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Viral Femininity:
A Cognitive Semantic Analysis of Emergent Girl Talk Online

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I. Introduction

In recent years, hyperfeminine aesthetics have come to dominate social and cultural trends aimed at young women, extending beyond fashion into wellness, behavior, relationship structures, and language. Across social media there is a renewed embrace of binary gender ideology that repackages traditional, conservative belief systems and often frames them as empowerment or self-improvement. On the feminine side of this binary, this shift is visible in bow-heavy “coquette” fashion and ballerina-inspired aesthetics, and it is also noticeable in recent linguistic trends. In the modern internet age, social media algorithms rapidly popularize trends with language that draws from a semantic domain of exaggerated femininity, often accompanied in written text by sparkle and bow emojis. Girl talk abounds online—we are focused on what the “girlies” and “girlypops” are up to and how they are embodying femininity in their lifestyles. Paired with this fixation on girlhood aesthetics is an emotional imperative for trend participants to not just look, but *feel* more feminine. This imperative has fostered the parallel creation of a new lexicon of language used to describe issues related to embodying this feeling of femininity, mainly related to the concept of “feminine energy.”

At first glance, the productive “girl” element used in many compounds might appear playful and harmless. The twenty-first century has seen plenty of trendy compounds that deploy “girl.” The turn of the century had punk feminist “riotgrrls,” then “girl power” was a popular phrase in marketing. The hustling and high-powered “girlboss” dominated the 2010s, but the pandemic led to a shift in the senses of terms with the “girl” affix. Recent articles have chronicled the “Death of the Girlboss” and rise of the “soft girl” among younger generations on social media. The communities of TikTok populated by young heterosexual women have been immersed in a cycle of “girl” trends that sell ways of being female. The last few years have seen the “clean girl,” the “softgirl,” the self-care focused “that girl,” ostensibly light-hearted ironic phrases like “girl dinner” and “girl math,” and the trending caption “I’m just a girl” paired with audio from No Doubt’s iconic song. Many have raised the critique that “girl,” when used to describe adult women, is inherently infantilizing. However, others argue that it may just be indicative of a casual, more playful and informal register. This research will not focus on the word “girl” in itself, but rather the harmful ideology implicitly conveyed by its combination with other semantic mental spaces in these emergent trend phrases.

Other recent trends that pull from the conceptual domain of femininity include discourse surrounding how to attain “princess treatment” from a romantic interest and how to cultivate or “activate” one’s “feminine energy.” Further, drawing from this femininity discourse is instructional content aimed at heterosexual women on how to become a “high-value woman,” able to secure a relationship with a “high-value man.” This specific language was popularized as slang in reactionary spaces but has now achieved widespread lexicalization, and the dataset I created reveals how these phrases are used together to convey a cohesive bioessentialist gender ideology.

In our modern age of internet virality, the online world is a space that encourages the rapid development of new trends and emergent lexical items. Ideas, values, and aesthetics can arise out of subcultures to affect dominant societal attitudes quickly, and with substantial reach and impact. Many consumers of these trends might think that linguistic trends are just words, just fun, but I will argue that an analysis of the conceptual structures behind this language is essential in understanding what the media we consume might implicitly drive us to believe about everyday reality. Taking all this under consideration, a semantic and conceptual analysis of the lexicon that emerges from viral trends and memes can reveal a corresponding shift in underlying social ideology. In a seminal theoretical work on conceptual structures and cognitive semantics, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) wrote that “our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” (3). Everyday language, unanalyzed, can impart harmful conceptual systems that lead us to relate to other people and view reality in a way we might not actually ethically align with. Everyday language can also reinforce negative and dangerous social stereotypes, reproducing inequality—a phenomenon widely discussed in the work of critical discourse analysts (e.g., Fairclough 1989).

By using cognitive semantic analytical methods, I seek to investigate the conceptual structure behind these emergent words and phrases. The questions at issue include, what are we doing when we deploy “girl” in novel compounds, and what conceptual structures do these emergent terms rely on to convey meaning? What Idealized Cognitive Models (Lakoff 1987) are relevant in the modern emphasis on the binary system of feminine and masculine energy, and what do these underlying conceptual structures say about the modern view of heterosexual romance? Drawing from the cognitive semantic theories of categorization, conceptual metaphor, and blended spaces, this project seeks to explain how antifeminist, conservative ideologies can be naturalized by the lexicon of popular culture. In this paper, I will introduce the modern femininity discourse that is occurring in certain online spaces centered around young heterosexual women, and I will show examples of how emergent language in these spaces contributes to the creation of an idea of modern femininity that supports conservative values and traditional gender roles. I will demonstrate where this particular language comes from at a conceptual level. This particular notion of femininity, emerging from the online discourse, must be noticed because it coincides with a larger cultural shift towards traditional values occurring today in America.

II. Sociology Research on Internet Femininity

Although, in this paper, I look at trending words and phrases that have garnered mainstream popularity, existing sociological research on the extremist spaces where some of this gendered language and ideology first originated online is essential for understanding the underlying ideology and impact of this language now. Many readers might be familiar with terms

like “manosphere” and “incel.” The manosphere is a term used to describe many related online subcommunities that share an ideology of gender hierarchy and traditional values, including forums for involuntary celibate “incels” and “alpha” lifestyle podcasters. Essential background for this research into viral femininity ideology, however, is the less researched “femosphere,” comprised of women-centered spaces that also conform to these gender essentialist and traditional beliefs.

Sociological research into these extremist femosphere spaces—particularly on “tradwives,” reactionary feminists, and the community in the r/RedPillWomen subreddit—gives a basis for the ideological analysis of the emergent online lexicon of femininity phrases. Femosphere ideology and language has disseminated through viral trends to the point that it is now in casual use among women and girls who may be entirely unfamiliar with the femosphere.

In *Incels and Ideologies* (2023), Frazer Heritage defines red pill ideology as a network of beliefs centered around a notion that “reject[s] contemporary views of feminism and lead[s] members of these communities to claim that society has an inherent bias against men” (8). He also notes “the broader red pill ideology—from which the ideologies which underpin the incel community originate—is Republican (i.e., politically right-wing)” (45). This contemporary rejection of feminism is also circulating in women-dominated online communities that embrace the red pill philosophy.

Feminist researcher Jilly Boyce Kay tracked this trend in the article “The reactionary turn in popular feminism” (2025). She describes that this turn “began to take shape in media culture from 2018 onwards,” and the central ideology “is based on the ostensibly ‘radical’ premise that ‘men and women are different’” (1,854). This type of feminism is rooted in ‘choice feminism,’ an idea that feminists can choose or not choose to be subordinate housewives, and it “views ‘liberal feminism’ and progressive politics as catastrophic for women, claiming that they deny the ‘truths’ of women’s biologically-based, evolutionarily determined ‘interests’ - which are based on their apparently ‘natural urges toward seeking commitment, affection, and protection’” (1,853). This ideology emerges from bioessentialism, the idea that unalterable biology and genetics determine human behavior, traits, and gender roles—categorizing gender into a restrictive binary structure. Gender essentialists see men and women as innately different, polar opposites, with roles that are separate but often complementary. This notion is reflected in many of the quotes I have selected from my corpus.

Pauline Hoebanx’s sociological study “Red Pill Women: Heterosexual Fantasies in Misogynistic Spaces” (2025) examines the beliefs of women posting in the r/RedPillWomen subreddit community, which had over 72,000 members at the time of the 2024 study. She writes, “narratives of tradition in Red Pill and TradWife subreddits reflect a ‘nostalgic view of a mythic past’ (Mattheis 2021, 91). This idealized re-imagining of the white, American, heteronormative, and middle-class family model naturalizes gendered roles and obscures underlying racist and classist systems of power” (179). Hoebanx explains women’s potential motivation to participate

in misogynistic ideology with the sociological concepts of “femininity premium” and a “patriarchal bargain.” Certain women, those who can successfully replicate dominant beauty standards, embody hegemonic femininity, and these women “benefit from a ‘femininity premium’—individual advantages over other women, as well as collective benefits derived from their privileged positions within other systems of domination, such as whiteness and class privilege” (181). The femininity premium includes access to privileged partners, an idea that is reflected in the “high-value woman” trend, wherein women seek to self-optimize to gain access to hegemonic femininity and thus “high-value” privileged male partners. Hoebanx also analyzes how these women, situated in an unstable financial situation due to the patriarchal structures of late neoliberal capitalism, might be motivated to adopt the red pill take on naturalized gender hierarchy due to the “patriarchal bargain,” which describes the “decision of some women to conform to patriarchal demands to gain benefits such as financial security,” driven to find a sense of protection “in the face of growing uncertainty” (181). One section of this study describes how women in this community are using the term “high-value man,” and a user of the subreddit was quoted saying “be careful, not all men who have resources are HVM.”

Reactionary feminists focus on the naturalized, “evolutionarily-based” roles of men and women as providers and receivers, hard workers and soft nurturers, and these ideas are also quite evident in the linguistic examples I present from my corpus of current online femininity trends. Language about “high-value” partners circulated first in these manosphere and femosphere spaces, but what was once niche slang has achieved widespread lexicalization and usage. This ideology is invading mainstream gender trends in a way that may not be immediately apparent to the average trend participant.

III. Theoretical Background

Semantic theory seeks to explain how our minds make meaning out of language. Modern semanticists use ideas from cognitive science to explore how words evoke categories in the mind, and thus, meaning is derived from categorical structures. George Lakoff’s book *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987) presented a major shift in semantic theory from the traditional, objectivist view in cognitive science, that words refer directly to real things in the world and “categories are defined in terms of common properties of their members” (xii). Building on Eleanor Rosch’s (1971, 1973, 1975) theories about categorical prototypes and his previous work on conceptual structure, he argues in this text that “our bodily experiences and the way we use imaginative mechanisms are central to how we construct categories to make sense of experience” (xii). In Lakoff’s view of human reason as it relates to the construction of conceptual categories, thought is embodied, experientially grounded, and imaginative.

The main thesis Lakoff puts forward is his idea of Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs), which he describes as structures of mental space with which humans organize knowledge (1987).

ICMs are idealized in our minds, so may not perfectly fit reality. Lakoff explains how humans categorize their reason about the world into cognitive structures that are conceptual gestalts and culturally constructed, so not true representations of the real world. Time, for instance, is encompassed in culturally relative ICMs, since different cultures structure time with different calendars and units. Prototype theory (Rosch 1971) plays an important role in analysis of ICMs, as an idealized model often has a prototype, or a best example of the model.

Lakoff (1987) explains how conceptually complex ICMs can be with the example of motherhood. Our idealized cognitive model of a mother is not one conceptual model, but actually a cluster of overlapping models that each describe different aspects of mother roles and qualities. This cluster model includes the birth model, in which someone who gives birth is a mother, the nurturance model, in which the female adult who may not have birthed but does raise the child is a mother, and so on. In this complex cluster of conceptual models that make up the ICM, a prototype emerges that we imagine is the best example of the mother category—a mother who gave birth to and is nurturing a child within a nuclear family system. But these clusters also help us understand that we still apply the mother label to non-prototypical situations. Like motherhood, the ICM of femininity is quite complex and multi-faceted. Adding on to this, the cognitive models we rely on to understand these complex concepts like motherhood and femininity also are structured through everyday conceptual metaphors, which are used to understand every abstract concept.

In their pioneering work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson introduce Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In this, they develop the ideas that metaphor is pervasive in daily thought and action, and conceptual metaphors structure how we think about most concepts, through “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (5). In Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphors are described with the structure TARGET IS SOURCE, where the source is the base metaphorical concept and the target is the concept it is mapped onto to create meaning. For example, in the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A TRANSACTION, romantic relationships are metaphorically understood in terms of the conceptual structure with which we understand commercial transactions, and we also infer all the entailments that come from the commercial event frame when this metaphor is applied. For example, people are mapped onto goods, and we infer that they can be assigned value. Certain words and phrases trigger conceptual metaphors in our minds, carrying entailments and mappings with them. In this research, phrases like *high-value woman* evoke these transaction mappings.

Another branch of cognitive linguistics relevant to parsing this emergent gender lexicon is the semantic theory of mental space blending. Eve Sweetser built on Fauconnier and Turner’s (1995, 1996, 1998) theories of mental spaces and categorization with ideas to address semantic compositionality, which is important in the semantic analysis of emergent compounds like *girl math*. In “Compositionality and blending: semantic composition in a cognitively realistic framework” (1999), she explains that the traditional idea of semantic compositionality was one

of morphemic ‘building-blocks,’ wherein each word or morpheme always represents one “rigid and stable semantic chunk.” Instead, following the semantic theory of flexible mental spaces first proposed by Fouconnier and Turner, “the same word can represent very different complex meaning structures in different contexts, and may alter flexibly depending on the meanings surrounding it” (Sweetser 136).

Sweetser gives the Noun-Noun compound example of a *land yacht*, which describes a large, expensive car. A *land yacht* is not a type of real *yacht*, as the rigid building-block model would suggest. In this example, ideas about land from the land mental space and ideas about yachts from the yacht mental space blend to create a novel idea in the overlap of flexible spaces. The idea that a yacht is a large, luxurious, expensive vehicle is imported into the blend from our real-world knowledge of yachts, and this leads us to understand that a land yacht is a large luxurious vehicle. However, we don’t import other qualities we know about yachts, like how yachts rest on water and have sails. Compounds like this are not straightforwardly compositional—rather, they draw on lots of real-world knowledge that has been constructed through frames, and to understand them we extract the pieces of the frame that make sense in the blend. In the new blended space, the way we imagine a land vehicle and the way we imagine a counterpart vehicle, a yacht, combine to make legible a very specific type of luxury land vehicle—the *land yacht* (Sweetser 135).

IV. Methodology

To conduct semantic research on contemporary linguistic trends in the enormous landscape of social media, I first used popular media articles to discover the trends that have had the most noticed or greatest impact on culture. I had some prior knowledge of these gender-focused linguistic trends through the language of my own social group and my personal Instagram algorithm, but articles like *Bustle’s* “The Tradwife in Girlboss Clothing” about the high-value woman trend, *Teen Vogue’s* op-ed “‘Divine Feminine’ Advice on TikTok is Just Part of the Alt-Right Pipeline,” and *Vogue’s* “Girl, Stop: Let’s End the Tyranny of 2023’s ‘Girl’ Trends” helped guide my selection of the most relevant words and phrases to focus my analysis on.

With these key words and phrases selected, I then searched within TikTok and Instagram to build a corpus of videos that discuss these phrases or listed them in the caption. I tried to select videos that were published within the last two years and that had at least a few thousand likes. I then used ChatGPT to transcribe these videos into a 5,821 wordcount dataset. I then used this dataset to extract specific uses of the words and phrases under issue and to inform my overall analysis of the ideology underlying the use of emergent language in these gender trends.

V. Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, I will focus my cognitive semantic analysis on the phrases *girl math*, *girl dinner*, *princess treatment*, *feminine energy*, and *high-value woman*. These emergent phrases were born out of online trends ranging from humorous memes to discourse about lifestyle and relationships, meant to be taken as legitimate advice.

The ‘Girls’ and ‘Princesses’ of Social Media

In investigating the language of femininity in online spaces, *girl* trends were inescapable. The 2020’s have seen so many “girls” rise and fall, from the micro-trendy *tomato girl*, *vanilla girl*, and *that girl*, to those with more staying power– the *clean girl* with her recognizable slicked hairstyle, the *softgirl* documenting her delicate habits within the #softliving tag, and the phrases *girl math* and *girl dinner*, lexicalized into everyday vocabulary. As “girl” is a highly productive compounding element within the emergent lexicon of viral female personas and discourses, I will focus my semantic analysis first on the compositionality of the phrases *girl math* and *girl dinner*, and next extend this analysis to the entailments of “princess,” as in the *pilates princess*, another viral girl persona, and the set of behaviors labelled *princess treatment*.

Let’s first examine the phrase *girl math*, a humorous concept conventionalized to refer to a type of flawed logic women employ when they want to rationalize a potentially poor financial decision. This playful online trend sparked countless videos of women listing various scenarios in which they use girl math, often having to do with the purchase of clothing or other beauty products. Below are examples of the use of this phrase in the data I gathered:

- (1) “Oh my gosh, I think I figured it out. You know what? Us girls have a shopping problem. It’s because us females do math differently than the male species. If I pay for something in cash, it feels like I got it for free because it didn’t reduce my bank balance. ***Girl math.***” (TikTok, User 9)
- (2) “I asked you guys what ***girl math*** you use the most in your everyday life, and I’m laughing because we are all the same...When I reload my Starbucks card, the Starbucks that I get later is free. I kissed those dollars goodbye a long time ago. They bear no weight on me now. Cash isn’t real money. This is a big one. It’s in the wallet, it comes, it goes. It’s fairy dust.” (TikTok, User 8)
- (3) “A list of things that I firmly believe because of ***girl math***...Anything discounted more than 50% is free, and I’m losing money by not getting it.” (Instagram, User 15)

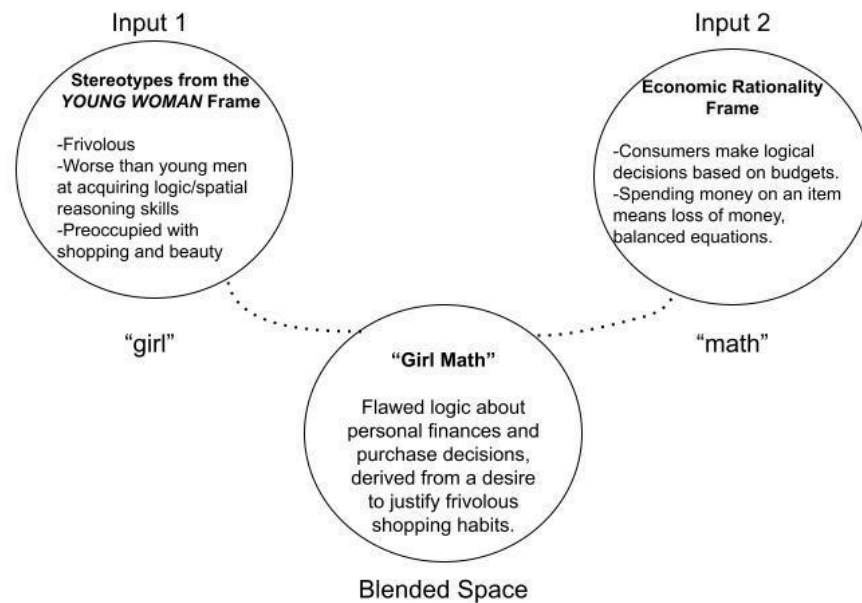
In these examples, the *girl math* concept compounds the words “girl” and “math” to describe a nonserious way of reasoning about personal finances. *Girl math* does not simply mean “mathematics when done by people who identify as girls,” so interpreting the meaning of this phrase invokes a more complex cognitive process than the simple compositional combination of

words like building blocks. Many of these videos clearly have a humorous, ironic tone. User 9 ended her video with the sign-off, “Yas, sis. Keep slaying in capitalism!” (TikTok). However, humorous phrases still rely on conceptual structures to convey meaning, and these conceptual structures influence our perception of everyday reality.

Girl math, and *girl dinner*, are Noun+Noun compound phrases, with an indirect compositionality because they are blends of the semantic spaces of a “girl” modifier and a common noun, where only certain stereotypes from the young woman semantic frame are used in understanding these particular versions of math and dinner. Our interpretation of a compositional phrase depends on the “active zone” of the frame which the specific meaning is drawn from. An active zone comes from Langacker’s (1991) theoretical work and can describe the specific subpart of an entity that is relevant to understanding its relationship to something else. Our Idealized Cognitive Model of a female person is multi-faceted, comprised of many ideas about prototypical female behavior. Sweetser, summarizing Langacker’s work, imparts that “all semantic elaboration relationships depend on the identification of an appropriate active zone of the elaborated concept” (Sweetser 138). The young woman semantic frame is an expansive structure, and the active zone of *girl* as elaborated in *girl math* is evoking certain socially constructed stereotypes about female rationality and interests. Girl as a semantic element in this context carries the inference that the active zone of semantic elaboration is the idea that women love shopping and have frivolous, unrealistic views of serious issues such as financial budgeting. The way this idea about women is elaborated into a popular phrase cements this stereotype into the ICM of the modern woman.

Sweetser used the example of “safe dog” in her exploration of semantic compositionality. A “safe dog” can either describe a scenario in which a dog was potentially endangered, as if by bear attack, or in which a dog could have been a source of danger, as if near a vulnerable baby. “Safe” is a word with a mental space that is semantically flexible, dependent on the speaker’s epistemology and the context it is applied to. Similarly, “girl” as an elaboration of the woman frame inhabits a flexible mental space with many potential active zones, and it takes on a specific meaning when the mental spaces of economic rationality and our preconceived stereotypes about female interests combine. In these emergent phrases, the active zone of *girl* is not focused on positive qualities associated with women. *Girl math* in its contemporary semantic understanding is not when a woman earns a PhD in rocket science, just as “running like a girl” is not typically a way to describe a scenario in which a woman is running fast with exemplary form. The generic mental spaces of mathematics and running take on negative or inferior connotations when blended with the mental space of girl stereotypes.

The diagram below is an illustration of how this type of mental space blending works:



The term “math,” used in this context of financial decision-making, is evoking the frame of economic rationality, which includes general ideas about financial budgeting and the exchange of money for goods. When blended with the mental space of negative stereotypes about young women, math takes on this negative connotation of flawed logical reasoning. When we understand the contemporary meaning of *girl math*, we must access and import these negative stereotypes into the blended space of understanding.

In User 8’s lengthy video defining girl math, she goes on to say:

- (4) “This isn’t *girl math*, this is just *girl logic*. You eat half a cookie, you really ate no cookie. This is what I say: if you eat the same cookie, a whole cookie, but spread it out over an hour or just take little mouse bites, like so petite, the caloric value is zero.”
(TikTok, User 8).

From this quotation, it is clear that the semantic difference between “math” and “logic” is not doing the conceptual heavy lifting. What gives these novel utterances their meaning is “girl” and the entailment of a stereotype that is facetious, irrational, and preoccupied with thinness and consumerism. User 8’s assertion that calorie-focused reasoning is “girl logic” leads to the next phrase under analysis- *girl dinner*.

The term girl dinner was first coined in a 2023 TikTok, and it quickly became viral. Videos of this trend amassed millions of views and likes (knowyourmeme.com). The trend also brought about an original “girl dinner” song, which likely increased the virality as trends with a specific audio association are easy to participate in. Videos within this trend include simple images of meals set to the popular song and videos of influencers talking through what girl

dinner means to them. For example, User 2 speaks to the camera while eating “deconstructed sushi”--- tuna salad with cucumbers, seaweed, and diet coke. In her TikTok, she says:

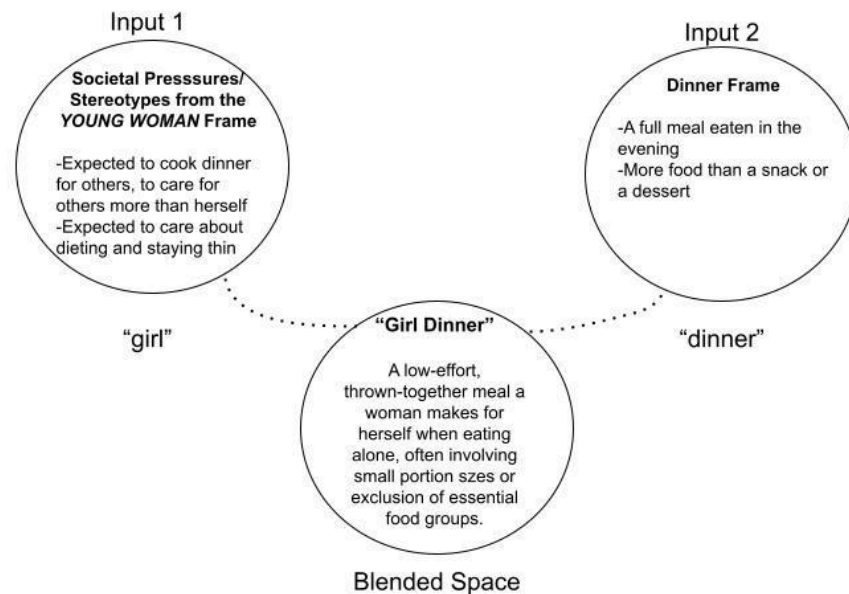
- (5) “The only good part about my husband not being home for dinner is that I can make a very low-effort *girl dinner*, something that he would find disgusting, not enough food. I don’t know, whatever men make up in their head why it’s not a meat and potatoes meal.” (TikTok, User 2)

She also says that after girl dinner, “for dessert I can have a glass of wine, go on my walking pad” (TikTok). This meal obviously lacks carbs, a glass of wine is far from an indulgent dessert, and she suggests that men think girl dinners are “not enough food.”

Another Instagram video from my corpus, with #girl dinner in the caption, displays the text “When you remember your husband won’t be home for dinner” over a wordless video of a woman miming chopping a bell pepper near an unopened package of ground beef until she suddenly sweeps these ingredients off the counter and a plate appears, onto which she tosses two strawberries, what appears to be a packaged meat stick, and fourteen almonds.

Girl dinner, as it is depicted in this social media trend, is a term that describes the meals that women make for themselves when they will be eating alone. The meaning has been less conventionalized than *girl math*, as girl dinners can take many forms. I found that girl dinner can be a small collection of snack items, simple and protein-less buttered pasta, or a restaurant order of caesar salad and french fries. In general, this trend depicts meals that are low-effort in preparation, less concerned with nutritional heartiness than the “meat and potatoes” meals preferred by User 2’s husband, and often depict small portion sizes. This trend also draws from the expectation that women should prioritize caring and cooking for others, so when a woman is alone without the pressure to be a caretaker, she will not put effort or care into food just for herself.

Girl dinner, like *girl math*, is not simply the name for an event in which a girl eats dinner. Its specific meaning depends on the entailment of certain stereotypes we hold about young women, specifically that they may feel a societal pressure to be thin and therefore moderate their portion sizes. Below is a diagram of how this blended mental space is created:



This is where the importance of context comes into how we process and understand a novel term. Without much explanation, we can take the “girl” modifier, along with the context of modern notions of femininity and its relationship to seeking thinness, and reason that this blend evokes this very particular version of “dinner.” While the trend may appear to be a harmless joke about strange eating habits, it became so widespread that it was added to dictionaries. Every time these cognitive processes and stereotypes we use to understand gendered terms like these become entrenched, it reinforces a girl prototype that impacts how young women using this language think they should behave. This girl ideal is further reinforced in dating advice geared toward women who want to receive princess treatment in dating or attract a “high-value man.” This advice often references thinness and “getting your body right.”

Related to the trending *clean girl* persona is the subarchetype *pilates princess*, a thin, clean, calm woman, outfitted in baby pink yoga gear, who does gentle pilates rather than vigorous or heavy-weight exercises. We also see “princess” show up in videos about *princess treatment*, a label for a set of behaviors women expect from their male partners within heterosexual dating, that go above and beyond the bare minimum. Recently, TikTok saw the “Princess Treatment or Bare Minimum” trend, in which girlfriends quiz boyfriends on which label to assign behaviors such as paying for nail salon appointments and tying a girlfriend’s shoelaces for her.

Unlike the other compounds I’ve discussed in this emergent lexicon, *princess treatment* is quite literal. This is a more straightforwardly compositional compound, where our mental space that defines princesses modifies how we understand the concept of treatment. Although it is

more literal and doesn't rely on specific negative stereotypes to be understood, it is a part of this emergent lexicon used alongside these other phrases within single utterances, and its conceptual structure similarly functions to reinforce the same conservative, uncharitable models of womanhood and femininity.

For example, in one woman's video describing how she receives princess treatment from her husband, she first says that she "leveled up" her princess treatment when she became a full-time housewife, and then explains:

- (6) "For example, I enjoy being the princess when traveling: I turn my brain off, don't worry about logistics, and just show up to be pretty while he takes care of everything. This *princess treatment* is fun and silly—you have to embrace it and remove the mindset that you must do everything for yourself." (TikTok, User 11)

Princess evokes the royalty frame and is conceptually related to the young woman frame, as "princess" relies on female gender. It carries entailments of needing to be protected, needing to be waited on, and a lack of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Below are more usage examples of this phrase by Instagram-based dating coaches and gurus:

- (7) "If you know how to do these three things, men will literally worship you, spoil you, and give you as much *princess treatment* as you want. First thing is learning how to attract a *high-value masculine man* who will actually spoil you and give you *princess treatment*, but attracting him in a way where you are the prize and he is chasing you, he is courting you, he is literally obsessed with you." (Instagram, User 12)
- (8) "You want the *princess treatment*, you have to give him the king treatment... So to get the *princess treatment*, you need to let him lead, and you need to hold space for his masculinity. Now, this is not about submission. This is about giving him the space to lead and step up, to feel strong and admired and useful, not because you need him, but because you see him. And it's truly in the micro-behaviours of everyday life: trusting his decision-making, not overruling him when he has direction on something, showing genuine gratitude when he does things for you, and letting him help you. Let him carry the damn bag. You see it all the time. When a woman respects a man's masculine core, his confidence skyrockets. He feels like a king, and he starts to treat you like a queen." (Instagram, User 13).

This phrase is being used in the online discourse surrounding heterosexual dating expectations to describe a variety of behaviors, but they center around this idea drawn from the princess semantic space that depicts a woman who never does anything for herself. Although it is normal and positive for women to participate in discourse surrounding boundaries and the behavioral expectations of men within dating contexts, these examples show the ideological stances underpinning the use of this term by many of these dating advice content creators. A princess, or

the prototypical princess concept being imported into the understanding of this term, does not play an active role in her life. She is not a leader, she “doesn’t worry about logistics,” she “show[s] up to be pretty” while someone else “takes care of everything” (User 11). Much of this modern femininity discourse online centers around the notion that the “girlboss” women of traditional feminism worked too hard, and working too hard is construed here as a masculine trait. In this new feminism, *softgirls* and *princesses* lean into their calm, passive femininity and ideally, a man does the hard work while they sit prettily to receive it.

‘Feminine Energy’ Cultivates the ‘High-Value Woman’

Moving on to the gender language emerging in less humorous online discourse, influencers who give lifestyle and relationship advice will very often emphasize the importance of “leaning into” one’s *feminine energy*. This discourse can either center around a woman’s energetic wellness for her own sake, as in discussions of giving up the “girlboss” corporate lifestyle for a “soft life” that allows the prioritization self-care and leaning into femininity, or center around the cultivation of feminine energy for the sake of successful heterosexual dating. In the latter discourse, feminine energy can be strategically deployed to become a “high-value woman”—a persona capable of capturing the interest of the rare “high-value man.”

The concept of “feminine energy” is best analyzed as part of a larger conceptual structure, in which it is the foil to “masculine energy” in a binary system. User 1, who makes content discussing her life as a woman with autism, begins a video with, “These are things I do to maintain a soft life as an autistic girly.” She first describes taking the rest she needs, then says:

- (9) “I embrace my soft and *feminine energy*. A lot of people try to shame women out of being soft and feminine. It just feels a lot of the time like it is not accepted in society. There’s this main character that’s always like out go-getting and ‘I’m paying the bills’ and ‘I’m making money, I’m doing this.’ It’s a *masculine energy*, and there’s nothing wrong with women embracing their *masculine energy*. That’s perfectly fine. But there’s also nothing wrong with you just being soft and feminine.” (TikTok, User 1)

In this example, User 1 imagines feminine and masculine energy as two tangible objects that are in opposition, and a woman has the option of embracing either tangible feminine energy or tangible masculine energy object. Metaphorically, we often speak about abstract concepts as if they are physical objects or substances. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) wrote, “understanding our experience in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experiences and treat them as discrete entities” (25). This common ontological metaphor that AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT used here so that User 1 can treat the abstract concept of the cluster of behaviors considered feminine as a discrete entity that can be “embraced.” Once this concept is understood as an object, it can be possessed or taken in. We also commonly see

energy spoken about with the underlying conceptual metaphor ENERGY IS A SUBSTANCE (IN THE BODY), built off of the BODY IS A CONTAINER metaphor. One area of previous conceptual metaphor research on energy is centered on the concept of qi in traditional Chinese medicine. Mei Feng's (2021) research on qi described how it is metaphorically imagined as a "shapeless substance in the human body" that has constant liquid motion. When we construe dual masculine and feminine energies as substances that flow in the body, there is the entailment that we have control over substances that flow in our body as if they flow from taps that we can turn on or turn off—this conceptual structure is what allows us to understand User 1's assessment that a woman can either choose to embrace her "soft and feminine energy" or her go-getting "masculine energy."

Here, she is also clearly drawing a semantic association between the mental space of "masculine" and the qualities of making money and paying bills. "Soft" and "feminine" are routinely collocated in her speech, entrenching the association softness is essential in femininity.

The importance of softness can also be seen in the next examples:

- (10) "If you want to have a soft life, if you want to lean into that *feminine energy* and be with a man who does everything for you, you have to become that woman who is able to receive that soft life. But if you're just being aggressive and you complain all the time about the things he doesn't do, all you do is lean into your *masculine energy*. In other words, if you want soft, you have to be soft." (Tiktok, User 10)
- (11) "Over the past couple of years, I've been really leaning in towards being softer, slower, more feminine. Then we moved to Utah, and I decided to stay home, so I became a full-time housewife, stay-at-home mom. I would say that for me personally, that kind of leveled me up into this 'leveling up' my princess treatment, because I was really leaning into that *feminine energy*... So the baseline is genuine respect, love, and adoration for each other. Once that is there, you can level up your princess treatment because he wants to. Men want to adore you, love you, and spoil you. But when you're in your *masculine energy*, you don't give them room to do that—you don't give them room to chase you, to spoil you, or to adore you." (TikTok, User 11)

In these examples, speakers tell us to "lean into," "embrace," and "be in" feminine and masculine energy. The use of these verbs metaphorically constructs the concept of gender energy as a physical space that one can be in or be out of. This is a vastly different conceptualization than our other concept of gender fluidity, where gender is imagined on a nonbinary spectrum and moving between nonrigid categories can be a fluid action. Fluids can leak out of boundaries and inhabit both spaces, but this is not permitted in the tangible container conceptual model. In research on the metaphorical models of gender and transition, Jenny Lederer (2015) describes how "much of English discourse concerning gender centers on a spatially based understanding of

bounded regions and movement between” (96). The way gender is spoken about often reveals a conceptual model of binary, bounded regions in space. This conceptual model of these two energies conveys the entailment that one is either in a masculine or feminine space, and cannot be in both at once.

In this data, our understanding of *feminine energy* draws from multiple metaphors at once. This is quite common, as we often mix metaphors in speech and can do it in the same utterance. Here, THE BODY IS A CONTAINER that contains ENERGY which IS A FLUID, the ontological metaphor A CONCEPT (femininity in this case) IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT, and GENDER IS A BOUNDED REGION IN SPACE, are all conceptual metaphors being used to discuss femininity and how it relates to masculinity. Again and again, the feminine energy discourse constructs masculine and feminine as semantic opposites, with no natural spaces of overlap. And dangerously, this bounded regions model can be used to prop up a bioessentialist ideology of complementary, naturalized roles, in which men are aggressive providers and women are soft receivers.

Building on the concept of *feminine energy*, becoming a *high-value woman* is the subject of numerous videos from dating advice gurus on social media, who often profit from virality or are selling a self-improvement workshop to viewers. The following examples show the phrases *high-value woman* and *high-value man* in use, and some of what the term means to the speakers:

- (12) “Here are things I do by myself that make me a ***high-value woman*** and way more confident. Number one, I lost a lot of weight. I started doing Pilates three to four times a week at Solidcore, and I started eating 1500 calories or less a day...I practice a lot of self-care at home and kind of look at it as a fun activity. So I’m always doing hair treatments. I’m doing scalp massages. I’m doing body oil treatments. I’m taking baths. I’m making bouquets of fresh flowers around my house. I’m lighting candles. I’m making healthy snacks so that I can watch *The First Wives* on Netflix. That just feels so elite. When any person walks down the street and they look at me, I’m like, I’m clean. I’m healthy. I’m beautiful. I’m smart. I am courageous, spiritually woke. You are the top 1% of women.” (TikTok, User 3)
- (13) “Let’s talk about becoming a ***high-value woman***. I don’t care how much money you make. I don’t care what your title is at work. I don’t care what your career is. It’s all in here [points to heart]. Number one, girl, you gotta get your body right. This is probably the most important step, and let me tell you why. When people look at you, the first thing they see is your appearance. It’s just natural human nature. And when people look at you and they see a fit body, they see someone who takes care of themselves. They see someone who respects themselves, and they see someone who has discipline...With the routine, I have an established morning routine and an established night routine. For women especially, this is very important because when we don’t have a routine, our body thinks that we’re not safe and that can spike your cortisol. To be in your feminine, you

need to have as much ‘safety,’ quote unquote, as you can for your body.”
(TikTok, User 5)

- (14) “You hear a lot about why dating a *high-value man* tends to require a different kind of woman, and a woman with different standards and a certain kind of self-confidence. But let’s talk about what’s required to date a ***high-value woman*** who is connected to her *divine feminine energy*. Dating this kind of woman requires a different kind of man, just like dating a *high-value man* requires a different kind of woman, who’s not going to just accept any person. You are able to provide for yourself and give yourself a sense of comfort and security and all these things.” (TikTok, User 6)

As User 3 asserts, *high-value woman* carries the meaning of “elite,” or “the top one percent of women.” As an emergent phrase, it draws from other concepts within the conceptual structure of the modern feminine woman, including *feminine energy*, or as User 5 shortened it, “to be in your feminine.” The meaning of *high-value woman* certainly includes a proper relationship with feminine energy. It also certainly includes thinness, as two women described to be one of the most important qualities.

To analyze how the emergent phrase is interpreted as part of a conceptual system, we must look at what “high-value” is doing semantically. This phrase is specifically used in contexts about dating and finding a worthy match, and it takes its meaning from a conceptual metaphor about love. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discuss various conceptual metaphors humans use to talk about love and relationships. These include LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS MADNESS, and LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART. However, LOVE IS A TRANSACTION is the most salient conceptual structure behind these “high-value” phrases.

FRAME ANALYSIS: COMMERCIAL EVENT

COMMERCIAL EVENT		HETEROSEXUAL ROMANCE
Buyer	→	Husband
Seller	→	Wife
Goods	→	Sex, Beauty, Attention
Money	→	Capital, Status, Wealth

In the conceptual structure of the commercial event frame, a buyer maps onto a husband, a seller maps on to a wife, the goods the wife sells are concepts like beauty and sex, and the money with which the husband makes a purchase are concepts like status and wealth. The commercial event frame carries many implicit inferences. People are understood as goods, and the existence of *high-value* people implies a necessary existence of low-value people within a value hierarchy. If a buyer gives someone money, they expect goods in return. There is the expectation that money is exchanged for a product of equivalent value, and dating is elaborated as shopping for the most valuable product. A single woman can infer from this structure that if she wants to find love, her time should be spent focused on changing herself to maximize her value in the marketplace. This is a very different message than the message imparted by relationship discourse structured by metaphors like LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART or LOVE IS A LIVING ORGANISM, which tell us that love is unique, an expression of who you are, and something that grows and changes. In those models, love can be accessed by everyone. In a transactional model, love is seen as only for those who have earned it.

We have metaphorical flexibility when discussing love, yet the conceptual structures behind this modern dating discourse reveal that many young people are opting for the one where humans are most objectified, incentivized to constantly self-optimize in order to compete for “high-value” partners, represented as a scarcity.

VI. Discussion

Semantic analysis of popular internet trend phrases revealed a common mental construction of the modern woman-girl prototype as soft, delicate, frivolous, unable to be financially intelligent or independent, submissive, and preoccupied with beauty, thinness, and consumerism. These emergent phrases, whether humorous or serious, work in tandem to impart this mental model—someone in her *feminine energy* likely makes *girl dinners* for herself, and a *high-value woman* receives financial support and *princess treatment* from high-value male providers.

This mental model is directly aligned with the ideology put forth by the reactionary feminist movement (and, originally, other reactionary conservative movements), that the binary gender roles of provider-protector and dependent receiver are evolutionarily determined, or natural. When language created by groups with extremist views disseminates into everyday usage, the harmful conceptual structures behind the language is carried with it. Memes and trends are not always harmless fun, or just words. This is the process by which public attitudes can shift in regressive directions, weakening support for socially progressive movements and eroding decades of work by feminist advocates.

More than this, the language that young women are exposed to shapes their understanding of their place in the world. Adolescents are engaging deeply with social media trends as they undergo the identity-formation processes involved in growing up and interpreting the social world. The prototype of the high-value woman within the heterosexual roles ICM is pilates-lean, attractive according to white beauty standards, and from a socioeconomic background that creates the cultural capital read as “expensive.” The message that a prototypical, ideal, or “highest value” woman is thin, beautiful, and biologically programmed to be financially dependent on a masculine provider can have numerous very dangerous impacts, including the encouragement of disordered eating and the normalization of forms of abuse and control within relationships.

It is essential that we examine the way this language reinforces gendered categorization and strengthens stereotypes of these categories in a way that supports politically conservative and antifeminist agendas. Lakoff (1987) wrote, “since we reason not just about individual things or people but about categories of things and people, categorization is crucial to every view of reason” (8). It is a natural tendency of the human mind to categorize, yet we should be aware of how potentially harmful categorical prototypes impact the way we reason about how people and society operate.

Kay’s research on reactionary feminism (2025) positioned it “as a key part of the broader turn to openly rejecting ‘liberal,’ ‘progressive,’ or ‘girlboss’ feminisms within popular and political culture; this phenomenon may seem to resemble feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism, but is based upon a rejection of social justice, a deep and transphobic bioessentialism, and hostility to liberationist feminism” (1,854). This rejection of traditional feminism is apparent in many facets of the contemporary American political landscape, and these bioessentialist linguistic trends are just one reflection of it. Where we had previously seen a linguistic push toward non-binary and gender neutral language, such as in pronoun inclusivity and emergent words like “Latinx,” research into reactionary spaces shows how this previous trend could be losing ground as this emergent language repopularizes very old ideologies that reinforce stark gender binaries.

When this new language is examined at a conceptual level, a very specific prototypical woman emerges from the modern young woman ICM. Understanding how we process new language at a conceptual level and how compounds such as *girl math* function semantically is essential in understanding how this prototype is created and where modern inferences about passive, frivolous femininity originate. This language about women does not simply refer to the entire female gender neutrally, it reinforces and privileges specific models of womanhood and femininity over others, and in this case, these models of femininity support the reductive, hierarchical ideologies of reactionary social movements.

VII. Conclusion

The reactionary feminist turn in our ideological and linguistic trends also holds great importance in the cultural landscape. These trends target and prioritize white women who have access to hegemonic femininity and the femininity premium, allowing us to make inferences about which women are not as “high-value.”

In this study, I have focused on the impact of gender essentialist language on women, but this polarized fragile-unbreakable gender frame also has tremendous negative impacts on the mental health of boys and men. The application of cognitive semantic analysis to the emergent online lexicon could have important further applications in the language depicting men online, especially given the popularization of manosphere “looksmaxxing” ideology and lexicon in recent months.

Emergent phrases that include elements from the domain of femininity are not neutral—they carry a conceptual structure that conveys specific ideas about how feminine people are or ought to be. Playful compounds like *girl math* rely on stereotypes for their meaning to be understood, stereotypes that can influence what young women exposed to this language might believe about themselves and their role in the world.

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