



Final Masters Project Proposal

Selling the Girlboss: A Critical Study of the Commodification and Decline of Feminist Empowerment Tropes in Fashion Media

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FMP: Assignment One

MA Fashion Journalism and Editorial Direction

00216925



Initial Ideas Moodboard



Project Focus

Selling the Girlboss: A Critical Study of the Commodification and Decline of Feminist Empowerment Tropes in Fashion Media

Chosen
Project
Weighting:

OPTION 2:
A 7000
word written
document
and a
practical
project with
outcome of
equal scale

Aims and Objectives

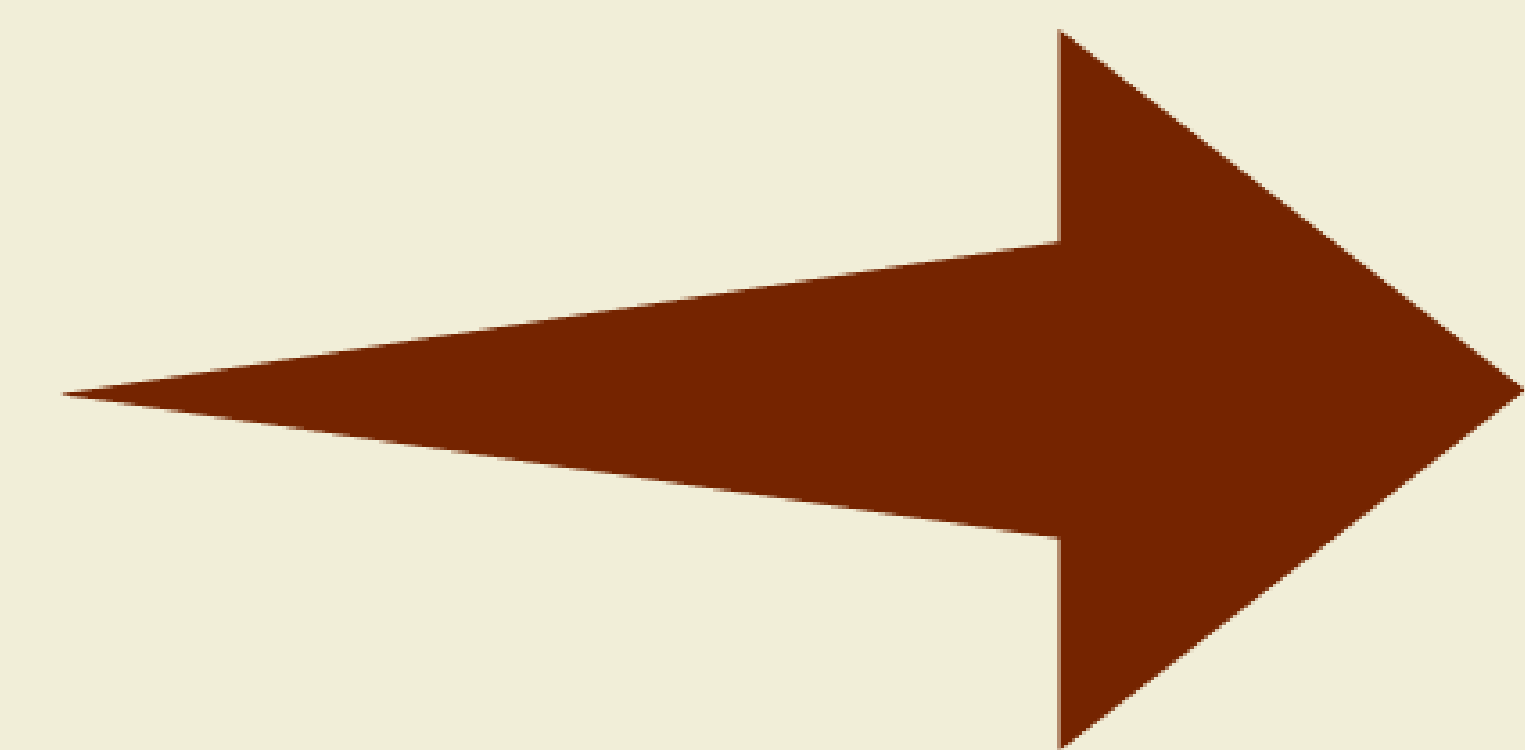
This project investigates the evolution and commodification of the ‘girlboss’ archetype in fashion media, exploring how an initially empowering feminist trope has been repackaged, ridiculed, and used to reinforce post-feminist ideals. The focus will be on how the fashion media has engaged with the girlboss narrative, and how this shapes broader societal understandings of women’s empowerment. This project was chosen as part of a passion for feminist studies that ignited during my undergraduate studies, and a wish to carry that on and take it with me into the world of journalism - as I feel it informs many of the thoughts and opinions that translate into my work.

- To trace the origins and evolution of the ‘girlboss’ trope within fashion media and brand storytelling.
- To critically assess how the girlboss identity has been commodified and, subsequently, delegitimised in public discourse.
- To analyse how the fashion industry and media platforms reproduce or critique the girlboss narrative.
- To produce an editorial project that reclaims or deconstructs this trope through investigative journalism and visual media.

This Research Will Consider

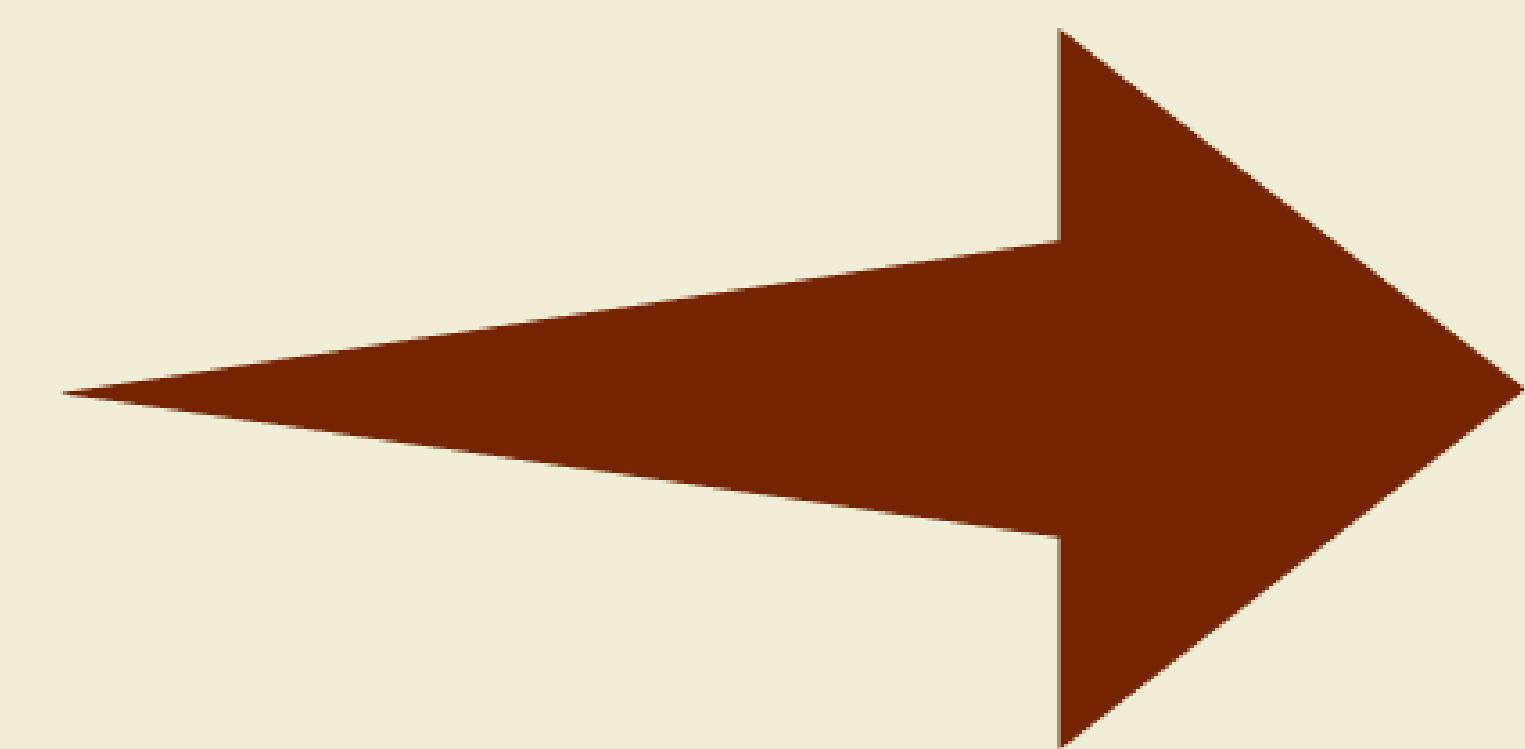
Market and Audience Research

Fashion Media's Co-Option of Feminism



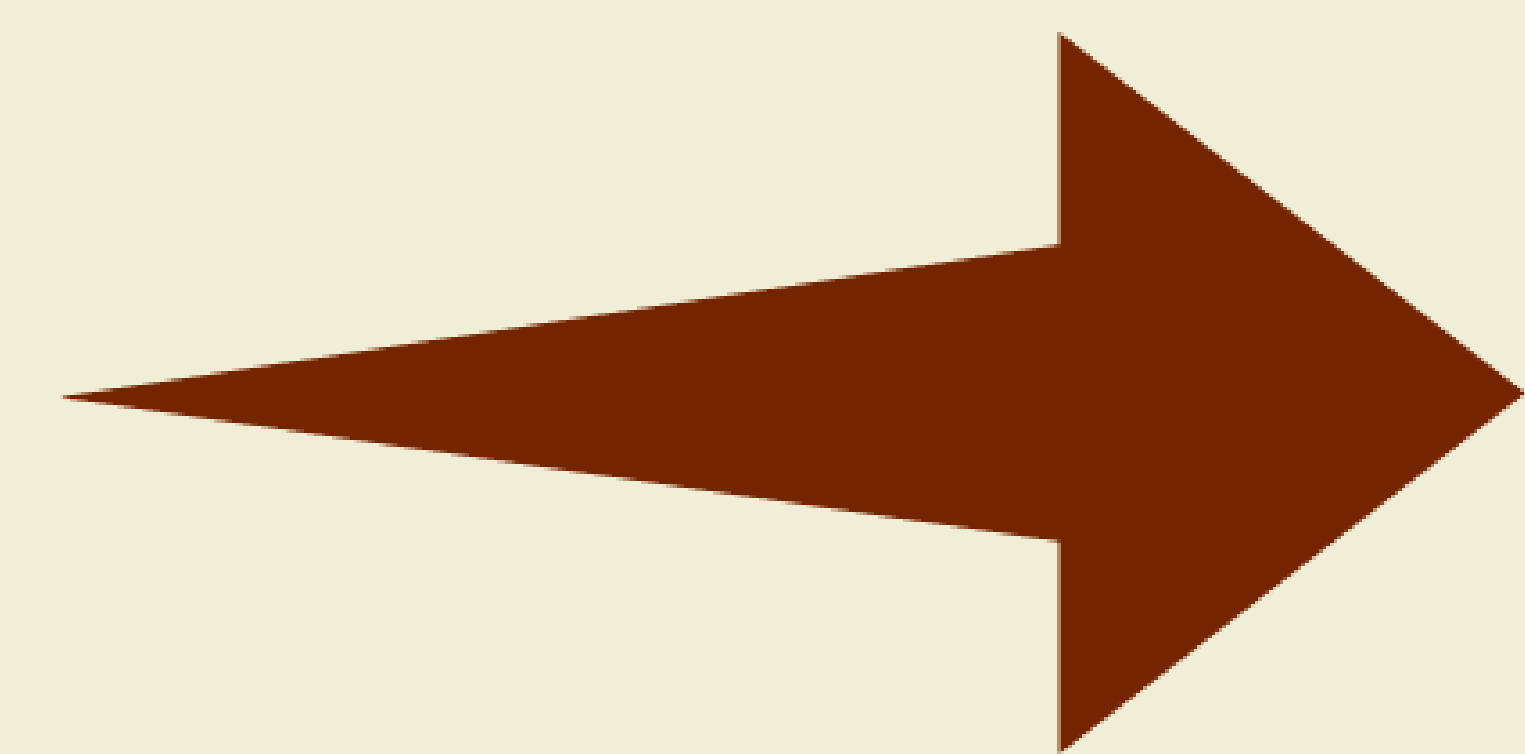
The rise of “**popular feminism**” in digital fashion media, and specifically in online magazines, testifies to an editorial tonal shift towards overtly political storytelling. The project's rejection of the “girlboss” as a shallow, marketable feminist ideal type is in line with an increasing **market need for critical and intersectional content** that pushes back against reductive storytelling.

The ‘Woke Consumer’ and the Feminist Economy



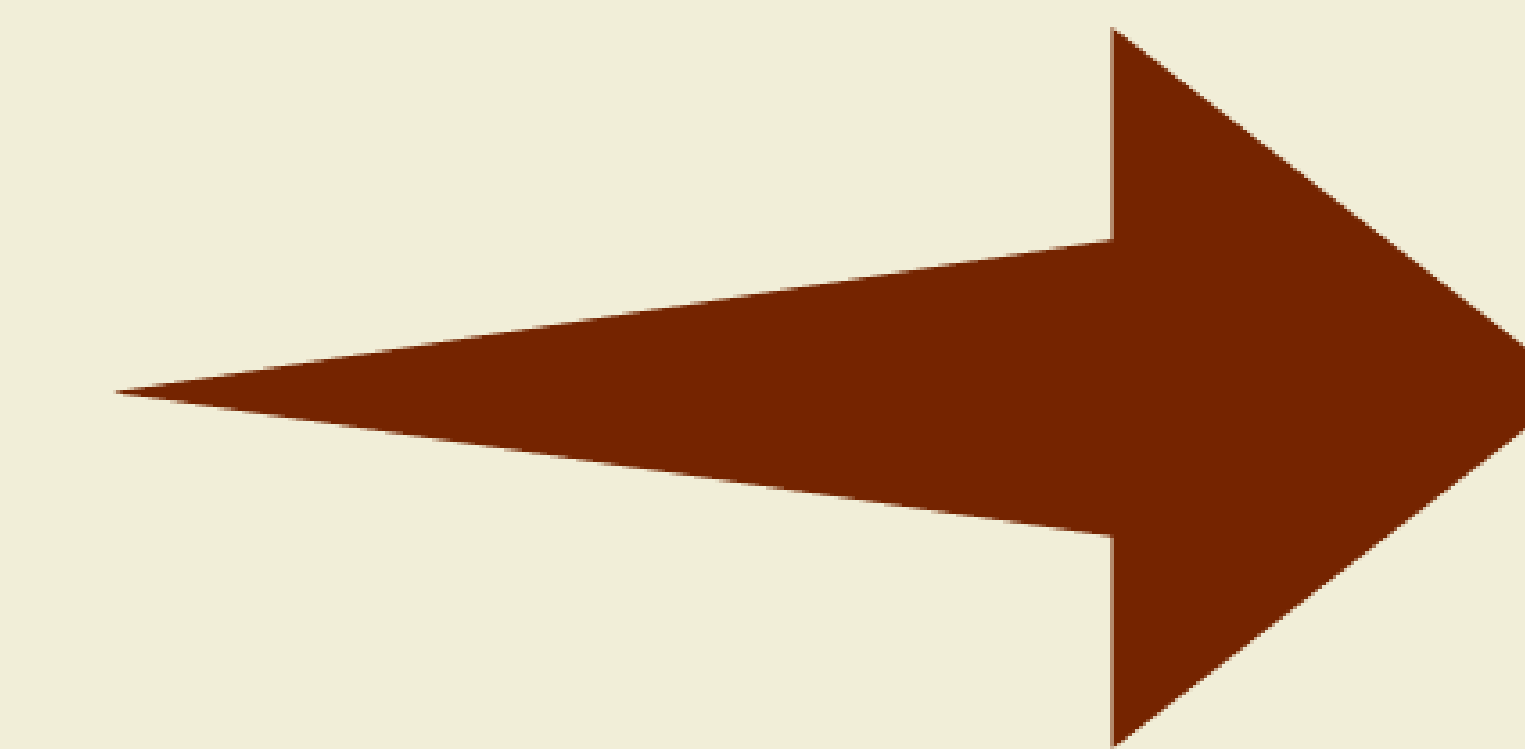
Recent research into the so-called “woke consumer” (Phipps, 2020) demonstrates how fashion brands and media outlets have shifted toward **performative allyship**. This project taps into a disillusioned but still engaged audience: one that recognises and rejects shallow empowerment rhetoric and actively seeks content that challenges the status quo.

Audience Trends and Editorial Directions



From a journalistic and editorial standpoint, audience analytics indicate that readers increasingly value **transparency, activism, and long-form visual storytelling**. Certain trends reinforce the market potential of the planned editorial project: a visually rich, politically informed, and stylistically bold piece of fashion journalism that simultaneously **critiques and reframes a dominant cultural narrative**.

Aligning with Niche and Emerging Media Spaces



With the decline of traditional publishing and the rise of independent zines, digital editorials, and activist-driven fashion collectives, the market has opened up to **hybrid forms of storytelling**. This shift validates the project's format, a stylised, satirical editorial feature, as a timely **intervention** in both critical fashion journalism and editorial art direction.

Concept Testing



Image 2: Ulman, A. 2017. Amalia's photography titled "Dignity 01."

This project is based on a timely critique of girlboss feminism and hustle culture, which have been widely criticised in cultural, academic, and popular digital spaces. Scholars like **Banet-Weiser, Gill, and McRobbie** highlight how feminism has been commodity-fied into marketable selves that promote individual empowerment yet conceal systemic inequality. The same critique reappears in books like *#GIRLBOSS* by **Sophia Amoruso** (2014), which is representative of the “girlboss” genre, have been faulted for promoting an excessively individualised form of empowerment that ignores systemic issues like labour exploitation and gender inequality. **Anne Helen Petersen**'s book *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (2020) also looks at how hustle culture contributes to millennial burnout, offering a critical discovery of productivity pressures and mental health in the digital age.

Beyond academe, trends on social media such as **#AntiWork**, **#QuitTheHustle**, and **#GirlbossFail** show growing public disillusionment with productivity culture and performative empowerment. Visual artists **Amalia Ulman** and **Molly Soda** also tackle these issues by critiquing self-branding and digital femininity. All of these sources validate your project as part of a broader cultural transition questioning the value systems of work, identity, and empowerment in the digital world.

Timelines for Project

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities
Research and Planning	Weeks 1-6	Literature review, survey design, interviews scheduled
Written Research Draft	Weeks 7-12	Writing literature review and methodology chapters
Practical Pre-production	Weeks 13-15	Storybaording, article drafting, visual planning
Production	Weeks 16-20	Writing, designing, editing content for editorial pieces
Final Edits and Submission	Weeks 21-24	Submission of practical and written work

Timeline for Whole Project

Phase	Dates	Tasks
Finalise Proposal & Lit Review	May 1 – May 24	Finalise research question, aims, and methods; begin core reading; draft introduction and literature review (approx. 2,000 words)
Research Design & Ethics	May 10 – May 31	Design interview/survey tools; submit ethics form (if required); pilot questions
Primary Research Collection	June 1 – June 25 (allowing for placement work too)	Conduct interviews or focus groups; gather visual/media case studies; transcription
Thematic Analysis	June 26 – July 10	Apply coding to qualitative data; compare themes with literature; outline findings
Writing: Main Body	July 11 – August 1	Draft analysis, discussion, and conclusion sections.
Editing & Proofing	August 2 – August 15	Final proofreading, formatting, citations, Turnitin checks
Final Submission	By August 22	Submit complete document to Canvas

Timeline for Written Document

Phase	Dates	Tasks
Concept & Moodboard	May 1 – May 18	Refine visual/editorial concept; build moodboard; plan content structure
Team, Casting & Pre-Prod	May 19 – June 7	Source collaborators; scout locations; finalise shoot plan & visual contrasts
Production: Shoot Week	June 10 – June 17 (Allowing for placement dates, these may go into following phase)	Complete photo shoots (both satirical + alternative feminist angles); document process
Editing & Visual Curation	June 18 – July 10	Edit visuals, curate slogans/quotes; design layouts or digital format
Editorial Content Writing	July 11 – July 25	Write accompanying editorial/artist statement and campaign rationale
Final Design & Reflection	July 26 – August 10	Layout digital/print zine or webpage; optional reflective blog or process doc
Submission	By August 22	Submit visuals, editorial, and documentation; optional small release/exhibition

Timeline for Practical Project

The Written Document

The Research Question

“What role has fashion media played in the decline of the ‘girlboss’ trope and what are the implications for feminist narratives?”

Document Focus

The written paper will explore how the girlboss trope has evolved from a symbol of female empowerment to a commercialised and often satirised identity. It will investigate how fashion journalism has both uplifted and undermined the girlboss figure, and what this means for the broader feminist narrative and understanding.

Aims and Objectives of Written Document

The written report attempts to critically analyse the commodification of the “girlboss” trope in fashion media, whereby its **aestheticisation and mass branding** have undermined its feminist origins and reproduced neoliberal, exclusionary values.

- To examine the rise and fall of the girlboss identity within fashion media.
- To investigate how this trope has been marketed and ridiculed across fashion media.
- To explore the broader feminist consequences of turning empowerment into a branding tool.
- To assess whether the backlash against the girlboss reflects a rejection of feminism or of its commercialisation.

Image 1: Mary Schepisi. 2011. Beauty Interrupted.



Research Design and Format

Methodological Framework:

This research will be grounded in a feminist qualitative methodology that prioritises lived experiences, critique of hegemonic narratives, and the intersection between power, media, and gender (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2013). The study will use mixed qualitative methods to access how both media producers and consumers engage with the girlboss trope. All research will abide by the **ethical standards** set out by the college.

Semi-Structured Interviews (6–participants):

Fashion journalists, editors, and feminist writers will be interviewed to understand how they perceive and navigate the girlboss trope in their professional practices. Questions will explore their views on feminist branding, editorial independence, and visual storytelling. This method allows for rich, subjective narratives and is informed by feminist epistemologies that value voice and context (Oakley, 1981). Interviews provide subjective insider insight, key for understanding media gatekeeping.

Content Analysis (5–7 editorial case studies):

Key fashion spreads, covers, and branded content campaigns will be examined for their visual and rhetorical use of the girlboss trope. Examples include Nasty Gal's early campaigns, Glossier's feminist branding, and recent satirical takes from Dazed or Polyester. Analysis will use multimodal discourse tools (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and thematic coding. Content analysis reveals how girlboss rhetoric circulates within fashion publishing.

Visual Discourse Analysis:

Deconstruct how visual cues (posture, fashion styling, colour palette) reinforce gendered tropes in girlboss imagery. Juxtaposed with images from activist media or anti-hustle shoots for contrast. Visual analysis roots findings in the aesthetics central to fashion journalism.

Survey (50–100 respondents):

Distributed via Instagram, Discord feminist groups, Reddit, LinkedIn and mailing lists. Will gauge awareness of the girlboss trope, attitudes toward its commercialisation, and reactions to editorial content. Questions will mix Likert scales, short open answers, and image-based perception tasks. Surveys reach a wider sample to test resonance of messaging, and provide some well-rounded statistical data.

Main Research Informing the Project

Key Theory: Robinson (P.1, 2023)

“It can be argued that the Girl Boss is a thing that is advertised and sold to young women as a capitalist commodity or a neoliberal meritocratic myth through these outlets, rather than a feminist movement.”

Consulted and Planned Reading List:

Ahmed, S., 2017. Living a Feminist Life. Durham: Duke University Press.

Amoruso, S. (2014) #GIRLBOSS. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

Banet-Weiser, S., 2018. Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fraser, N., 2013. Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis. London: Verso.

Gill, R., 2007. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 10(2), pp.147–166.

Gill, R. and Orgad, S., 2015. The confidence cult(ure). Australian Feminist Studies, 30(86), pp.324–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001>

Harding, S., 1987. Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hesse-Biber, S.N., 2013. Feminist Research Practice: A Primer. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T., 2006. Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

McRobbie, A., 2009. The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change. London: SAGE Publications.

Negra, D., 2009. What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism. London: Routledge.

Oakley, A., 1981. Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms? In: H. Roberts, ed. Doing Feminist Research. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp.30–61.

Petersen, A.H., 2020. Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Phipps, A., 2020. Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023. Digital News Report 2023. Oxford: University of Oxford.

Robinson, L., 2023. Is the “Girl Boss” Really Just an Anti-Feminist Commodification? Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues, [online] Available at: <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/article/view/4670> [Accessed: 30 April 2025].

Rottenberg, C., 2018. The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Statista, 2024. Leading values fashion consumers want from media outlets worldwide in 2024. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com> [Accessed 5 May 2025].

Tokumitsu, M., 2014. In the name of love. Jacobin Magazine, [online] Available at: <https://jacobin.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2025].

Ulman, A., 2014. Excellences & Perfections. [Instagram performance art] April–July. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/amaliaulman/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Walter, N., 2010. Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism. London: Virago.

The Practical Project

The Proposed Idea: *Unfinished?*

I want to create a satirical or alternative editorial Zine subverting “girlboss” tropes, featuring anti-hustle, collective, or slow fashion narratives. The Zine will be titled “Unfinished?” which will be a satirical yet authentic visual and journalistic project that subverts traditional girlboss aesthetics. It contrasts hyper-curated hustle culture imagery with representations of softness, collective action, protest, and alternative feminist power structures.

Chosen Format

Format: **Digital fashion/editorial zine** of 15 pages with accompanying editorial content (hosted on Issuu or a custom site)

Tools: **Adobe** InDesign, Photoshop, Audition, Illustrator, Microsoft applications

Creative Approach: **Collaborative moodboarding**, shoot planning with feminist creatives, zine-style layout **juxtaposing slogans** and protest photography, **collaborating with other writers** to produce content for the zine.



A Moodboard
for the Practical
Project

Aims and Objectives

- To reject the aesthetic of hyper-productivity, competition, and polished capitalist feminism.
- To visually and narratively elevate values like mutual aid, softness, protest, rest, and collectivism.
- To use satire to highlight the limitations of the girlboss narrative.
- To foreground activist voices, quotes, slogans, and feminist history in an editorial format.

How Does This Relate to the Written Document?

This project embodies the critique developed in the written paper. While the research investigates how feminist identity has been commodified and depoliticised, the visual/editorial piece provides a **counterpoint**, creating **new visual languages** that celebrate feminist values without relying on individualism or aesthetic tropes.



Thank You for Listening

Image List

Image 1: Mary Schepisi , 2011. Beauty Interrupted. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_art_movement#/media/File:Beauty_Interrupted.jpg [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Image 2: Ulman, A. 2016. Arcadia Missa [online] Available at: <https://arcdiamissa.com/amalia-ulman/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Practical Project Moodboard (L-R):

Anti-Heroine Media, 2021. Copy of Memes.png. Available at: <https://www.antiheroinemedia.com/blog/can-girl-boss-culture-expire-already> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Froio, N., 2022. All Girlbosses Are Bastards. [online] Blind Field Journal. Available at: <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2022/08/12/all-girlbosses-are-bastards/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

ilis___n, n.d. Instagram profile. [Instagram] Available at: https://www.instagram.com/ilis___n [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Girlboss, n.d. Is Hustle Culture Actually Hurting Us? [online] Girlboss. Available at: <https://girlboss.com/blogs/read/productivity-culture> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Ornelaswam, 2024. I have so many beautiful photos of our time at @la__caseta, it's just a perfect place to slow down and enjoy the moment. [Instagram] 20 April. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C5Tat3glx_S/ [Accessed 14 May 2025].

Culted, 2024. Irina Shayk for Helmut Lang Fall/Winter 2024 campaign. [online image] Available at: <https://culted.com/who-is-peter-do-helmut-lang-departure/> [Accessed 14 May 2025]

Hillergoodspeed. 2018. Hobbies Poster. @hillergoodspeed. Available at: <https://Instagram.com/hillergoodspeed>.

Stevenson-Lal, K., 2022. Hustle culture is not the only way to run an online business & make an online income.

[online] Organic Goody. Available at: <https://organicgoody.com/2022/11/11/hustle-culture-is-not-the-only-way-to-run-an-online-business-make-an-online-income/> [Accessed 14 May 2025].

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- Gill, R., 2007. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), pp.147–166.
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- Harding, S., 1987. *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
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- Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T., 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A., 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Molly Soda, n.d. Selected digital works. [online] Available at: <https://www.mollysoda.exposed> [Accessed 14 May 2025].
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