has become exclusive by creating rigid fences on who is "allowed" to speak or be a feminist. In her opinion, feminism nowadays is more focused on calling people out and criticizing them,

rather than emphasizing empathy and education. Thus, illustrating how platform algorithms amplify extreme viewpoints, shaping users' political identities through repeated exposure (Pomerantz & Field, 2022, p.8). Hence, this contradictory ecosystem emphasizes the importance of examining TikTok as a contested space where feminist progress and patriarchal resistance meet, with major implications for gender equity and political and ideological formation of young users. Understanding this duality is essential in order to navigate and understand how Tiktok influences feminism and gender roles.

1.3. Academic relevance

Feminism in social media has been widely studied on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and even Twitter. However, TikTok, as a very recent platform, lacks research. Compared to other social media platforms, TikTok is highly addictive and influential, particularly among younger individuals, who are the platform's main target audience (Qin et al., 2022, p.2). TikTok's algorithm involves AI technology that tailors content according to users' interests, creating personalized content exposure (Zhu, 2023, p.1). This contrast makes TikTok a powerful tool for shaping public discourse, including feminist narratives. Therefore, by examining feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok, this study addresses the gaps in how social media algorithms shape gender narratives and user engagement.

While existing studies such as Qin et al. (2022) explore TikTok's role in facilitating feminist expression and polarization, and Zhu (2023) analyzes how content moderation biases affect gender-related content, a thorough comparative analyses that compare feminist and anti-feminist narratives next to each other remain limited. Although research by Pomerantz & Field (2022) highlights how algorithmic repetition shapes political identities of the younger users, it lacks detailed focus on feminist versus anti-feminist dynamics.

This study aims to address the TikTok algorithm's role in shaping and representing gender discourses and will reflect on the role of such platforms when it comes to shaping audience perceptions of feminist discourse. Hence, raising the following question: "*How does engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok shape young women's views on gender equality?*". Through this question, the research will contribute to a better understanding of the impact that conflicting gender narratives and digital algorithms have on young women. Ultimately, this research aims to gain insight into how social media, particularly, TikTok, not only reflects but actively shapes contemporary understandings of gender equality in the digital age.

1.4. Chapter outline

This thesis is structured to systematically investigate how feminist and anti-feminist narratives on TikTok shape young women's perceptions of gender equality, with a focus on algorithmic influence and platform-specific dynamics. Thus, the thesis includes a total of 5 chapters. Chapter 1 presented the topic through this in-depth introduction; Chapter 2 will include the Theoretical Framework, which will provide a comprehensive understanding of the concepts relevant to the study. This will help establish a foundation to analyze digital feminism and platform governance. Drawing on feminist media theory and algorithmic bias frameworks it discusses how social media platforms like TikTok mediate gender discourses. Key themes include the commodification of feminism, the role of algorithms in amplifying polarization, and the effects of exposure to conflicting narratives. Moreover, Chapter 3 will be dedicated to the methodology and research design of the thesis, which will discuss the method employed to conduct this study. In this case, the method will be based on a qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews with 10 young women (aged between 20-25) to assess how algorithmic exposure influences their views on gender equality. Furthermore, Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the findings of the interviews by presenting the empirical results, highlighting the key themes. Lastly, the thesis's last Chapter will be the discussion and conclusion, and will also discuss the limitations of the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study will discuss six key concepts related to feminist, media, and social theories in order to explore the influence of TikTok in shaping feminist and anti-feminist perspectives. It will also assess the platform's role in shaping young women's views on gender equality. To establish a foundational understanding, the terms feminism and anti-feminism will first be defined to ensure a clear understanding of such theories as the central themes of the research. Furthermore, postfeminism and digital feminism are important to acknowledge as they reflect on feminist ideologies and will enable the exploration of how they apply to a media platform such as TikTok. These theoretical perspectives will help contextualize how feminist ideologies are expressed, adapted, or diluted on social media. Moreover, concepts such as algorithmic bias, agenda-setting theory, and social constructivism are crucial to understanding the impact of media content on its audience. Together, these theoretical perspectives will provide a nuanced lens through which the interplay between digital media and contemporary feminism can be understood.

2.1. *Feminism and anti-feminism*

Given the presence of both feminist and anti-feminist narratives on TikTok, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of these concepts, which will aid in distinguishing and analyzing the content that includes such ideologies.

2.1.1. *Feminism*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2019), feminism is defined as the belief that women and men should be treated equally and have the same rights, power, and opportunities. Moreover, feminism is a concept highly discussed by Bell Hooks, who made the following statement: "*Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression*" (2000, p.8). Hooks emphasizes that sexist thoughts and behaviors, whether they come from women or men, adults or children, are always problematic. The key is recognizing that sexism is a systematic, institutionalized issue that requires awareness and understanding (2000, p.8). Understanding feminism, therefore, requires a fundamental understanding of sexism.

Sexism, as defined by scholars such as Marilyn Frye (1983, p. 18) refers to any action that "creates, constitutes, promotes, or exploits" (p. 18) any irrelevant or inappropriate distinction between the two sexes. It is not merely a set of individual prejudices, rather a

representation of an oppressive system embedded in societal frameworks and cultural practices. In the context of social media platforms like TikTok, sexism can be subtle and manifest through algorithmic biases, content moderation disparities – unequal enforcement of content moderation policies across different regions or demographics, and the normalization of gendered stereotypes disguised as “free speech” (Jago, 2022, p.3).

TikTok, therefore, becomes a fertile ground for both: challenging and reinforcing sexist ideologies. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, the current media landscape often cultivates what is called “popular feminism” (p. 1), which offers a marketable and palatable version of feminism made for mainstream audiences. This form of feminism exists alongside openly misogynistic content, creating a complex ideological environment for users who engage and create media within TikTok. While popular feminism might be criticized for its commodification, it also offers accessible entry points into feminist discourse, especially for audiences who might be less familiar with academic or activist spaces.

In order to better understand how feminism narratives evolve and coexist on TikTok, it is important to situate them within the broader historical context of feminist thought. Feminism has never been a static ideology, over time it has shifted and transformed, responding to social, political, and cultural force. As noted by Mohajan (2022, p.3) these shifts are described as the “four waves” of feminism, each representing specific priorities, challenges, and modes of resistance. The first wave began in 1848 and lasted until 1920. It was characterized by significant legal and political achievements, and it represents a critical turning point in human history. Across the Western world women began to fight for their fundamental rights: rights to vote, own property, pursue education, and employment. This movement was not confined to the United States, as women in Europe, Canada, and the United Kingdom also advocated for societal reforms.

The second wave occurred from the 1960s to the 1980s, broadening the scope of feminist activism to include issues such as sexuality, family dynamics, workplace rights, reproductive freedoms, and legal inequalities. Mohajan (2022) points out that this wave underscored the notion that personal experiences are fundamentally political, challenging patriarchal structures and cultural conventions (p.2).

Emerging in the 1990s, the third wave of feminism was a response to perceived limitations of the second wave, particularly that it only focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women. Therefore, third-wave feminists embraced individualism and diversity, emphasizing intersectionality, which is the idea that various forms of oppression overlap, and sought to redefine what it meant to be a feminist (Mohajan, 2022, p. 2).

The fourth wave began around early 2010s, and it is characterized by the use of digital technology and social media to address and combat issues like sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture. This wave emphasizes intersectionality and inclusivity, leveraging online platforms to give voice to marginalized groups and foster global feminist communities (Mohajan, 2022, p. 4).

2.1.2. Anti-feminism

On the other hand, anti-feminism is argued as the opposition to feminism and against improving women's lives and exposing women's inequalities (Sagaria, 1999, p.10). Anti-feminism uses socially accepted and normalized practices of gendered shaming and symbolic violence toward women (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p.8). This form of resistance can take various shapes on social media, ranging from subtle misogyny to overt hostility towards feminist ideas.

To fully understand both feminist and anti-feminist narratives on platforms like TikTok, it is essential to examine the concept of patriarchy. As defined by Pierik (2022, p. 88-89) patriarchy is a social system where men hold more power and privilege, and they dominate in roles of leadership and authority. This domination also extends into other aspects, such as cultural, legal, and familial institutions, and it continuously reinforces gender hierarchies and marginalizes alternative expression of identity and power. In digital spaces like TikTok patriarchal structures are both reproduced and challenged through the platforms' content and algorithmic design. Although feminism content gains visibility and popularity, it is still oftentimes diluted to fit within a constraint of patriarchy and capitalist media economy (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This interplay between visibility and containment reflects how well adapted patriarchy is to shifting cultural contexts and maintaining dominance by absorbing and neutralizing opposition. As such, TikTok becomes a contested site, where users can both resist and inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms through the content they consume and create.

Oftentimes, women who participate in anti-feminist narratives do so without recognizing the internalized misogyny hidden in their opinions. Internalized misogyny describes a phenomenon when sexism is unconsciously adopted and perpetuated by women themselves. Evteeva et al. (2024, p. 85) emphasizes that it manifests through behaviors such as self-objectification, devaluation of women, and preferring male leaders. A common expression of internalized misogyny might be calling feminists as "aggressive" or "too much", which ends up delegitimizing feminist discourse and maintaining traditional gender

roles. “It is crucial to recognize that misogyny is not simply an incidental outcome of patriarchal systems. Instead, it functions as a core mechanism that maintains and strengthens patriarchal power structures” (p. 85).

When talking about anti-feminism, it is important to mention the concept of ‘male gaze’, as it conditions women to adhere to the patriarchal ideas on how women should look, act, and behave. When it comes to TikTok anti-feminist concepts, like the ‘male gaze’ are key to analyzing how TikTok content influences self-perception and gender norms among young women. In 1975, the film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term male gaze. She argues that Hollywood cinema always portrays women from a male’s point of view and regards them as mere sexual objects (Mulvey, 1975, p. 805).

As John Berger explains in “*Ways of Seeing*” (1972, p. 46), a woman is conditioned to exist in a state of constant self-awareness. From a young age, women must learn to internalize an external gaze, splitting their identity into two roles: the observer and the observed. Whether moving through a space or experiencing emotion, she cannot escape envisioning herself through the lens of how others, and particularly men, might perceive her. Their self-worth becomes intertwined with being seen and evaluated, which leads them to transform into an object of vision. Berger summarizes this dynamic with the axiom: “*Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.*” (p.154). This dichotomy shapes not only gender relations but also women’s internalized relationship with themselves, where the male perspective dominates even their self-surveillance, reducing their existence to a demonstration. Furthermore, Berger’s analysis in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) provides a foundational lens in understanding the gendered dynamics of visibility and self-perception. He states that women are socially conditioned to internalize this external and male-dominated gaze, underscoring how patriarchal structures not only dictate interpersonal relationships but form what a woman is, in other words, her identity. By framing women as objects that are being observed, Berger highlights the duality of their existence. On one hand they are subjects that experience life, while on the other, they are objects prone to scrutinization. Thus, fragmenting their sense of self, this idea is closely tied with feminist critiques of objectification, illustrating how society pressures women to prioritize appearance and desirability over autonomous agency. His observation that “men act and women appear” in summary reveals the inherent power imbalance in this gendered hierarchical dynamic: men occupy the active role of spectators, while women subconsciously and consciously perform for men. Even the performative aspects of social media, which comes in the shape of curated images and videos based on how women believe they are being perceived or should be

perceived. This framework is important in order to analyze how intersecting narratives reinforce these roles and perpetuate a system where a woman's value is based on a man's approval.

These TikTok trends, amplified by the platform's algorithm, might appear to celebrate women or explain female experiences, yet they often mask deeper issues related to gender equality. Rather than promoting collective feminist action or addressing structural inequalities, these trends frame gender equality as a personal achievement or something that has already been accomplished, perpetuating a postfeminist mindset.

2.1.3. Incels

Anti-feminist narratives online are especially prominent within far-right, male-dominated digital communities like the incel forums, which have made their way to TikTok. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines incels as “people on the internet who are unable to find sexual partners despite wanting them, and who express hate towards people whom they blame” for their misery. These are online spaces where men who identify as involuntary celibates (short for incels) gather to express their hatred towards women and blame them for their sexless life. It is important to note that incels have carved out a space for themselves on TikTok, transferring and adapting their content to this newer social media platform. In their research, Solea & Sugiura (2023), discuss how incel ideology is not absent from platforms like TikTok. However, unlike the explicit and aggressive tone often found in secluded incel forums, the content on TikTok tends to be more subtle. On TikTok incel ideology disguises itself as emotionally appealing pseudo-science, using covert language and coded terms that evade moderation policies while still perpetuating harmful and hateful beliefs. Therefore it raises an important question, whether people come across this anti-feminist content on TikTok. The subtle integration of incel ideology into mainstream TikTok content blurs the line between what is considered a casual engagement and what is the normalization of anti-feminist beliefs. Thus, making it increasingly difficult for users, especially younger audiences, to recognize and critically engage with the misogynistic undertones embedded in seemingly benign or humorous content.

TikTok becomes more than just a platform for browsing entertaining content as it becomes a space of ideological struggle. Feminist narratives can offer new ways of resistance and empowerment, however they are continuously challenged by patriarchal and anti-feminist ideologies, which are embedded in the platform's logic.

2.2. Postfeminism

To understand how feminist and anti-feminist ideologies coexist and manifest on TikTok, it is crucial to examine the framework of post feminism as it helps to make sense of the contradictory messages about gender, power, and equality that are prominent in the platform. Postfeminism is a framework that refers to the understanding of contemporary gender dynamics, which are often characterized by the belief that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer necessary as women are considered autonomous agents (Gill, 2007, p. 12). Scholars like McRobbie (2009) argue that anti-feminism often masquerades as post-feminism. This theory downplays or trivializes progress achieved through feminism, as well as gender issues that are still prominent. This conceptual framework is critical to understand how anti-feminist content on Tiktok might appear less overtly hostile but nevertheless perpetuates harmful ideologies.

However, this claim is harmful as it overlooks the persistent gender inequalities and discrimination that continue to permeate every day life, and remain embedded in structural systems and societal patterns (Patouras & Tanner, 2024, p. 3). Additionally, it can be criticized because even though society has come far for gender equality, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are still major differences and inequalities between men and women. For instance, there might have been a movement of 'girl power,' yet women's bodies are still portrayed as sexual objects (Gill, 2007, p. 25). This concept can be linked to feminist discourses on TikTok, as some content shares information about gender equality and women's empowerment, whereas other content masks as that but in reality it highly sexualizes women's bodies.

The tension between empowerment and objectification is particularly evident online, where social media platforms like TikTok amplify both feminist viewpoints and postfeminist ideals. "*Young women are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful*" (Gill, 2007, p. 35), and while on one hand that might be empowering, on the other it obscures the ways in which women are still being pressured to conform to narrow ideals of attractiveness and desirability. Similarly, Evans et al. (2010) investigate the concept of "technologies of sexiness," where women adapt hypersexualized aesthetics under the guise of autonomy, despite the fact that these performances align with traditional gendered expectations. This phenomena is prominent on TikTok, where the widespread appeal of videos merges feminist rhetoric, such as confidence or self-love, with visual representation that continues to center on the sexualized female body.

While some TikTok trends are meant to be jokes and superficial, they often overlook deeper issues related to gender and identity. What is important is to understand if these trends are really perceived at a surface level or if and how they shape young women's views on gender equality, feminism, and their own sense of self. Analyzing TikTok content through the lens of post-feminism will question whether TikTok's portrayal of feminism undermines or reinforces the need for feminist activism, particularly in a digital space where feminist and anti-feminist discourses coexist. This aspect highlights how new feminist discourses on social media are both shaped by and react to post-feminist ideals, all while considering ongoing structural gender inequalities still persist.

Ultimately, the post-feminism framework works as a tool that analyzes how gender politics are being expressed on TikTok. It is done by revealing the multilayered interplay between empowerment and regulations, autonomy and conformity. This theoretical framework helps expose how feminist narratives are shaped by and respond to post-feminist ideals, while also foregrounding the systematic gender inequalities that exist beneath the surface.

2.3. Digital feminism

While previous sections have explored how feminism, anti-feminism, and postfeminism manifest on social media platforms like TikTok, these frameworks are not constrained to digital environments. They can also exist and be analyzed in offline contexts such as popular culture, policy, education, or traditional media. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize the concept of digital feminism, which specifically refers to feminist activism and engagement that is born from and operates within online spaces. Unlike broader feminist discourses that may simply be mentioned on social media, digital feminism is shaped by the affordances and structures of online platforms themselves.

Digital feminism refers to feminist activism and engagement that takes place primarily online, using digital platforms to raise awareness, build community, and advocate for gender equality (Pucelj & Bohinc, 2024, p. 240). As Pucelj & Bohinc (2024, p. 240) state, although digital feminism or cyber-feminism exists within the digital reality, its impact extends beyond the screen, influencing public discourse, social norms, and real-world activism. In its simplest form, digital feminism can be understood as the expression and mobilization of feminist ideas through online spaces. Foundationally, this study is based on digital feminism, and perhaps even digital anti-feminism.

Digital feminism is important because it provides an accessible and participatory space where feminist ideas can be encountered, discussed, and reinterpreted by diverse audiences. The usage of platforms such as TikTok enable young individuals to increase their political awareness and learn more about social justice especially through the quick spread of anti-oppression hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, or #GirlPower (Pomerantz & Field, 2022, p.3).

Because TikTok is especially popular among Gen Z, its algorithmic design, which promotes swift spread of relatable, emotional, and educational content, creates a powerful environment for feminist discourse to flourish (Pomerantz & Field, 2022, p.8). By showcasing short videos and enabling comments, this digital tool is fostering feminist engagement and facilitating these conversations to transcend borders. Notably, these conversations often carry out in real life, shaping behaviors, attitudes, and even forms of activism. Thus, digital feminism does not only exist in isolation but actively shapes how gender politics are understood, performed, and resisted in day-to-day life (Pomerantz & Field, 2022, p.8).

Additionally, authors like Sue Jackson (2018) examine how teenage girls engage with feminism through digital media and more specifically, social media, by exploring how they use these platforms to express their feminist identities and activism (p.2). Thus, digital spaces can serve as essential tools for feminism as they hold the power to raise awareness for such movements and foster supportive online communities (Jackson, 2018, p.15). Although the presence of anti-feminism should not to be overlooked, especially in online environments where harassment and hate are highly present, it is still crucial to consider that the narratives within these spaces can play a key role in shaping young women's feminist practices (Jackson, 2018, p.14).

2.4. Algorithmic bias of social media

The algorithmic structure of TikTok must be taken into consideration to understand how feminist and anti-feminist ideologies are consumed and internalized on the platform. The algorithm is the core of how TikTok functions and it decides what content users will see on their FYP. Since this research investigates how young women engage with and are influenced by feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok, it would be incomplete without addressing how the algorithm shapes that engagement.

As mentioned, Tiktok has an AI-driven algorithm that makes every user's page highly personalized. Hence, social media algorithms work with the process of tracking people's media behavior and consumption to tailor specific content accordingly, leading to a manipulative strategy of the mind (Jago, 2022, p.3). Thus, this digital process directly impacts people's cognitive functions and behaviors (Jago, 2022, p.5) but also decreases an individual's critical thinking (Jago, 2022, p.8). This is particularly relevant to the research as it investigates how engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content influences young women's views on gender equality. Since the TikTok algorithm promotes content based on previous engagement, users may be constantly exposed to videos similar to their ideology which may reinforce existing beliefs while limiting exposure to diverse or opposing viewpoints. Hence, this tailored exposure to content for each user may harm critical thinking (Jago, 2022, p. 8) and intensify confirmation bias, both of which can shape how users form or resist attitudes related to feminism (Jago, 2022, p. 5). By embedding this discussion in the broader framework of algorithmic bias, this section explains how TikTok's design contributes to the construction of digital echo chambers, which is central to understanding how young women's attitudes toward gender issues may be formed or polarized on the platform.

Moreover, many researchers, for example Jago (2022) have emphasized that influencers have the power to shape public opinion and can be perceived as endorsers shaping users' attitudes (p.6). In fact, there are many influencers on social media platforms like TikTok that have a large audience reach and who are able to promote certain beliefs through their content. Therefore, feminist and anti-feminist ideologies can be interpreted within the content of influencers that portray gender discourses.

In the context of feminist and anti-feminist narratives, this algorithmic reinforcement has the power to polarize young women's views on gender equality. As argued by Jago by consistently presenting content that aligns with users' existing beliefs, TikTok's algorithm might limit exposure to diverse perspectives and hinder the potential development of a well-rounded, in-depth understanding of feminist issues. This phenomenon underscores the importance of media literacy and critical engagement with content to mitigate the potential negative impacts of algorithm-driven platforms on feminism and ideological development.

In examining the algorithmic structures of social media platforms, Cotter (2019) introduces the concept of the "visibility game" to describe how influencers strategically interact with platform algorithms to gain exposure (p.2). This framing is particularly relevant to understand algorithmic bias on platforms like TikTok which has an engagement-based recommendation system that prioritizes content that aligns with specific interaction activities.

TikTok 'For You Page' (FYP), is designed to deliver the users with content that matches their interest which is tailored thanks to its complex algorithmic recommendation system (Taylor & Brisini, 2024, p.1). Furthermore, teenagers and adults both argue that TikTok's FYP personalization is more engaging and conceived in a better way than other social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or Facebook (Taylor & Brisini, 2024, p.1).

Consequently, this raises questions on whose content is made visible and whose is not, and how algorithms influence the narratives users are exposed to. As that might have a major impact in shaping their behaviors and beliefs (Taylor & Brisini, 2024, p.1).

A prominent example is Andrew Tate, who rose to fame in 2021. Tate, known for his overtly misogynistic views and hyper-masculine persona, gained a massive following, particularly among young male audiences. According to Haslop et al. (2024, p. 2), his portrayal of the ideal man as dominant, emotionless, and financially successful, resonated with many boys, reinforcing rigid gender norms and undermining feminist values. In a way, Tate's popularity exposed the fragility of gender equality in contemporary society, revealing how quickly these regressive ideas can be elevated through influencer culture and algorithmic amplification. Thus, underscoring the urgent need to examine how influential creators on TikTok either reinforce or restrain gender ideologies, and how this process shapes young users' understanding of gender roles and dynamics. Consequently, TikTok and its content creators can either threaten or support feminist progress, according to the advocacy they promote regarding gender hierarchy.

2.5. Agenda-setting theory

Furthermore, the agenda-setting theory refers to the influence of mass media on the public's mind and mentions that the media does not directly tell people what to think but shapes what to think about (Zain, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, this theory is relevant in the context of social media platforms like TikTok in shaping public discourse due to its personalized algorithm and user-generated content.

With the constant rise of new trends on the platform, the content can give visibility to specific narratives to targeted users, which is explained by the algorithmic bias. On TikTok, trends like "girl dinner" or "girl math" might not be considered directly related to feminism but they can still frame feminist issues by portraying gender stereotypes that can resonate or not with the audience (Salma & Leiliyanti, 2024. p. 61). Agenda-setting is not always visible. It can be subtle ideological framing that influences perception. When these subtly anti-

feminist and misogynistic trends become popular, users subconsciously fit themselves into these roles, societal expectations, and norms, based on their gender (Scott, 2024, p. 141). What is more important is that users start to relate to the content and not only distribute it but start to create it. Then comes the algorithm's role in amplifying certain trends while silencing others, thus creating a feedback loop where specific ideas about femininity are continuously reinforced (Scott, 2024, p. 141). This contributes to what users come to associate with feminism, or reject as “anti-feminist”, even if these portrayals are oversimplified or misrepresentative of the broader movement.

Hence, agenda-setting theory does not solely rely on the content but also makes sense of its framing and patterns (Neuman et al., 2014. p.4). In the context of TikTok, this means recognizing the platforms’ ideological power not just in circulating ideas, but in shaping which ideas will be seen as valid and worthy of engagement and visibility.

2.6. Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism is a sociological framework suggesting that cultural and social realities, including values, norms, and meaningful actions, are products of collective human practices and interactions and are not inherent or objective truths (Segre, 2016, p.1). These realities are shaped through shared social agreements, normalized behaviors, and taken-for-granted processes, which over time establish what a society collectively accepts as valid and legitimate (Segre, 2016, pp. 1-2). When applying this lens to feminism and technology, Berg and Lie (1995) argue that social constructivism views technology and gender as mutually shaped through social practices, negotiations, and power dynamics. It rejects deterministic views (technological or social), arguing instead that artifacts and systems are not neutral but reflect the values, hierarchies, and gendered assumptions of their creators and users.

Technologies are co-constructed alongside social norms (e.g., gender roles), with their meanings and impacts emerging from ongoing interactions between humans and material systems. Crucially, the authors integrate a feminist lens, emphasizing how constructivism must account for gendered power structures to avoid reinforcing inequalities

Applying this lens to feminist technology studies, Berg & Lie (1995) argue that technologies are neither neutral nor deterministic; instead, they reflect and reproduce gendered norms through design, use, and discourse (pp. 1–2, 16). For instance, household appliances historically encoded assumptions about women’s domestic roles, reinforcing patriarchal structures, while feminist interventions in design can disrupt these norms (pp. 9–10). TikTok, as a contemporary socio-technical platform, is an example of this dynamic: its

algorithmically curated content, whether feminist hashtags like #WomenSupportingWomen or regressive trends like “tradwife” aesthetics, actively shapes gender perceptions by promoting specific narratives that either support or oppose feminism. Hence, feminist content can challenge stereotypes and foster solidarity, while anti-feminist content risks normalizing inequality as entertainment (pp. 15–16). However, TikTok’s “interpretative flexibility” (Berg & Lie, 1995, p. 6) means its impact on gender equality depends on how users resist or internalize these narratives. Thus, this causes TikTok to become a contested space where gender is both constructed and contested, which illustrates the core of social constructivism: technology and society co-evolve, making platforms like TikTok pivotal in advancing or hindering feminist progress.

3. Research Design and Methods

The study will employ a qualitative research design to explore how the engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content of TikTok shapes young women's views on gender equality. Since an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, attitudes, and motives is essential to address the research question, a qualitative approach is the most suitable for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Firstly, it is important to define qualitative research to understand its relevance for this study. As argued by Brennen (2017), qualitative research does not offer straightforward answers, absolute truths, or precise measurements unlike quantitative methods. Instead, it often presents complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity. Despite this, it can also lead to valuable insights (p.10), through which it can offer new perspectives, promote critical thinking, and uncover fascinating dimensions of human experience (p.10). This will help to understand how young women navigate and interpret gendered content in a dynamic and often polarized online environment like TikTok.

3.1. Description and Justification of Methods

This research will employ qualitative methods and data collection will be conducted through, specifically, semi-structured interviews which refers to a mix of open and close ended interviews (Kircher & Zipp, 2022, p.100). This interview structure means that the researcher does not necessarily have to follow a pre-set order when asking the questions but still requires to cover the key topics relevant to the research (Kircher & Zipp, 2022, p.100). This allows for participants to share their perspectives in their own words while ensuring that key themes relevant to the research question are addressed since the questions remain mostly open-ended, enabling them to express their thoughts (Kircher & Zipp, 2022, p.100). Moreover, if during the conversation, unexpected information relevant to the researcher arise, this structure enables to spontaneously ask questions that were not originally in the interview guide (Kircher & Zipp, 2022, p.100). Thus, with this approach many different dimensions can be covered as it gives the possibility to dive deep into each interviewees experiences.

The choice of semi-structured interviews is justified by the study's focus on how young women engage with and interpret content on TikTok, a highly dynamic and user-driven platform. Given that social media experiences are deeply personal and shaped by individual contexts such as cultural background, identity, and values, this method allows for a more holistic understanding than quantitative tools, like surveys, could provide. It also facilitates the exploration of unanticipated themes that may emerge during the conversations,

contributing to the richness and authenticity of the data. Through interviews, the study will gain a deeper understanding of personal and sensitive information that the participants might be hesitant to share in more public settings, like focus groups. Furthermore, since the research is focused on feminism, participants who identify as feminists may be uncomfortable when engaging with anti-feminist narratives and might not want to argue with the contrasting viewpoints of other women in the group.

Additionally, interviews will be conducted either in person or via secure video call platforms such as WhatsApp and FaceTime, depending on the preferences and availability of participants, especially in cases where geographical distance makes face-to-face interaction impractical. Each interview is expected to last between 45 to 60 minutes and will be audio-recorded with the informed consent of each participant to ensure ethicality.

The data collected through these interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.3), it is a widely recognized qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. Thematic analysis is particularly effective for this study because it enables a systematic yet flexible approach to organizing and interpreting qualitative data. Through its six-phase process, ranging from data familiarization to producing the final report, it allows for both descriptive and interpretive depth. Therefore, employing thematic analysis is adequate because it aligns with the study's objective: providing an in-depth view of how young women perceive and interact with TikTok content. Through this analysis, it will enable the researcher to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across the conversations, shedding light on how young women make sense of gender-related content online. Its flexibility and depth make it an ideal tool for uncovering shared experiences as well as divergent viewpoints, thereby enriching the study's findings and supporting a more nuanced understanding of the topic. This method of analysis is particularly convenient when trying to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p.54). This methodological design also supports ethical considerations by creating space for participants to reflect and speak freely, fostering trust and authenticity in the research process.

In addition to obtaining informed consent, several ethical considerations were taken into account to protect the well-being and privacy of participants. For instance, anonymity was ensured for those who decided to stay private by assigning pseudonyms and removing any information and indications linked to their identity from the transcripts and final report. Furthermore, participants were also provided with a disclaimer at the beginning of the study, outlining that the interviews may include sensitive topics related to gender, feminism, and

online experiences. They were informed of their right to skip questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. This ethical framework aimed to create a safe, respectful environment that encouraged honest and voluntary participation (Appendix B).

This ethical framework is designed to foster trust and openness during the interviews, encouraging participants to share their honest experiences and reflections. Overall, this data collection method is carefully structured to support the study's aim of understanding the nuanced effects of TikTok content on young women's perceptions of gender equality, while maintaining methodological rigor and ethical responsibility.

3.2. Proposed Sample and Sampling Strategy

The process for sample selection will begin by using purposive sampling as it allows to select participants that have specific characteristics, experiences or background relevant to the study (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p.36). After that snowball sampling will be used, which involves asking initial participants to refer to others who meet the study criteria, thus accessing a wider range of population. (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p.36).

Participants for the interviews were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, primarily through personal and social networks, including both university contacts and individuals outside of academic settings. Firstly, by approaching peers from university who met the inclusion criteria. Additionally, the recruitment process was extended beyond the university by asking these individuals to refer friends, relatives, or acquaintances who also fit the age, gender, and platform usage criteria. Thus, the snowball sampling technique helped widen the participant group and ensured a mix of perspectives from different educational and cultural backgrounds, diversifying the sample. Hence, this informal yet targeted approach was effective in building trust and encouraging participation in the study.

In this case, the goal is to understand how young women engage with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok, so it's essential to define criteria to select the appropriate and suitable participants. The focus is to recruit individuals who are active TikTok users and who have encountered or interacted with such content. Specifically participants who identify as young women aged between 20–25, as it is an age group that represents the target of the research question and the main audience of TikTok users. The sample will consist of 10 interviews, providing a sufficient amount of data to gain relevant insight from which themes can later be created. Participants will be recruited through social media platforms and university networks, taking into account their geographic location, educational and cultural

backgrounds, to ensure diversity within the sample. Lastly, the criteria of frequent TikTok usage and engagement with feminist or anti-feminist content on the platform are also central factors considered when selecting the participants. In order to meet this criteria, they will be asked to approve of their daily usage with ideally a minimum of 30 minutes, and to confirm their familiarity with feminist and anti-feminist content with some sort of interaction manifested through views, likes, follows, comments, shares, etc.

Hence, the sample will include participants who engage with both feminist and anti-feminist content, as well as those who are exposed to both sides. This approach will enable a diverse range of perspective and a comparative analysis of how different types of content facilitate debates around feminism, influencing users' perception of gender roles.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was developed by the researcher (Appendix A). The interview guide purposely contains open-ended questions designed to discuss rich and detailed responses while allowing for the natural flow of conversation and the emergence of unexpected themes. Through the questions, the interviews will explore participants' experiences with using TikTok and the nature of their engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content. It will also seek to understand how this algorithmic content exposure shapes their perspectives on gender equality, identity, and societal norms.

3.3. Operationalization

When it comes to the interview guide and the exploration of TikTok's impact on young women's feminist perceptions through algorithmic exposure, it is important to operationalize these abstract concepts. They are as follows: algorithmic exposure, gender norms, feminist self-identification, emotional response and empowerment. The semi-structured interview guide breaks down these concepts into measurable components, which will allow an in-depth qualitative analysis.

For instance, algorithmic exposure is explored through questions 1 and 2 by focusing on the participants' perception of their "For You page" (FYP) and the frequency with which they encounter content that aligns or contradicts their viewpoints (Appendix A). Hence, this will provide insight into how young women users experience the algorithmic-driven content curation and how they interpret this personalization.

Moreover, gender norms will be addressed by covering questions like 3 and 4 (Appendix A) about gender-specific content, such as 'girly' trends or comparison between how men and women are portrayed. With these questions, the research will be able to identify

how gendered content patterns are perceived by young women and how they reinforce or challenge social expectations on the platform.

Feminist self-identification is operationalized through direct self-identification questions such as questions 5 and 6 (Appendix A), which allow participants to express their definitions of feminism. Additionally, feminism in digital spaces will also be examined by asking participants to reflect on how they experience feminist-related content that appears on their FYP, including trends, creators, and community discourses from the comment sections. Thus questions such as 7 and 8 (Appendix A) will allow the understanding of participants' interactions with feminism within digital media environments like TikTok.

Emotional responses and empowerment are also brought up in questions 9, 10 and 11 (Appendix A), by asking the participants' feelings towards empowering or degrading content which will help understand the emotional and psychological impact of feminist vs anti-feminist content. In addition, through opinion-based questions, such as 12, 11 and 13 (Appendix A), the research is able to identify opinion shifts that may have been caused by gender-related content exposure on TikTok. Moreover, questions 14 and 15 (Appendix A) will also ask the participants whether they find TikTok progressive or regressive in terms of gender equality and draw a conclusion of TikTok's overall impact and societal role on gender equality.

Lastly, the interview will begin with demographic questions such as age, gender identity, and cultural background to better understand how these variables intersect and influence the results, as well as to gain a better understanding of the population being studied. This section will also include an icebreaker question about general TikTok use to contextualize responses and categorize them according to patterns across different groups. By structuring the interview guide around these thematic areas, each concept central to the research question was made observable through participant experiences and reflections, facilitating rich, qualitative data collection suitable for thematic analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

The process for analyzing the data from the interviews will start with a transcription of the audio recordings to have a visual representation of the interviews. This will allow the researcher to easily identify recurring themes, keywords, and concepts within the text. The Thematic analysis, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 11), will be used to analyze the data. This process involves six key steps: firstly, *Familiarization with the data*. The first

step consists of reading the transcripts, several times if needed, to gain a deep understanding of the data and to avoid missing any relevant information (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.11). Furthermore, the second step is *Generating initial codes*, the codes are generated through the content of the transcripts and identify the relevant insights related to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12). The third step is *Searching for themes* which consists of grouping the codes to create broader themes that are meaningful to the research and from which sub-themes can also be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.13). Continuing with the fourth step, *Reviewing themes*: this is when the themes are being reviewed and refined to ensure they are accurate and reflect the data, as sometimes similar themes can overlap (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.15). The fifth step will be *Defining and naming themes*, in this process, each theme will be clearly defined and named to identify the essence of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.16). Lastly, the final and sixth step is: *Producing the report*, this requires the findings to be presented in a narrative format, supported by quotes from the interviews for evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.17).

Overall, the report will discuss how the themes address the research question and contribute to the broader understanding of TikTok's influence on young women's views on gender equality. By following all these steps, transparency and accountability in the research process will be ensured.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

In order to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research, it is essential that the results represent the experiences of the participants accurately. Thus, to ensure a trustworthy study, several factors were applied to report the experiences of the interview participants accurately. Firstly, reliability is defined by the consistency of the results over time and how they accurately represent the population studied, and if they are reproduced by using the same method would lead to similar outcomes which then proves the reliability of the research tool (Golafshani, 2003, p.2). On the other hand, Validity refers to how accurately the study measures what it wants to measure, and how trustable the results are, validity also questions if the tool used to capture the study's aim is adequate (Golafshani, 2003, p.3). Thus to meet these criteria, the researcher followed specific steps throughout the data analysis process.

The first step after conducting all the 10 interviews, was to transcribe them which was completed by the researcher manually, each of the interviews were carefully revised multiple times to guarantee their accuracy and remove any errors before initiating with the coding

process. This step helped to ensure that the data was fully and precisely representing the participants' responses. The coding process was conducted with the software Atlas.ti which is a widely recognized tool for qualitative data analysis. This helped the researcher to keep the data organized and be consistent in the coding process as the transcripts were imported into the software one by one to conduct an inductive thematic analysis. The use of the software was efficient as it provides a clear data management and gives the ability to generate codes by allowing a visualization of relationships that could link concepts together. The research realized this step by reading and scanning through the data multiple times and generating initial codes with descriptive terms. Hence, this step revealed relevant information for the study by capturing the key insights of each interview. After this initial round of coding, the researcher ensured to examine key patterns and recurring codes which were regrouped into more general and overarching categories. Then, these codes were organized into broader themes that aligned with the study's aim in order to answer the research questions. Therefore, this approach enhances reliability through detailed human interpretation and careful attention as discussed by Golafshani (2003).

4. Results

The analysis of the interview data was first conducted through an inductive coding approach, which allowed the capture of a wide range of initial codes that helped to collect participants' experiences with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok through the algorithmic content exposure. These primary codes gathered insights into participant's thoughts, behaviors, body image, feminist identification, and experiences with TikTok usage. Afterwards, a second stage of thematic analysis was conducted, in which the initial codes were regrouped into categories. This process enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns across the data and generate overarching themes, which are as follows: *Algorithmic Curation and the Personalization of Feminist and Anti-Feminist Content*; *Feminist Identification and Ambivalence*; *Anti-Feminist Content and Internalized Misogyny*; and *Body Image, Beauty Norms, and the Performance of Femininity*. Hence, these four themes reflect the complexity of the interplay between algorithmic curation, identity formation, and personal experiences. Offering an inclusive lens on the understanding of how young women make sense of feminist discourses portrayed on TikTok, and the impact it has on their view on gender roles.

4.1. Algorithmic Curation and the Personalization of Feminist and Anti-Feminist Content

One of the main findings that emerged across the interviews was the extent of personalization of TikTok's algorithms according to each user's preferences and interests. This aspect showed that the platform creates both an echo chamber effect by tailoring the content exposure, but on the other hand, TikTok can occasionally showcase contradicting viewpoints or content that does not necessarily appeal to the user. Participants often expressed that their "For You" pages aligned mostly with their values and interests, but also with their emotional state. For example, according to Lila, she said: "It is really tailored to me because, when I am sad and when I am feeling sad, I also get videos of people that are feeling sad." Moreover, many interviewees said that they get feminine and women-oriented content regularly on their feeds as all of them identify with it as part of their self-identity which was an initial code detected in the interview codings process, this is demonstrated through Laura's words: "Most of my for you page is really tailored towards women, because I am one as well." and Emily who also supported this with: "I think most of my videos concern girl topics, or womanhood in general". Thus, the outcome of the interviews reflected on the accuracy of TikTok's algorithm.

Furthermore, Tara explained: “I rarely see content that I would not agree with, but if I do, I usually watch it as well, because I am interested to see what happens on the other side of the debate.” Through her description, two essential aspects of TikTok can be underlined: first, its ability to reinforce user’s existing beliefs and opinions, and second, its capacity to present opposing viewpoints in a way that would prompt reflection and curiosity. Additionally, Jessy mentioned: “I think the algorithm itself is pretty sensitive, right? So if sometimes I explore one topic, or I am in a deep dive searching for something, I can see that it influences what I see on my feed”. This statement reflects the sensitivity and responsiveness of TikTok’s algorithm, illustrating how even minimal engagement with certain content can significantly shape the direction of the following content.

Hence, most participants mentioned that they realized how their interactions with videos shape their algorithm in boosting and increasing specific content exposure as a result of the engagement with previous topic-related videos. Therefore, this aspect of the algorithmic bias confirms that media such as TikTok increase the reinforcement of beliefs. For instance, Laura noted: “Honestly, most of my for you page is really tailored towards women... I think I do like it because... I can relate to it or I can understand the woman”, her experiences demonstrates that she is exposed to content she can relate with, especially when it comes to topics that revolve around the themes of womanhood and female representations.

Nonetheless, even if the algorithm's personalization of TikTok is strong and very specific to each user's interests, it also has a side that sometimes promotes content isolation. For example, Annabelle mentioned how her engagement with one anti-feminist video that appeared on her FYP led to an unexpected number of videos related to it. She explained that after liking one video from a particular content creator, her FYP led to displaying many similar videos, which happened to be very conservative and associated with Mormon TikTok. Anabelle expressed that she was surprised at constantly seeing this content portraying Utah-based mothers with traditional and conservative lifestyles, which are views that she does not align or identify with. Her experience shows how fast the algorithm catches the user's actions when scrolling on the app, creating echo chambers even based on minimal interaction. This insight raises concerns about TikTok’s potential influence on leading its audience into ideological beliefs without them explicitly intending to do so. This is further supported by Charlotte, who noted that at times, when she interacts with content that is usually not in her interest by mistake, it results in getting a lot of the same type of content, she said: “for example, if I watch a video of Jude Bellingham, then I get football videos when I do not mean to”.

Consequently, Maddie also recognizes that the algorithm has the power to provide awareness as she explains: “TikTok triggers my awareness, so then I am aware in my day-to-day life.” which is also supported by Jessy with: “I think it kind of gives me a reality check because the world is really complex... I tend to forget that...your whole world view can be easily shifted just from what you see in the media”. Through these quotes, both reflect on how the algorithm has the ability to remind them that people think differently and that digital spaces can hold a lot of diverse opinions, which can coexist. Thus, their views can be challenged or reinforced according to the content exposure TikTok individually promotes. However, the features of the app allow users to disengage from unwanted content exposure, as Maddie adds on to this with: “Everyone has their freedom to talk, but if I don't agree with it, I do not have to listen to it”. Thanks to TikTok’s fast-paced usage and its scrolling system, users can skip the disliked content at any point by just swiping through it as much as they want.

Despite the users' awareness of the algorithm’s tendency to create echo chambers, many interviewees expressed that they mainly engage with content that aligns with their views, which often reinforces the loop of getting validating and relatable content. Bea acknowledged: “99% of the time, it shows whatever interests me”. But she later also recognized that she sometimes gets content that contradicts her opinion, especially when it comes to geopolitical or societal issues. Thus, Bea’s two dual statements highlight the nuances that are present within the algorithm, which can also derive and shift its recommendations.

The interview participants also reflected on the role girly or women-centered trends play in constructing a shared identity among female users. The majority of them admitted that they enjoyed this type of content related to girlhood, mainly referring to the viral ones such as “girl dinner”, “girl math”, or also “I am just a girl”. Even though interviewees like Charlotte argued that these trends are not to be taken seriously and do not have that much of a deeper meaning. Others like Tara and Grace offered a more critical view on them and questioned their impact, Tara said: “I do not think I have a very good opinion on any trend happening on TikTok, because I think they categorize people too much”, she also mentions: “it constantly changes, so you are just running from one trend identity to the next trend identity, and I think it is more harmful than anything.” Grace also approved with: “I used to see it, girl dinner, and all of that girl math, and at first, I found it funny, it was relatable to me. But then I realized that it diminishes a woman's view of a woman.”

Through their lens, it is essential to observe how Tiktok trends can potentially have consequences and shape users' beliefs and behaviors. For example, the trend of 'girl dinner' comes off as humorous, but often self-deprecating, portrayal of women eating insufficient or unhealthy meals. This might seem playful or even empowering, but it quietly reinforces outdated gender stereotypes of women as frivolous and careless in their self-care (Roy, 2023). Similarly, as described by Rosida et al. (2022), the rise of 'pick me girl' content is another example of internalized misogyny, where women go out of their way to distance themselves from other women or not indulge in feminine behaviors to gain male approval. This can entail a woman exclusively surrounding herself with male friends, which on social media is referred to as a woman who is 'one of the boys', or showing interest in traditionally "masculine" activities like sports or cars. At its core, the 'pick me' phenomenon harms young women because it supports the idea that women have to compete with other women for male attention.

In this light, trends like 'pick me girl' are not just individual choices but manifestations of a societal conditioning where success and worth are measured through male approval, and women, consciously or not, adjust their behavior to remain desirable within that structure. The 'pick me' trend often mocks women who feel the need to be different or reject stereotypically feminine behaviors in order to appeal to the male gaze. However, recently, many women now hesitate to express preferences or behaviors that deviate from traditional femininity for the fear of being labeled as a 'pick me'. For instance, in the podcast "Nevermind" episode 76, "I Am Feeling Morning?", host Veronika Slowakovsky admits that she was reluctant to share that she did not know how to pose for pictures or that she did not spend the entire Coachella music festival taking photos. She feared that by not engaging in these typically "girly" activities, she would be perceived as someone trying to distance herself from femininity, thus earning the 'pick me' label. This example further highlights the deteriorating nature of such trends, which discourage individuality and create new pressure for women to conform. In order to avoid criticism, women may end up reinforcing narrow expectations of how they should behave, look, and express themselves.

Ultimately, this theme illustrates how TikTok trends can both shape and constrain female identity, which illustrates how complex the platform's role is in representing contemporary womanhood. The interviews revealed how participants navigated algorithmic content with intention and ambivalence. Annabelle noted using TikTok's "not interested" function to avoid reinforcing conservative views. Whereas others like Maddie took a more passive approach, who confides that she just scrolls past videos that she dislikes.

Overall, these themes illustrate how TikTok's algorithm not only mirrors users' preferences but also guides them into specific ideologies, whether this is wanted by the user or not. Therefore, the app often reinforces pre-existing beliefs but also occasionally diverges its content exposure by introducing other perspectives. Participants described TikTok as a highly personalized media that holds many conflicting views, which everyone can be confronted with, even if this causes discomfort.

4.2. Feminist identification and ambivalence

While the majority of interview participants frequently encountered feminist content on their TikTok For You Page (FYP) and all expressed support for gender equality, their identification with the term "feminist" was often more complex and ambivalent. All the young women were asked about whether they identify with feminism and if they could give a definition of what it means to them in their own words (Interview guide, questions 6 & 7, Appendix A). Through these questions, a persistent pattern emerged, demonstrating that even young women can be doubtful about their stand on feminism and when defining it for themselves. For example, Lila said: "I am in between, but I think 65% yes and 35% no. I am in the middle, but more, because I am a woman."

Additionally, Charlotte also expressed this feeling with: "I support feminism at its core, but we are at the fourth wave of feminism now, maybe that I do not really identify with it as much." Even though she stated that she supports equal rights and believes in equal opportunities among genders, she also mentioned that she does not define herself with labels due to the diverse interpretations people have of feminism. Moreover, a few others also confessed that the various ways feminism is conveyed do not always align with how they personally identify with it. For instance, Annabelle acknowledged that she believed there is a connection between politics and feminist media discourses, which she thinks are shaped and adjusted to fit political contexts in order to reflect them. She said: "I think it is really interesting to see how politics shape gender roles in society, on social media." Therefore, her view of feminism is not necessarily reconsidered but rather critically understood by taking into account the influence that societal and political changes can have on digital spaces. Moreover, Emily also said: "I hate that people think feminism is about women being superior to men. I think that is so stupid, something that I cannot understand when people say that they are not a feminist."

Additionally, when it comes to feminist content, Bea reflects that there are two sides to it: “healthy feminism...it promotes gender equality... on the other hand, some of the content is trying to make a joke about it”. This statement highlights the complexity of trends and the nuances of supportive content, which can sometimes carry undermining representation within its own message, depending on factors such as its framing or interpretation. She adds on with: “Some of this funny content is too marginalizing or too extreme to the sense that it makes people hate and not being feminist at all.” This statement raises concerns about how TikTok trends can undermine serious movements like feminism and affect their credibility.

On the other hand, participants like Charlotte expressed that she does not really see a deeper meaning behind trends like “girl dinner” as she stated: “I think they are fun because I think they are accurate. So I like it, I can relate to all of them”, which shows that every user has a different interpretation of these trends. Her comment demonstrates that everyone's engagement with feminist content is experienced differently. Some consume it with critical reflection, whereas users like Charlotte are more passive in their media engagement and focus more on their entertainment purposes rather than the depth or meaning behind them.

Furthermore, participants like Laura mentioned how she enjoys that some Tiktok trends enable women's empowerment by referring to the “women in male fields,” which is a prominent trend on TikTok that features women reclaiming “traditionally” male-coded behaviors (Ward, 2024). This often includes the use of irony to highlight dating scenarios typically associated with men, such as engaging with multiple romantic partners simultaneously, displaying emotional detachment, or avoiding vulnerability (Ward, 2024). Laura refers to this trend by noting: “especially when it comes to relationships or when it comes to things that are acceptable for men...it's like women taking this power back.” She even expresses her connection and enjoyment with this trend, particularly after experiencing her breakup. Through the use of humor and reversing gender roles, female creators use this trend to critique double standards in gender expectations, particularly in romantic relationships. ‘Women in male fields’ not only criticizes traditional standards around femininity and gender roles but also reflects a broader cultural shift towards empowering women to subvert and start questioning patriarchal structures (Ward, 2024). This serves as one example of how feminist discourse is being reshaped and popularized through digital media. Even though the “women in male field” trend does not solely focus on relationships, it is often linked to that topic, as Laura mentioned.

However, this might not be beneficial or valued for every user, as for participants like Grace, this aspect of TikTok is not appreciated. In the interview, she said that she believes dating advice on the app can be damaging, as she states: “ I get dating advice videos on TikTok, and I really dislike them because they can shape your views wrongly, and make you start overthinking... So, I try not to watch those”. This ambiguity and divergence of trend appreciation demonstrate once again that TikTok users engage in different ways with their content exposure.

Similarly, Emily and Tara stated how frustrating it can be to see opposing views than theirs when it comes to gender related content, Emily said: “Sometimes it is hard to accept that other people have other opinion and that you not everyone have the same one as you, and you are maybe not always right.”, which Tara also expressed with: “I am always driven by curiosity to see what the other side talks about. But most of the time, I end up being sad in some way.” Thus, both reflection points out that feminist and anti-feminist discourses on TikTok can trigger users' feelings when they are confronted with positions that challenge their own beliefs and sense of reality. Even though they argue that it is interesting to see and be exposed to different perspectives to avoid being stuck in unrealistic bubbles and echo chambers.

Furthermore, a few participants, like Annabelle or Grace, highlighted the distinction between educational content and aesthetic or trend-based content associated with anti-feminism. They acknowledge that they use the app for both entertainment and educational purposes. Annabelle mentioned this: “There is always social impact topics intertwined, it is always a combination of having entertainment and education on TikTok. So, although I use it for entertainment purposes, I think I am learning new things.” Therefore, the relevance of the app in shaping feminist views is significant as it showcases a wide range of content related to gender and identity, ranging from trends to creators promoting specific narratives. Although this content is often not directly framed as feminist, it conveys ideas that reflect on ideologies that either support or challenge feminist views.

4.3. Anti-feminist content and internalized misogyny

Even though many participants admitted that they were frequently exposed to feminist or women-centered content on TikTok, the interviews also revealed that the users encounter anti-feminist content, which often appears through content promoting conservative values and lifestyles or through regressive gender narratives. Most of the participants argued that

such content exposure is not something they expected, and was often surprising to see. This content emerged specifically through the reinforcement of gender norms that are often portrayed by “Trad wives,” which all 10 participants agreed on being familiar with. This was one of the most cited examples when discussing the presence of anti-feminism on TikTok. For example, Annabelle said: “I definitely see trad wives and Mormon TikTok, like Nara Smith.”

Therefore, TikTok’s ability to reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes is important to consider. The example of the ‘tradwife’ content, which stands for traditional wife, idealizes a lifestyle where women embrace conventional domestic roles, serving as primary caregivers who are responsible for home, children, and meals, and are often of Mormon faith (Proctor, 2022, p. 8). While choosing a family-oriented path or becoming a stay-at-home mother is a valid decision, the romanticized portrayal of this lifestyle by influential creators, “*From Ballerinasfarm’s from scratch cooking with her eight children and Nara Smith’s viral heavily pregnant all day cooking for her family to the radical marriage rules of Estee Williams*” (Scott, 2024, p. 142). Thus, pressuring or convincing young girls that conforming to narrowly defined roles is the right decision (Proctor, 2022, p. 9). This can overlook the structural consequences of such a choice, for example, limited education or career opportunities, and a lack of economic autonomy and freedom of choice (Sykes & Hopner, 2024, p. 459). These outcomes disproportionately affect women and contribute to the widening of the gender gap, reinforcing systemic inequalities rather than challenging them.

Hence, many of the interviewees expressed their concern about content promoting gender stereotypes, such as “trad wives”. They often referred to this type of content as counterproductive for feminism. Participants argued that these kinds of narratives and “trad wife” creators like Ballerina Farm or Nara Smith display a romanticized portrayal of conservative lifestyles. Consequently, many expressed that such content can influence audiences to adhere to traditional gender roles. The majority reflected on such content affecting women in particular. However, Tara had another view about this and pointed out an interesting aspect, which is that the impact goes beyond female audiences. She mentioned that this type of content also reinforces gender norms from the male perspective, as it creates unrealistic expectations of women and a criterion that can be embedded and internalized in men who see these ideologies in the media when looking for a partner. Tara noted that this content exposure portrays a standard for what a “real woman” should be, which is presented by ‘trad wives’ as someone who cooks, raises children, and fully embraces domestic roles.

Thereby, such content consumption can perpetuate patriarchal expectations and limit women's roles within society and relationships by going against feminist values.

Participants often expressed their emotional triggers when encountering anti-feminist content. For instance, Bea affirmed: "My first emotion is either anger or frustration. So I'm quite angry and frustrated by how these people can have such a view, which is the opposite of what I believe in". This emotional reaction is especially caused when the content touches upon content that undermines serious issues like gender equality and discrimination.

Nonetheless, participants like Jessy argue that 'trad wives' on TikTok do not necessarily represent anti-feminism or harmful ideologies but rather discuss how such narratives are romanticized through a submissive role, which concerns them regarding the influence these ideas and values can have on younger media consumers.

On the other hand, another anti-feminist approach that participants like Charlotte and Maddie perceived is the content that promotes very sexualized portrayals, which they believe perpetuates the objectification and oversexualization of women's bodies. Charlotte said: "There's also this whole aspect of sexualizing people on Tiktok, which, for me, is not very feminist.". They often referred to content creators like Bonnie Blue and Lily Phillips, who are known for their highly sexualized content. This aspect is completely on the opposite edge of the spectrum of traditional wife narratives, but shows that both types of content, either too conservative or overly sexualized, can be problematic and controversial for feminist progression.

Moreover, a few participants expressed their familiarity with incels and misogynistic content that is promoted by celebrities like Andrew Tate; they shared their thoughts about the danger of such public figures having high visibility on the media and producing content harmful to the audiences. For example, Lila said: "Someone like Andrew Tate or other creators like that is something pretty concerning for our world." Emily also noted: "The tip of the iceberg is Andrew Tate, but there's even more extreme than that.". These reflections emphasize the influence misogynistic figures can have on shaping attitudes and beliefs, especially among young users or easily influenceable people, which increases harmful gender ideologies in digital environments.

Many interviewees believe that especially young boys are impacted by such content and a few like Tara and Lila brought up the example of their recent Netflix show "Adolescents", which portrays a young teen boy who committed a hate crime against a girl because of his incel ideology. They mention how awareness of such a topic is good, but also concerning because of the rise of such behaviors and beliefs among teenagers. Emily noted

when talking about Andrew Tate: “What is crazy is that unknowingly, Tiktok is feeding that content to young boys.” Despite these concerns, most participants did not refer to TikTok as being completely regressive, as they also acknowledged the positive aspects of the app. They mostly see TikTok as a sphere in which competing ideologies coexist and emerge. They mostly admitted that both feminist and anti-feminist discourse is present, and even if it can be uncomfortable or shocking to be exposed to conflicting viewpoints, they see it as part of the scrolling process.

4.4. Body image, beauty norms, and the performance of femininity

The visual appeals and trends that arise from TikTok make it a place where expectations for beauty norms and standards are created alongside discourses of femininity. These aspects were also discussed in the interviews, and participants stated both positive and negative perspectives about the effects of body-image-related videos. For example, Lila mentioned that the TikTok content exposure does not challenge her feminist ideologies, but she reflects on it as being emotionally draining. She admits that her female-oriented content exposure can sometimes cause a feeling of saturation, especially when it comes to body positivity content, which is primarily meant to be supportive and in line with feminist values. She reflects on body positivity as having the opposite effect of empowerment and said: “A lot of body positivity is only for the skinny people”. Thus, this comment acknowledges the lack of body representation and inclusivity, as people like Lila do not relate or identify with body types that typically promote such content. Additionally, Lila followed with “I am so over it... at first it was a motivation for losing weight... but now I just want to see videos of my body being normalized.”, her quote once again highlights how feminist content can easily deviate from its primary objective, which is to value women, to a negative effect that leads to unrealistic expectations and a sense of unattainability.

Similarly to Lila, Jessy mentioned how body positivity on the internet can be a “slippery slope” and ambiguous in its messaging; she argues that there is a big difference in the audience’s reaction towards skinny versus bigger women on the app. She pointed out that skinny women get more positive reactions than bigger individuals, who are way more likely to be criticized and mocked in the comment sections. She follows by emphasizing that the algorithm prioritizes conventionally attractive people and bodies, which reinforces the beauty norms and expectations, particularly for women. She said: “Female body comes in very different shapes and sizes, but the Internet is a really tough place”. She mentioned that this

dynamic on the app is not very encouraging in the promotion of body positivity, as it is not as real and inclusive as it appears to be. She adds on to this by referring to influencers like Kylie Jenner with: “She has this really glorified lifestyle and a body that has cost her a lot of money, but she doesn't acknowledge or admit that it is true”. This highlights how high-profile influencers and famous people on the app with a lot of visibility contribute to perpetuating harmful body standards in society, especially by promoting an image that is impossible to reach naturally, as they often mask their artificial features.

In contrast, throughout the interviews, some argued that they appreciated the messaging of normalizing and representing diverse appearances like Maddie, who expressed her appreciation with: “If I see anything like that, it's only empowering and encouraging for me, especially when you mention body positivity”. However, many of them also had a critical view and expressed their awareness of the unrealistic beauty norms and expectations that are sometimes portrayed in the media. Participants like Grace pointed out unhealthy behaviors: “I remember that sometimes I used to get eating disorder TikTok about how these young girls would share how much they would eat in a day, which was basically nothing, they would starve themselves.” Thus, the interpretations of such content can be mixed according to the user and varies according to how and what is being shown or promoted. Tara expressed her concern for young users with: “I think younger girls and younger people are more self-conscious in general...more susceptible to these kinds of trends”. The discussed reflections demonstrate how complex and different the engagement with body positivity content is for young women, as it highlights factors that influence the different interpretations. For instance, the interviews showed that it can depend on contexts like age, vulnerability, and character traits unique to each individual.

Additionally, participants often mention the presence of performance and look pressure from the media and through content on TikTok. Participants like Jessy admit that body positivity content on the app is not always inclusive or realistic. She noted: “The clean girl aesthetic really annoys me; it makes me feel like I'm a failure”. Therefore, this comment emphasizes TikTok trends like “clean girl aesthetic” contributing to increasing ideals and stereotypes of femininity performance. This aspect shows how TikTok content promotes an ideal for women to conform to, which can be both through appearances and also through unrealistic lifestyles or routines that display high demands.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. *Finding interpretation*

To conclude, the research aimed at exploring how engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok shapes young women's perceptions of gender equality. Thus, this was conducted through the lens of feminist media theory, algorithmic bias, agenda-setting theory, and social constructivism. These concepts were essential to the study as they helped understand the depth of such theories, acknowledge the systems of platforms like TikTok, and enabled the consideration of societal implications. The findings highlight many aspects, but particularly the empowering and regressive dynamics that coexist on the platform. The highly personalized algorithm and fast-paced spread of content on TikTok make it a digital environment in which users are frequently exposed to diverse narratives about gender. Thereby, the study demonstrates that even though TikTok can serve as a tool for expression and be used to voice feminist opinions, it can also promote harmful ideologies to such movements and amplify anti-feminism through conservative or hateful content and trends. Consequently, the ambivalence on the platform creates a complex duality where both empowering content coexists with videos that reinforce traditional gender norms.

When it comes to young women engaging with Tiktok content, the app actively tailors their media exposure based on their interactions, influencing the direction of the videos that appear on their FYP. Moreover, as seen in the interviews, the majority of the participants noted that their FYP is highly personalized to their interests and mentioned that they usually feel like its tailoring aligns with their existing beliefs and emotional states. This aspect of the interviews resonates clearly with the algorithmic bias theory discussed by Jago (2022, p.3), who argues that such systems can manipulate the human mind and become a threat to individual critical thinking.

Nevertheless, the curation of TikTok's algorithm can also challenge users' opinions and go against one's beliefs. This dynamic reflects on Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of "popular feminism-popular misogyny," as discussed previously. The platform contributes to both the democratization of feminist narratives and simultaneously amplifies patriarchal ideologies. Thus, this complexity of contradictions can be applied to Ging and Siapera's article "Gender Hate Online" (2019, p.7), in which they argue that digital environments can serve as a tool for women to share their experiences and relate to one another through identity expression, allowing visibility and activism to take place. However, such discussions

happening online generate hate speech and anti-feminism, as the world, and consequently, the media, remains a space dominated by masculine and patriarchal values (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p.7). Therefore, this helps explain the persistence of anti-feminist discourses and why women, and especially younger women, resonate on higher levels with harassment and abuse (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p.10). Hence, since young women are the primary audience facing online hate, they are also more likely to change their behaviors and accommodate their actions to avoid such interactions (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p.10). Thus, this reflection elaborates on how misogyny evolves with time and technologies to remain present even in postfeminist days. Moreover, anti-feminist and misogynistic narratives are nowadays operating in strategic ways through online communities that aim at silencing women (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p.9).

Additionally, the research also revealed that participants appreciated trends that are meant to empower women through portrayals of girlhood or women in male-dominated fields, which had positive outcomes and gave them a sense of encouragement. On the other hand, some participants expressed their concern about TikTok's ability to challenge feminist discourses due to trends or content that reduce such complex discourses to entertainment. For example, "girl dinner" or "girl math" are trends that a few interviewees described as decreasing women's credibility because they showcase women embodying foolish behaviors through irresponsible actions. Participants like Emily and Jessy, for example, described these trends as perpetuating a shallow representation of women. Although they aim to be humorous, they often risk undermining feminist progress by simplifying gender dynamics to comedy or mockery.

Thus, the algorithmic features of TikTok have a significant impact on audiences as participants also recognized them as being designed to foster engagement, which can sometimes result in users being stuck in echo chambers that often support their interests and beliefs. However, a few participants argued that the smallest interactions can result in unwanted exposure to ideas or topics they do not align with. The reactions to such exposure were expressed either in a passive manner, which was often expressed by just scrolling through the undesired content, while others expressed a more active approach by selecting the "not interested" option on these videos to avoid more involvement with them. This algorithmic exposure was further discussed to be mainly dangerous for the younger users, as they were described as still in the process of forming their identities and beliefs.

Additionally, there is an evident link between body dissatisfaction and social media (Harriger et al., 2023, p.2), which was another prominent factor mentioned in the interviews.

Participants discussed this aspect as being harmful to their self-esteem, especially since TikTok is a video-sharing platform that focuses on visuals and aesthetics, which reinforces its content to promote beauty standards. Participants like Lila expressed how even body positivity portrayals can be unempowering, as unrelatable bodies promote such content. Thus, when discussing this aspect, the platform illustrated how young women feel pressured to conform to these specific beauty standards imposed by societal expectations. These physical characteristics, portrayed by influencers and trends, emphasize that young women need to fit into them to be considered attractive in society. Additionally, several participants, like Jessy, noted that even TikTok's algorithm prioritizes content in which these standards are represented, which, once again, discriminates against women who do not fit these categories.

Furthermore, the hashtag #SkinnyTok, which was also highly discussed in the interviews and which provoked a lot of controversy, as concerns were raised about its ethicality. Governments such as the French one decided to take action against this phenomenon, promoting extreme body standards and skinny ideals to young women (Willsher, 2025, para.1) by portraying restricted eating, which sometimes falls into eating disorders. Therefore, the hashtag #SkinnyTok got removed due to European regulations expressing their concern about such videos being available to young users (Maheshwari, 2025, para.1). Thus, the connection between body dissatisfaction and social media becomes even more critical when considering the effects it has in promoting unrealistic beauty standards. Additionally, the controversy that the hashtag #Skinnytok got highlights the concerns related to the normalization of extreme body ideals through platforms like TikTok, particularly among young and easily influenceable audiences. The European regulations on removing this phenomenon reflect on the broader societal impact of social media on mental health and gender norms. As this trend was mainly targeted at young women with a messaging of conforming to beauty norms, the regulation of the government aimed at reducing the effect of these harmful trends. Therefore, when searching #SkinnyTok on TikTok, a message of prevention appears instead of displaying the content posted under this hashtag.

Although TikTok can offer space for body positivity and feminism, it also enables the spread of content that pressures young women to conform to very narrow beauty standards. The visual nature of the platform, in combination with the powerful algorithm, makes it especially influential in how young users perceive their bodies and self-worth. As revealed in the interviews, even seemingly empowering content can reproduce exclusionary standards, working as a reminder that digital culture can uphold the same gendered expectations

feminism seeks to challenge. This dual impact positions body image discourse not as a side issue but as central to understanding how gender roles are continuously negotiated, reinforced, as well as resisted in the digital age.

Lastly, the findings can be applied to the agenda-setting theory and social constructivism as they demonstrate how Tiktok holds an important role in shaping public opinion, as the platform influences people's thinking processes even in indirect and subtle ways. Thereby, the algorithmic personalization and trends present on the platform prioritize and reinforce some narratives, whether these are supporting feminism or anti-feminism. They have the power to shape the public's minds on many topics, and in this case, particularly on gender roles. By promoting discourses that challenge or support gender norms, Tiktok can convey messages that will influence people's behaviors and beliefs. Furthermore, social constructivism can be perceived in the results through the participants' interpretation of gender narratives. They often evoke their own understandings of gender equality based on their FYP but also based on their cultural and social background. Such contexts are important to consider as they are factors that shape one's identity and values, altogether with media exposure. Thus, these theories are important to apply to the findings as they help understand the intersections between media and individual influence on users' interpretation of gender narratives.

5.2. Answering the Research Question

This study revealed that the engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok significantly shapes young women's views on gender equality by exposing them to both empowering and regressive narratives and ideologies. Feminist content is manifested through educational videos about the topic and resonating discourses about womanhood, which fosters community solidarity and a sense of feeling understood. Such content also validates young women's experiences with their female identity by presenting videos of awareness about gender inequalities. Consequently, such content can be beneficial by providing support to young women in a male-dominated world, which is the aspect that young women in the interviews describe as being progressive for gender equality and feminism. However, the coexistence of anti-feminist content often portrayed by traditional gender roles and content presenting "Tradwife" ideals, or misogynistic narratives, makes the platform a nuanced space. Moreover, trends like "girl dinner," which are meant to be entertaining and humorous, are argued to have deeper connotations that challenge or decrease

feminist principles. The illustration of gender-specific content perpetuates regressive gender norms as acceptable or desirable. As a result, TikTok's algorithmic curation, which tailors content to individual users' preferences and interests, creates a fragmented space where young women may be exposed to conflicting gender ideologies, leading to both internalized contradictions and ambivalence about gender roles. Ultimately, this dual exposure can either reinforce or undermine young women's commitment to gender equality, depending on the type and frequency of content they engage with.

5.3. Societal and Practical Implications

The findings of this study illustrate wider societal implications, especially when it comes to social media platforms' responsibility for the mental health issues among young women. The majority stated their concern and frustration with the harmful trends that are seen in the media and on platforms like TikTok. The example of #SkinnyTok urges regulations to become stricter in order to prevent the promotion of dangerous behaviors to the audience. Moreover, the entertainment purposes of TikTok remain an appreciated aspect of the app; however, gender-specific trends like “girl dinner” can discredit important movements such as feminism. Therefore, this ambiguity raises the question of how activism can be maintained seriously in media environments, particularly in this day and age where entertainment on media platforms is central.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While the research provided valuable insights into how TikTok shapes young women's views on gender equality, there are several limitations to consider. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample size of 10 young women, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives among all TikTok users. Even though the sample provided in-depth-qualitative insights, it is not representative and lacks diversity.

Additionally, the highly tailored nature of TikTok's algorithmic curation may not capture the broader dimensions of how TikTok content impacts users with different socio-cultural backgrounds and identities. Thus, expanding the sample size and including a larger group of participants would be essential to further understanding the intersectionality of gender, identity, and digital engagement on TikTok.

Another limitation is the potential bias that could arise with the method of self-reported data. The participants' reflections on their engagement with TikTok content are

shaped by their own perceptions and experiences, which may not fully capture the nuanced ways in which algorithmic exposure influences their beliefs and behaviors. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provide valuable insights into participants' experiences, but they are still limited by recall bias, as participants may not be able to accurately remember the specific ways in which content on TikTok shapes their views on gender equality.

The study focused primarily on the content that young women are exposed to on TikTok due to the processes of its algorithm. However, future research could delve deeper into how users navigate their digital environment, which is also a factor that could determine how young women navigate feminist and anti-feminist content. Understanding the user's active engagement through likes, follows, or shares could suggest other dimensions of their exposure to media content. Finally, future research could also investigate a larger sample size with different demographics, including male and non-binary participants, for more diverse insights. Lastly, it could be pertinent to investigate how TikTok content creators themselves experience and engage with feminist narratives or gender-based discrimination on the platform.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Introduction

- Explain Objective: The aim is to explore how TikTok shapes participants' views on feminism, gender norms, and equality through algorithmic content exposure.
- Briefly discuss the purpose of the interview and explain the study's focus
- Ask for consent and confirm recording

Demographics

- Age
- gender identity
- cultural background

Icebreaker

- How long have you used TikTok, and what do you typically use it for?

Algorithm & Content Exposure (10 mins)

1. How often do you think TikTok's algorithm shows you content that aligns with your values?

- How is "For You Page" tailored to your interests?

2. What content have you encountered that surprised or disagreed with your values? How did it make you feel?

Gender-Specific Content (8 mins)

3. How often do you see content about womanhood or "girly" topics? What's your opinion on these trends?

4. How does TikTok portray men vs. women (e.g., "girl dinner" vs. male equivalents)?

- have you ever noticed a real difference in gender-related content/trends?

Feminism & Self-Identification (7 mins)

5. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?

6. How would you define feminism in your own words?

Feminism in Digital Spaces (10 mins)

7. How do you think feminism shows up on TikTok? (for example, trends/creators.)

8. Has anything you've seen on TikTok ever made you think about gender roles

Emotional Impact & Empowerment (10 mins)

9. How do you feel when you see content that challenges your values (e.g., anti-feminist posts)?

10. Do any "empowering" trends (e.g., body positivity) really make you feel empowered, or do they sometimes have the opposite effect?

11. Have you ever felt pressured to conform to TikTok's gender-related trends?

Opinion Shifts & Influential Trends (5 mins)

12. How has TikTok influenced your opinion about a gender-related issue? (If yes, ask for an example.)

13. Are there specific trends or creators you think heavily influence people's views on gender?

Progressive vs. Regressive (5 mins)

14. Overall, how is TikTok moving gender equality forward or backward?

15. What changes would improve gender discourse on TikTok?

Final Thoughts (2 mins)

16. Is there anything about TikTok's role in shaping gender norms we haven't discussed?

Conclusion

Thank the participant for their time and participation

Appendix B – Interview Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Lorine Tümen, 618132lt@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about the impact of TikTok in shaping users views on feminism, gender norms, and equality through algorithmic content exposure..The purpose of the study is to understand how engagement with TikTok content shape young women’s perception on feminism and gender equality.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to: feminism, gender-related topics and TikTok content consumption/ exposure/ impact.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. Participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

B. I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for their privacy. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)— I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only use pseudonyms to identify participants.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45 to 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

DATA COLLECTION AND RETENTION

During the interview, the following personal data will be collected from you: Name, age, gender, nationality, cultural/ ethnic background, audio or visual recordings, occupation, sentiments about / feelings about / opinions about, IP address, information about physical or mental health.

In addition, it is also possible that you will talk about your political affiliation and religious or philosophical beliefs and those of others, as these may also relate to your opinion about gender-related topics, feminism and TikTok consumption.

In case, you desire to know more about my research, I also need your email address; to send the results of the study to you.

Your data will be retained for a minimum of 3 years. I retain the data so that other researchers have the opportunity to verify that the research was conducted correctly.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Lorine Tümen, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 618132lt@eur.nl

Do you have a complaint or concerns about your privacy? Please email Lorine Tümen 618132lt@eur.nl or visit www.autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl. (T: 088 - 1805250)

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name Signature Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix C – Codebook

Themes	Codes	Description	quote example
Algorithmic Curation and the Personalization of Feminist and Anti-Feminist Content	Algorithmic accuracy, Echo Chamber, Exposure to opposing views, Liked content exposure, scrolling disliked content, inaccurate algorithm, coexistence of beliefs	Reflecting on users' experiences with their algorithm and FYP based on repetitive or unexpected content exposure	“99% of the time, it shows whatever interests me.” - Bea “Most of my for you page is really tailored towards women, because I am one as well” - Laura
Feminist identification and ambivalence	feminist engagement, female-oriented content, Feminist identity, gender equality, misrepresentation of feminism, unsure about feminist position, women’s rights	Differences in how feminist messages are received and identification extend with feminist ideologies	“I am in between, but I think 65% yes and 35% no. I am in the middle, but more, because I am a woman.” - Lila
Anti-feminist content and internalized misogyny	anti-feminism as hate speech, anti-feminist, diminishing women, dominant masculine norms, embedded social	Conservative gender roles are romanticized, and the High visibility of harmful male	“Someone like Andrew Tate or other creators like that is something pretty

	injustices, trad wives, increased conservatism,	creators like Andrew Tate	concerning for our world” - Lila
Body image, beauty norms, and the performance of femininity	pressure to conform, personal dissatisfaction, exposure to eating disorders, gender body ideals, social comparison, unhealthy advice,	Body positivity seen as exclusive to certain body types. Pressure to look or act a certain way online Reinforcement of unrealistic beauty and lifestyle norms	“Female body comes in very different shapes and sizes, but the Internet is a really tough place - Jessy

Appendix D – AI Declaration

I hereby declare that I have used AI tools such as ChatGPT as I have signed the “Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis”

For example I asked ChatGPT to rephrase my research question as a thesis title, I asked ChatGPT to correct any grammatical errors in my sentences; I also used Grammarly to help me refine some sentences for a better and more academic writing style.

My prompts included:

- Can you rephrase this research question as a title for my thesis: *“How does engagement with feminist and anti-feminist content on TikTok shape young women’s views on gender equality?”*
- Can you help me rephrase and correct grammatical mistakes for this sentence?
- Is this paragraph clear? Help me correct any grammatical mistakes:
Furthermore, the hashtag #SkinnyTok, which was also highly discussed in the interviews and which provoked a lot of controversy, as concerns were raised about its ethicality. Governments such as the French one decided to take action against such phenomena that promote extreme body standards and skinny ideals to young women (Willsher, 2025) by portraying restricted eating, which sometimes falls into eating disorders. Therefore, the hashtag #SkinnyTok got removed due to European regulations expressing their concern about such videos being available to young users (Maheshwari, 2025).