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Algorithmic Identity: Pinterest, Instagram, and the Practices of Curating the Visualization of Self

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Abstract: This research examines how Instagram and Pinterest shape users as creators, curators, and consumers of visual and textual content, influencing behaviors, preferences, and cultural identities. It explores how these platforms integrate images and texts into daily life, creating a "memory fabric" for branding and self-expression. Pinterest, focused on curated themes like decor, fashion, and beauty, has become a feminized space, while Instagram emphasizes image creation and sharing, with features like Stories and "Add Yours" encouraging participatory self-curation. The study analyzes how these platforms' algorithms and features shape visual preferences, self-representation, and cultural narratives. It highlights the cyclical maintenance of digital personas, including reinterpreting, renewing, and rewriting self-image, then connects these practices to broader themes of media materiality, cultural production, and pop culture. Using an interdisciplinary approach, the research investigates how digital archives, algorithms, and intermediality influence branding, aesthetics, and cultural memory in the current digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, television and cinema primarily shaped aesthetic influence. Today, internet-based audiovisual platforms dominate, with algorithms curating content based on user preferences and emerging trends. Instagram and Pinterest, both visual-based platforms, now play a significant role in aesthetic influence within the digital era. Launched in 2010, Pinterest had 522 million monthly active users by 2024 (GrowthDevil, 2025), ranking 15th among global social platforms. The same year, Instagram surpassed 2 billion users worldwide, ranking 3rd globally. Pinterest users discover visuals through a network of pinned and repinned images, allowing aesthetic ideas to circulate across themed boards. Notably, around 70% of Pinterest users identify as female (Business of Apps, 2025), making it a platform rich in content aligned with women's interests and visual preferences. In Indonesia, Pinterest's user base is smaller compared to Instagram, which captures around 85% of internet users aged 18 and above. By 2025, Pinterest accounts for 33% of this demographic, roughly 42 million of Indonesia's 126 million internet users (DATAREPORTAL, 2025). However, 87% of Indonesian Pinterest users are also active on Instagram. This dual-platform behavior supports a flow of aesthetic content from discovery (Pinterest) to self-display and social interaction (Instagram).

Given this context, our research began with one question: How does the interplay between Pinterest's algorithmic curation and Instagram's participatory, transient features encode texts and images into human interactions and daily practices that shape branding, self-expression, and cultural identity?

This research explores how social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest shape users as subjects, curators, and viewers of visual and textual content, influencing behavior, self-representation, and cultural narratives. It examines the interplay between Pinterest's algorithmic curation and Instagram's participatory transient features in validating aesthetic preferences and personal branding. By exploring the temporality of platform use and the fluidity of persona changeability, it traces how users engage with algorithms to construct meaning, while also narrating the origin and flow of today's circulating images and cultural production.

This research framework builds upon four intersecting concepts: algorithmic influence, cultural memory, media aesthetics, and postfeminist consumer agency. First, the notion of the "algorithmic" refers to how discovery mechanisms embedded in audiovisual social media platforms could construct and express personal preferences and self-representation. Bratton (2016) in his book The Stack emphasizes that interfaces in media platforms are not merely visual or interactive elements but are integral in shaping user behavior and perception (p.220). For him, interfaces are thresholds that actively structure users' interaction, perception, and behavior across platforms (Bretton, 2016, p.229). This makes the architecture of platforms also produce control over the aesthetics narratives the platform circulates. By mechanically curating and reinforcing certain visual styles and trends, algorithms influence what users come to see as aesthetically desirable and culturally relevant. This repetition produces a feedback loop where certain images dominate, gradually embedding themselves in the collective visual consciousness and cultural memory.

Astrid Erll argues that cultural memory is never purely individual but shaped by collective contexts (Erll, 2008, p.5). Through social interaction and media exposure, individuals develop frameworks to recall and interpret experiences. Media consumption acts as external stimuli that socially construct memory. As remembering and relating the past to the present is central to self-definition, the process of identity making is continuously constructed and reconstructed (A. Assmann, 2008, p.97). Cultural memory studies analyze how societies produce, sustain, and transform identities over time, highlighting the interplay between remembering, forgetting, and narrative formation.

For narrative formation, media channels tend to produce aesthetic hegemony by stimulating symbols through clothing, poses, and other audiovisual elements (Appadurai, 2000, p.6). Media also reflects and constructs culture through a "system of feedback between distorting mirrors," reinforcing certain aesthetic norms (Castells, 1942, p.364). Furthermore, the current algorithmic systems in media do not merely interpret cultural input but also actively produce it. Bucher (2018) posits that "when algorithms become part of people's everyday lives… or entangled in knowledge production, they do something to those domains" (p. 50). This empowerment commodification, shaped by global advertising, sells curated ideas of consumer agency. Yet, as Appadurai points out, this agency is illusory, consumers are led to believe they are active agents, while in reality, they are merely choosers from the pre-curated options (Appadurai, 1990, p.307).

Susan Hopkins argues that (post)feminism has been embraced as a strategy for stimulating consumption, positioning empowerment as something that can be achieved through consumer choices (Hopkins, 2000, p.23). Cristina Stasia further critiques this trend, stating that the postfeminist action hero is constrained by "girl power's" emphasis on feminism-by-purchase, reinforcing the notion that liberation is synonymous with purchasing power (Stasia, 2007, p.247). On visual-based social media platforms, this phenomenon is reinforced through algorithm-driven curation, where aesthetics tied to consumerist ideals of self-expression are promoted and normalized.

METHODS

This research adopts an experimental and participatory approach to explore how algorithmic curation influences self-projection and visual identity construction on visual-based social media platforms. Unlike large-scale cultural analytics that rely on big data via crawling and mining, our method emphasizes a more intimate, qualitative approach by engaging directly with user-generated content. The experiment observes how images travel and contribute to cultural memory within the interplay of Pinterest and Instagram.

To initiate the experiment, we used Instagram's transient "Add Yours" Story feature, which encourages users to curate and share visual expressions based on prompts. We created a Story template with six grid keywords: "character," "weekdays fit," "weekend fit," "color," "aesthetics," and "hairstyle." Participants were instructed to search for images on Pinterest using these keywords and select visual references to share through the Instagram chain using our template.

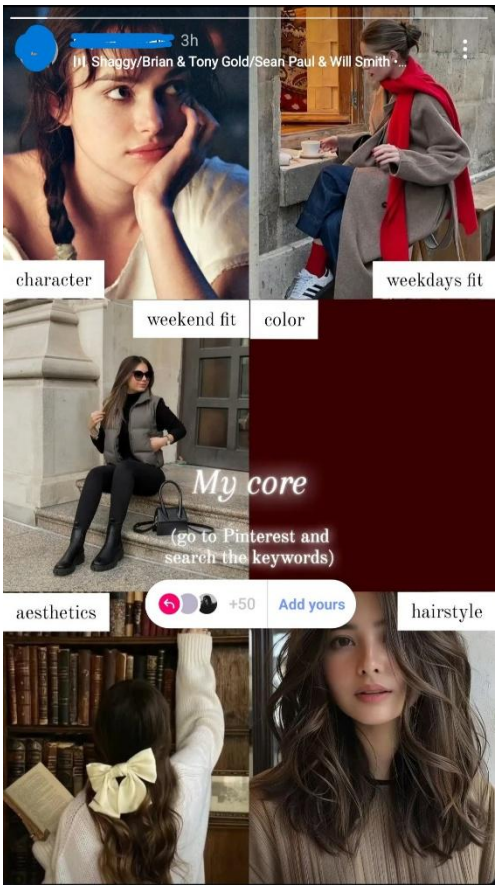


Figure 1. Instagram template for this research, shared by one of the participants.

Across all attempts, we received 94 stories, though only 49 could be accessed due to privacy settings. Among these 49 participants, 48 identified as female and one as male, These 49 stories served as our dataset, analyzed through combined quantitative and qualitative methods. We traced aesthetic tendencies, recurring visual references, and the "roots" of these images to examine how algorithmically suggested visuals contribute to personal and collective identity.

Additionally, we examined how algorithmic curation influenced participants' self-expression. This helped reveal the complex negotiation between individual and algorithmic agency, and collective visual culture in the digital realm. By adopting this approach, we aim to provide nuanced insights into the dynamics of digital identity formation within an increasingly algorithm-driven visual culture.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Algorithmic Identity and Globalized Aesthetics

When browsing Pinterest, the journey typically begins by entering a keyword into the search bar. Pinterest then shows a curated selection of images based on the input, which often feels uncannily personal. With evolving search algorithms that "read" our activity history, the platform learns aesthetics inclinations, making reactions like "This is so me!" increasingly common. These moments suggest a sense of emotional accuracy, as if the platform anticipates one's identity through visuals.

As a user-generated, image-based social media platform, Pinterest's expansive archive is shaped by global contributions. Its discovery mechanism not only analyzes user inputs (searches, pins, likes) but also the behavior patterns and identifies trends using machine learning. Manovich in Cultural Analytics describes these aspects as explicit user inputs, pattern recognition, and reliant on big data analytics (Manovich, 2020, p.64). The more we engage with certain visuals, the more they dominate our feeds. A single pin of a library, for instance, can trigger an influx of similar images, gradually shaping our visual consumption and aspirations. This continuous cycle creates an endless feedback loop, where users are both data contributors and consumers.

Our experiment uses Instagram's Add Yours feature to invite participants in curating a self-representative persona through six specific keywords. Every keyword occupies a certain section and offers an insight into contemporary aesthetic culture.

Interestingly, some images appeared repeatedly among different participants, confirming the dominance of certain visual trends. This repetition points to a growing aesthetic homogenization, shaped by algorithmic curation and demographic similarities. While platforms seem to offer endless inspiration, users tend to be funneled to globally favored styles. But what is 'global' in this context? Does it represent the diversity of myriad aesthetics, or is it merely a globalized form rooted in specific cultural powers?

Although users may believe they are engaging with diverse visual content, many images bear a striking resemblance, mirroring what appears to be broad access while masking limited variation. These globally shared aesthetics slowly infiltrate daily life, subtly shaping our ideals of beauty, design, and expression. The omnipresence of such circulation echoes Arjun Appadurai's theory of today's global interactions between cultural homogenization and heterogenization (Appadurai, 1990, p.295), a process where homogeneity disguising itself as heterogeneity, facilitated by platforms connecting users across regions and normalize specific aesthetic

Curating the Self: From Boards to Story and Feed

While Pinterest's global user base grew significantly since its 2010 launch, its function diverges from social-driven platforms. Instead of fostering social networking, Pinterest operates as an image-based search engine, curating aspirational imagery and shaping aesthetic trends through algorithmic suggestions. In Indonesia, its role aligns more passively, as a visual reference hub for aesthetic inspiration, especially in fashion, beauty, and lifestyle content.

In contrast, Instagram thrives on active participation, encouraging users to create and share content as part of digital self-presentation and identity formation, where it functions as a "frontstage" for the curated images, videos, and interactions. Data also reveals that 87% of Indonesian Pinterest users are also active on Instagram, suggesting a symbiotic relationship where Pinterest focuses more on backstage image discovery, while Instagram becomes the projection surface for aesthetic concoctions and social validation. This dynamic reflects how digital identities are shaped through both discovery and display, mediated by platform-specific aesthetics and user behaviors.

This intra-platform synergy reveals a broader pattern in digital identity construction. Pinterest serves as a private archive where users can gather and assemble aesthetic vocabularies,

shaping an internalized sense of taste, aspiration, and self-branding. Less concerned with social interaction, users engage in visual exploration, collecting, and pinning images as acts of digital memory-making. Then, users construct curated references into a potential "self" through algorithm-driven visual lexicon.

Instagram, in turn, becomes the performative stage for these aesthetics through audience engagement. Story features offer low-stakes, transient spaces for identity projection, while Feed posts require more refined, lasting compositions. This is where past visual culture finds its re-contextualization as new meanings and values, like a new layer of memory fabric which later might become a reference and take us back to the feedback loop of aesthetics.

Rather than functioning in isolation, Pinterest and Instagram form an interconnected ecosystem where private and public identities are constructed simultaneously. Their interplay reinforces not just individual self-construction but also broader trends in visual culture, solidifying globalized stylistic norms influenced by algorithmic circulation. Such interconnection has constructed a new type of identity that is always "performed and shaped within the symbiotic relationship between users, search engines and social software platforms" (Helmond, 2010, p.22).

Crucially, algorithmic curation mediates self-construction, narrowing perceived choices and individual agency by continually reinforcing users' prior preferences. As platforms exhibit visual similarity, aesthetic echo chambers emerge, blurring the line between authentic self-expression and algorithmically tailored desire. Images shift from being mere aesthetic expression to aspirational products, being consumed, embodied, and projected as collective memory. Through this cycle, digital identities are shaped less by spontaneous creativity and more by algorithmic predictability.

Exercise of Agency and Rewriting Cultural Memory

Based on a broad understanding of cultural memory, defined as "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts." (Erll, 2008, p.2-5), this concept serves as an umbrella term for "social memory" (the starting point for memory research in the social sciences) and "material or medial memory" (the focus of interest in literary and media studies) (Erll, 2008, p.4). It suggests that memory is never purely individual but always shaped by collective contexts. Thus, cultural memory relates strongly to the broader cultural imagination of femininity.

One example is the act of choosing references, which first leads to self-awareness, then self-expression. Here, agency is demonstrated via social media, which becomes a space to negotiate gender, and for girls and women to share their experiences. In real life, societal expectations often leave women and girls with little space to construct and articulate their identities. Thus, this chain of action is an exercise of agency.

Instagram, now a hub for community engagement, marketing, personal branding, and self-expression through selfies, shopping haul reviews, curated aesthetics, etc. It is an ongoing negotiation between individual identity and collective participation. And through language and terminology, the rise of the poetic era (2014–2019), and buzzwords like "aesthetics" reflect how cultural consumption shapes self-expression. Lingo also becomes identity markers and reinforces cultural memory.

This is where "Girl Trends" steps in, originating from pop culture and social media, function to reassert and redefine feminine identity. The intersection of these two cultural products with cultural memory helps reconstruct modern femininity. "Girlhood" is a full spectrum, it is never just one thing. The following discussion of "Girl Cores" shows inclusivity, where they offer something that resonates with almost everyone.

This aligns with Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which explains how societies preserve and transmit identity over time through symbols, texts, media, and traditions. Cultural memory reinforces collective identity and shapes cultural production. Assmann argues, the connection between time, identity, and memory across personal, social, and cultural dimensions is increasingly evident in modern culture (Assmann, 2008, p.110). This framework helps us

understand the enduring appeal of certain characters, not just as products of their time, but as vessels of reinterpreted pasts, evolving identities, and rewriting cultural memories in the digital age.

The fluidity of online identity allows constant reshaping of what it means to be a girl today. Now the question becomes: what do we rewrite in our self-image and memory? Memory and identity are closely linked at the individual level, a notion dating back to John Locke who argued that identity is constructed and reconstructed through acts of memory (as cited in Erll, 2008, p. 6). The concept of cultural memory extends this to the collective level, revealing how identities evolve and endure through shared cultural symbols and narratives (Erll, 2008, p. 6).

Examining girlhood and girl cores through memory reveals identity formation across three interconnected dimensions. On the personal level, individuals relate to specific tropes through shared traits or experiences, thinking, “I relate to this”. This self-definition is reinforced socially through communal validation and a sense of belonging. Then, at the cultural level, identities transcend individual and communal experiences to become embedded in media, fashion, literature, and beyond, solidifying their place in the broader cultural narrative. Together, these layers of memory (personal, social, and cultural) illustrate how girl trends evolve from individual self-definition to collective recognition, and ultimately, to enduring cultural influence.

In 2023–2024, traditionally feminine aspects are being re-valued. Style Analytics (2024) observes that the internet has heightened appreciation for feminine-coded terms: being a “Girl,” “Mother,” “Babygirl,” “Girl’s girl,” which are celebrated in certain online circles. This trend is more than a passing micro cultural memory in the current digital age but also juxtaposes traditional feminine vulnerability with subtle irony, becoming a tool of both submission and resistance, responsibility and decisiveness in shaping one’s life. Femininity, once devalued, is being reframed as a conscious act of identity construction and agency.

Femme-Identifying Through Girl Cores

In the internet discourse we saw terminologies like tropes and cores, both words are used in discussing identity, culture, and aesthetics, but they operate at different conceptual levels. Girl tropes emerge from pop culture patterns and media representations. It transcripts female character types that audiences recognize instantly and it is constructed by the media. These tropes are shaped by historical, cultural, and media trends, reinforcing or challenging gender norms. On the other hand, Core is more of a contemporary internet-born term referring to a thematic aesthetic category that shapes personal identity and expression. It emerged from social media (Tumblr, Pinterest, TikTok) as aesthetic movements to categorize visual, stylistic, and lifestyle choices. It is highly digital, consumer driven, and often defined by fashion, mood boards, and lifestyle aspirations. It is a self-applied aesthetic that provides a visual and performative identity, people adopt "cores" to construct and express their self-image. Practically, tropes can intersect with cores to complement fragments, qualities, and niche-fy some aspirational lifestyles. And girls may align themselves with both to construct identity.

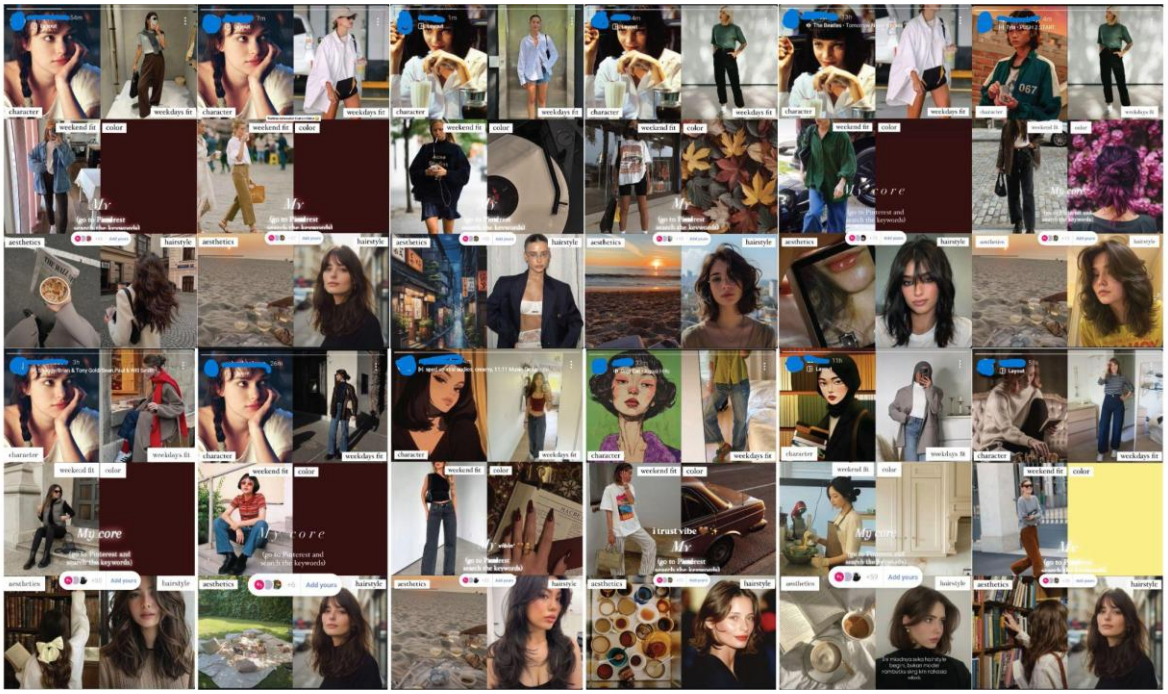


Figure 2. Instagram Story Collage from the participants.

Among the collected samples, this compilation stands out as the most dominant, centered on 12 “attitude girlies” characters. The selection sits heavily on a cohesive visual code: burgundy, warm neutrals, earthy autumn tones, and a preference for mid-length wavy-layered hair. This blend reinforces an outstanding yet understated sensibility. Alongside five additional image choices, this part of analysis will examine the cultural circulation and self-representation referring to pop culture and other cultural products, and question how girlhood is performed and understood in pop culture.

They include four screen-based figures: Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley, Pride and Prejudice, 2005) whose traits are intelligent, witty, loyal, and having self-respect; Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman, Pulp Fiction, 1994) known for being mysterious and bold; Kang Sae-Byeok (Jung Ho-Yeon, Squid Game, 2021), stoic and ironic, close to the eldest daughter trope; and Beth Harmon (Anya Taylor-Joy, The Queen’s Gambit, 2020) a passionate, ambitious loner genius. Interestingly, Elizabeth and Mia resist standard tropes, making them compelling case studies for exploring identity through core and aesthetics.

Elizabeth Bennet merges Light Academia and Cottagecore, projecting intellectualism and romanticized connection to rural life. She remains a Pinterest favorite, representing bookish autonomy within a structured society. In contrast, Mia Wallace channels Dark Feminine core, mysterious, daring, and effortlessly cool, exuding allure without the overt agency of a classic femme fatale. Both characters highlight distinctive representation yet influential spectrums of feminine identity. Mia's influence also extends beyond film, shaping fashion and style trends. With her aesthetic becoming even more prominent since the 2010s, she inspired characters like Jane Margolis in Breaking Bad (McCluskey, 2015).

These aesthetics: Light Academia, Cottagecore, and Dark Feminine, serve more than visual trends: digital self-mythologizing, each curating their feminine identity through color palettes and overall style. They manifest into real-life as expressions of intellect, nostalgia, or quiet nonconformity. It is seen in boxy silhouettes, clean white, dark and bold colors outfit, or layered wavy hair, each reinforcing specific personality traits. The act of selecting and projecting these aesthetics online reflects a larger cultural phenomenon where aesthetics define identity performance, blurring the line between personal identity and digital performance, similar to how people reference some fictional characters as personal symbols.

Cinema, literature, printed media, and cultural memory serve as identity references, shaping

self-curation in both pre- and post-Instagram eras. Before social media, character tropes were absorbed through cinema, literature, and fashion subcultures, evolving gradually through cultural nostalgia and reinterpretation. This reminds us that culture is not static, it is a living, evolving entity that continually reshapes itself through stories we tell and the icons we celebrate. Today, Pinterest and Instagram accelerate this process, turning aesthetics into immediate and consumable identities. Curated Instagram accounts like @witchyfeelings_, @girlhoodprincess, @moonlyhoroscopes, @glossy_zodiac, @astrhology translate visual codes into symbolic identity cues, such as the crisp white shirts of 90s Minimalist, warm neutral tones of Light Academia, the moody burgundies of Dark Feminine, or the rustic textures of Cottagecore. These signal not only stylistic preference but deeper connections to intellectualism, mystery, or romanticized simplicity. Digital reinterpretation of past media transforms fictional figures like Elizabeth and Mia into identity templates. Their appearance, mannerisms, and personalities left a strong impression on pop culture, shaping how audiences perceive and embody aspirational identities, merging media with memory.

Then, fictional women function as both tropes and aesthetic cores, shaping how femininity is performed and understood across generations. Social media platforms act as living archives, amplifying, and reshaping these identities through curated visuals and digital discourse. Figures like Elizabeth and Mia blend traditional elegance with subversive nonconformity. As aesthetics circulate online, they mirror past ideals and redefine contemporary femininity, allowing individuals to adopt, embody, remix, and perform these identities.

Users relate to these characters like people once did with fashion magazines, navigating manifestations of power, control, and resistance. "Girl Cores" follow this lineage, using characters as templates to relate with and embody. These cores and tropes, reinforced visually and narratively across platforms, shape personal identity through aesthetics and behavioral cues. Then, self-identification with these fictional women reflects a broader negotiation of feminine traits and aspirations, where tropes and aesthetics merge to form identity performances. As Harrison (2023) explains, “online aesthetics and ‘cores’ serve as an identity-fulfilling role, filling in the gap created by dominating modern-Western philosophies that demand a core, complete identity that ‘identity aesthetics’ fill” (para. 6).

Fictional women also influence one’s aspirations, aesthetics, and self-image, whether as inspiration or warning signs. From Mia’s allure, Elizabeth’s intellect, to Beth’s brilliance, these women serve as guides to self-expression and social identity formation. Their traits inspire two possibilities: First, hobbies, tastes, and cultural preferences. Speculatively, Elizabeth’s love for literature might encourage intellectualism. Mia’s bold and retro vibe inspires audiences to explore vintage pop culture. Beth’s passion for chess and classical music fuels ambition, resilience, and sophisticated aesthetics. Second, Pinterest mood boards, Instagram feeds, and curated "cores," turning them into cultural blueprints for being a certain kind of femme. In short, these characters embed themselves in cultural memory, reinforcing extension of our interests and identities, also recurring ideals of femininity across generations.

These characters belong to a lineage of past archetypes, continuously influencing cultural production. Their impact is seen in fashion, hairstyles, the resurgence of classic literature (e.g., Jane Austen), intellectual pastimes (e.g., online chess), and films like Kuldesak (Indonesia, 1998). Again, the cyclical nature of trends ensures that these tropes remain relevant, while constantly reshaped by new cultural contexts.

Romanticizing identity and emotions

Since the post-Tumblr era, Pinterest and Instagram have functioned as key platforms for self-expression. From 2014 to 2019, the Instagram Poetic Era romanticized emotion through minimal and digestible poetry. Writers like Rupi Kaur and Lang Leav gave women a language for emotions: heartbreak, empowerment, and healing. In Indonesia, illustrated poetry books with handwritten typography and soft feminine themes also hyped the major bookstores like Gramedia. Works by

Lala Bohang (The Book of Forbidden Feelings, 2016), Marcella FP (Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari ini, 2018), Rintik Sedu (Buku Minta Dibanting, 2020), and Putri Marino's @poempm, from hashtag to poetry book in 2019, all these functioned as "emotion captions," where snippets were shared online as a form of reader's self-expression, before the rise of self-help books to represent agency, mental struggle, and adulting hardship.

Though the Instagram poetry trend has faded, its emotional and aesthetic influence lingers. Today, "girl aesthetics" serve a similar function in a different format: instead of short poems, we have Pinterest moodboards; instead of romanticizing heartbreak, we categorize personas into "Sad Girl," "Soft Girl," or "Lover Girl", leading to aesthetic-based identity formation. These characters are performed and remembered as cultural scripts of femininity to navigate a variety of power, desire, independence, and selfhood.

While books once validated emotional vulnerability, aesthetics now validate identity performance, and both help women process and express emotions. Even as the way we interact with femininity changes, the impulse to aestheticize and express identity through cultural templates remains. It is all part of the evolving cultural conversation around girlhood, how it is constructed, categorized, and consumed. Pinterest and Instagram in the 2020s romanticize identity through curated "vibes" and niche personal branding. Now poetry like Rupi Kaur's fades because her work centered on feeling, while Gen Z prioritizes aesthetics, shared experiences, and identity-building. If Millennials sought problem solving online, Gen Z embeds their emotions into digital spaces and narratives.

Image: Empowering or Marketing?

This section explores how icons like Buttercup from The Powerpuff Girls and brands like Glossier contribute to redefining femininity in the evolving relationship of feminism, consumerism, and self-expression.

Ten samples from female users below present a dominant visual style: bold colors like burgundy and cool tones, street fashion sensibilities, and mid-length wavy hair. Signaling a tomboyish, nonchalant, and unconventional femininity. These aesthetic choices align closely with Buttercup's character: strong, assertive, and nonconforming. Hairstyle choices also appear irrelevant to identity coding, suggesting a broader visual language of confidence that departs from traditional femininity and draws from empowered, culturally resonant character reference: Buttercup.

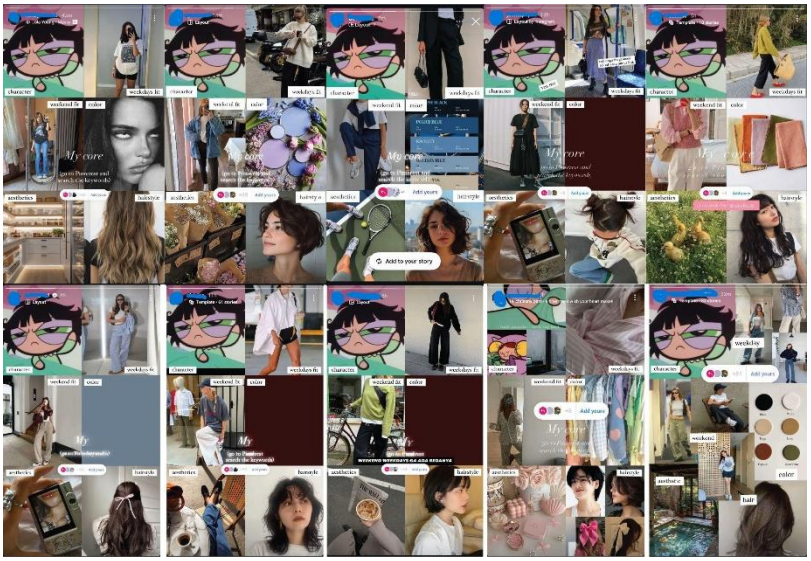


Figure 3. Instagram Story Collage from the participants.

Buttercup and the female empowerment

According to the Powerpuff Girls fandom wiki, Buttercup is the toughest member of the trio.

Known for her aggressive demeanor, rebelliousness, and dislike of girly things. She acts as the middle child in her sisters' dynamic. Among her many expressions, her "cranky-sleepy" persona has become one of the most iconic and resonant images in recent years. This specific portrayal resonated deeply with modern audiences, particularly social media users, who see in Buttercup a reflection of their own struggles with modern exhaustion and societal expectations. In modern lives where well-being is often sacrificed to meet the overwhelming dilemma of the working class, the idea of prioritizing rest becomes a radical act. Generally in Indonesia, Buttercup's cranky-sleepy image challenges societal stereotypes, where women who prioritize rest are often labeled as lazy. In the Indonesian urban context, especially in Jakarta and its surrounding cities, women are expected to be endlessly productive, suffocated in between work exhaustion, commuting, and domestic responsibilities. Yet paradoxically, as working class women, labor grants them conditional purchasing power, reinforcing their role in the consumer economy. By reclaiming rest as a form of female empowerment, Buttercup offers a critique of traditional gender expectations and refuses to glamorize burnout.

Unlike earlier feminist waves that focused on collective struggles, Buttercup's character aligns with the principles of third-wave feminism, which first emerged in the 1990s and continues to influence contemporary discussions about gender, individuality, and empowerment. As Lise Shapiro Sanders notes, 'third wave feminists have come to emphasise the diversity of women's experience over the similarities amongst women' (2007, p.7). Kendal (2012, p.235) adds that this wave initiates a radical reclamation of the traditional femininity symbols. Thus, on social media platforms, where female users often cope with societal pressures, subconsciously Buttercup's character has become a symbol of resistance and solidarity against these conditions.

Since its release in November 1998, The Powerpuff Girls has become a cultural phenomenon, influencing global trends and vast merchandising success. From unofficial T-shirts to official toy collaboration with fast-food chains. Consciously, Cartoon Network capitalized on the show's popularity, targeting young girls as ideal consumers (Van Fuqua, 2003, p. 206). Its "Girl Power" message, while empowering, also became a commodity. Susan Hopkins (2002, p.23) argues that (post)feminism has been embraced as a fresh strategy for stimulating consumption, and Cristina Stasia (2007, p.247) further argues that the postfeminist action hero is often reduced to "feminism-by-purchase," where the marketers have recognised that women will put money where "liberation" appears. Girl Power becomes synonymous with purchasing power.



Figure 4. Unofficial printed T-Shirt of *The Powerpuff Girls*.



Figure 5. *McDonald's* toy merchandise of *The Powerpuff Girls*.
Source: ICv2, 2016

However, the show and the merchandise were never just for children. With reference to 1960s and 1970s culture, e.g., Yoko Ono and Broadway musical Annie, the creators clearly acknowledged its adult audience (Maier, 2012, p.236, 241). This intergenerational appeal amplifies the commodification of "Girl Power" as adult women may indulge in this consumerism as well.

Among the trio, Blossom embodies leadership and intelligence, Bubbles represents sweetness and innocence, and Buttercup stands out for her toughness and defiance. In here's local context, Buttercup's popularity gained momentum way later after its original debut. This delayed recognition and contemporary resonance reflects a broader cultural shift on empowerment. Today, Buttercup is seen as liberating, not only in personal behavior, but also in attitudes toward femininity, beauty, and consumption.



Figure 6. *NewJeans* x *The Powerpuff Girls* for the album *Get Up*.
Source: Kosicoso Substack, 2023

Before Cartoon Network shut down in August 2024, The Powerpuff Girls re-emerged as a cultural icon through a collaboration with K-Pop girl group NewJeans. In July 2023, NewJeans released the song "New Jeans" from their Get Up album, accompanied by a music video celebrating the 25th anniversary of The Powerpuff Girls. This collaboration sparked a fast-burn phenomenon, reigniting interest in the franchise.

By 2024, The Powerpuff Girls concept was absorbed across industries, from promotional ideas,

collectibles (e.g., The Powerpuff Girls x Crybaby, The Powerpuff Girls x Molly, The Powerpuff Girls x Hugkis), to beauty collaborations with Scarlett (Indonesian skincare), Rosé All Day Cosmetics (Indonesian cosmetics), and SHEGLAM (Chinese cosmetics). As a result, Popmart Indonesia stores in Jakarta became an instant hype, marked by long queues, viral videos, and stock monopolization by resellers charging markup prices. This is the peak of consumerism, while the narratives of empowerment, cuteness, and liberation remain central as an appeal.

These collaborations do more than sell goods. They market ideas, a sense of identity, and belonging. By tapping into core childhood memories and nostalgia, brands leverage The Powerpuff Girls to resonate emotionally with consumers, while the marketing pivot to "limited-or-special edition" shows how local markets capitalize on cultural resurgence. By embodying familiar characters and repackaging them through aesthetics, lifestyle, and empowerment rhetoric, The Powerpuff Girls were reabsorbed into contemporary visual and consumer culture, also being integrated into the circulation of cultural products.



Figure 7. *The Powerpuff Girls Scarlett* Special Edition
Aqua Reset & Barrier Gel Moisturizer was launched in September 2024.
Source: Scarlett Official, 2024

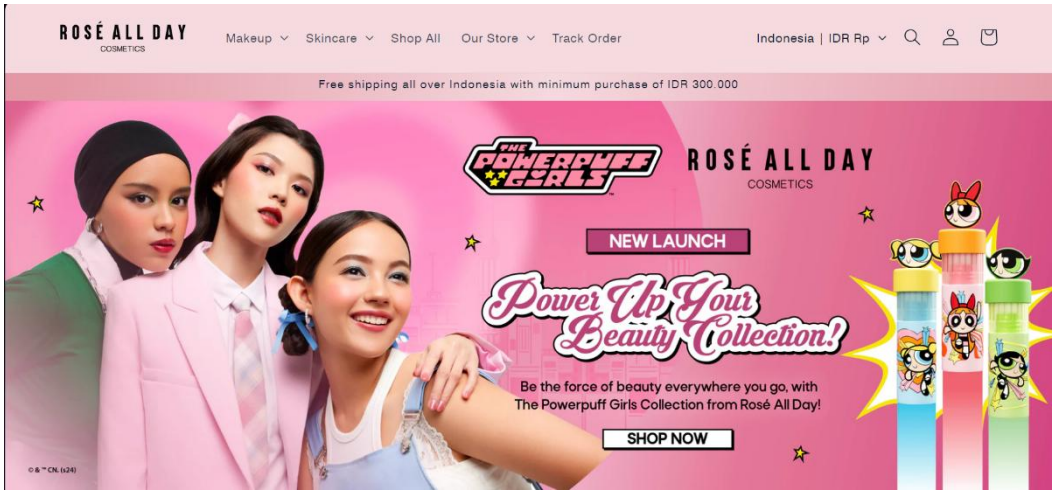


Figure 8. *The Powerpuff Girls* x *Rosé All Day Cosmetics* launched in August 2024.
Source: Rosé All Day Cosmetics, 2024



Figure 9. *The Powerpuff Girls* x *SHEGLAM*.
Source: SHEGLAM, 2024



Figure 10. *The Powerpuff Girls* x *Crybaby* launched in March 2024.
Source: Popmart, 2024

Purchasing power and liberation

The initial hype of The Powerpuff Girls x Crybaby in Jakarta emerged around June–July 2024, with Popmart sustaining the hype by gradually releasing additional products into late 2024. Among all potential implications, Rosé All Day Cosmetics (RADC) was the first to launch The Powerpuff Girls themed makeup collection. Other beauty brands soon followed, tapping into this cultural trend with cutting edge beauty products. Take a look at other past collaborations before 2024 with global and local cultural icons, e.g., Dear Me Beauty x KFC, Upmost Beaute x Tolak Angin, Rabbit Habit x Indomie, Mad For Makeup x BT21. They successfully capitalized on the growing demand and cultural moments, blending novelty and nostalgia to foster lasting consumer engagement. Finally, it wasn't just about the products, it offered a shared experience of merging childhood memories with modern aesthetics. The cyclical trend of nostalgia-meets-novelty highlights how cultural icons continually reinvent themselves to stay relevant in an ever-changing market.

This collection marked their second collaboration, following the Rosé All Day Cosmetics x Harry

Potter collection in 2022. But beyond these limited-edition launches, how does RADC define and position its brand identity? In 2017–2018, RADC entered the Indonesian beauty scene with minimalist, soft pink visuals, and playful branding, which naturally drew comparisons to Glossier. According to the brand's profile, RADC established its own niche with the local market in mind, catering to diverse consumer preferences. Its first complexion product launch attracted significant attention proving local's growing desire for fresh, minimalist, and natural beauty.

While the definition of "effortless" beauty has expanded, fair skin, long straight black hair, and slim figure are no longer the sole standard. Indonesian big cities' female consumer behavior mirrors this idea as a globalized beauty movement, a standard for diversity and self-expression. Local brands also tapped into this fascination and opportunity, benefitting from the aesthetic trends, and manifested it into the local market. Later on, with a booming local beauty industry, by 2024, many brands compete to gain recognition and be sustained.

Jakarta's consumers gravitate towards specific aesthetics and mid-range price points, positioning RADC as an alternative to pricier foreign brands while maintaining similar appeal. Though RADC's pricing is more reasonable than luxury imports, the idea of "accessibility" remains relative. The urban middle class largely drives this consumption, highlighting how empowerment narratives in beauty trends remain intertwined with purchasing power.

Glossier set the blueprint for this movement. Launched in 2014 with just four items: a balm, a facial mist, a sheer skin tint, and a moisturizer. Emily Weiss promoted a philosophy of celebrating freedom of expression, individuality, and fun in beauty. It emphasizes a beauty movement: celebrating real girls, in real life. Glossier's boom in Western markets in 2016–2017 established its strong brand identity that resonates with its target market of millennial and Gen Z consumers, where Glossier users in the U.S. are associated with clean, minimalist, aesthetically tasteful girls. A reason why the same demographic in Jakarta were the perfect class markets to sell Glossier's signature pink minimalist packaging, inclusive marketing, and natural beauty narrative, which aligned very similarly to RADC's approach.

By 2017, owning Balm Dotcom, Boy Brow, or Cloud Paint, and posting them on Instagram became more than functionality. It became a cultural capital, signaling one's aesthetic references and cultural belonging. Jakarta's beauty community was not immune to this Glossier phenomenon, experiencing the same Fear of Missing Out. Though the hype in Jakarta was a tiny scale in the global markets, it reveals that Indonesian consumers were paying attention, emulating values from global beauty narrative, and the local beauty standards envision the same direction too. They want to associate themselves in a global class society through curated purchases.

Glossier perfectly exemplifies our ambiguous cultural moment, one that seamlessly merged feminist rhetoric with consumerism. Once again, a woman's cultural capital is valued by how well she performs consumerism at any given moment. And historically, femininity has been determined on this principle, Glossier is just one example. Despite its inclusive branding, its price points and limited accessibility position it as semi-luxury items, raising questions about the true inclusivity of consumer-driven feminism. However, as a U.S.-oriented brand, it was built for the middle class, even for the Americans themselves. Glossier redefines beauty standards while showing the paradox of modern feminism: celebrating individuality and empowerment while intertwined with the act of consumption. This makes us question whether true liberation can ever be separated from consumption in a capitalist society. Beyond this, we must consider the complex consumerism realities of class-based access and aspiration, whether it is about personal agency, necessity, or economic survival. After all, consumerism has always been a paradox itself.

It's a thing, it's a cultural moment



Figure 11. Logo of *Glossier*.
Source: Glossier, 2014



Figure 12. Logo of *Rosé All Day Cosmetics*.
Source: Rosé All Day Cosmetics, 2019

This whole phenomenon is a result of the power of aesthetics, built through brand awareness and sustained exposure. Glossier's success endured beyond five years (2016–2022), despite facing turbulence in 2019–2022. Meanwhile, Western markets offer more alternatives like Summer Fridays, Rare Beauty, Rhode Beauty, Kosas, and Milk Makeup. Glossier maintains its relevance by consistently releasing new products, limited-edition merchandise, catering to both loyal and new consumers. This cyclical strategy, as in a recurring pattern of reintroducing, reimagining, or repackaging ideas, icons, or products, helps brands and cultural phenomena sustain engagement over time, similar to Crybaby x PPG. It also mirrors how individuals maintain a digital persona, anchored in the same empowerment core idea, even as the imagery evolves and renews. This exemplifies how aesthetic trends move from social media into daily life, with intangible digital cues replicating into the physical reality through curated products and imagery. Yet, as this cycle deepens into long-term profitability, it raises other critical questions: What cultural production does it actually generate? And how do individuals curate themselves to relate to a brand beyond mere consumption and outward manifestation?

Just as Buttercup challenged traditional femininity in the 2000s, modern brands like Glossier continue this legacy by redefining beauty standards and digital age consumption. Commonly referred to as the brand of Instagram era, Glossier's perfectly curated profile appeals to the "cool" girls of social media. They barely use influencers, only relying on genuine fans to act as brand ambassadors for their "skin first, makeup second" ethos. This consumer-first approach, paired with a curated digital presence, exemplifies the modern day brand model. Additionally, qualities like being witty, intellectual, and artistic are also being promoted and referred to as female empowerment. When we see how Glossier can be linked to Frida Kahlo, it taps into aspiration. It invites consumers to reinterpret and remain culturally relevant through consumer aesthetics and creativity. This also answers why Elizabeth Bennet's bookish aesthetics and her character traits continue to resonate.

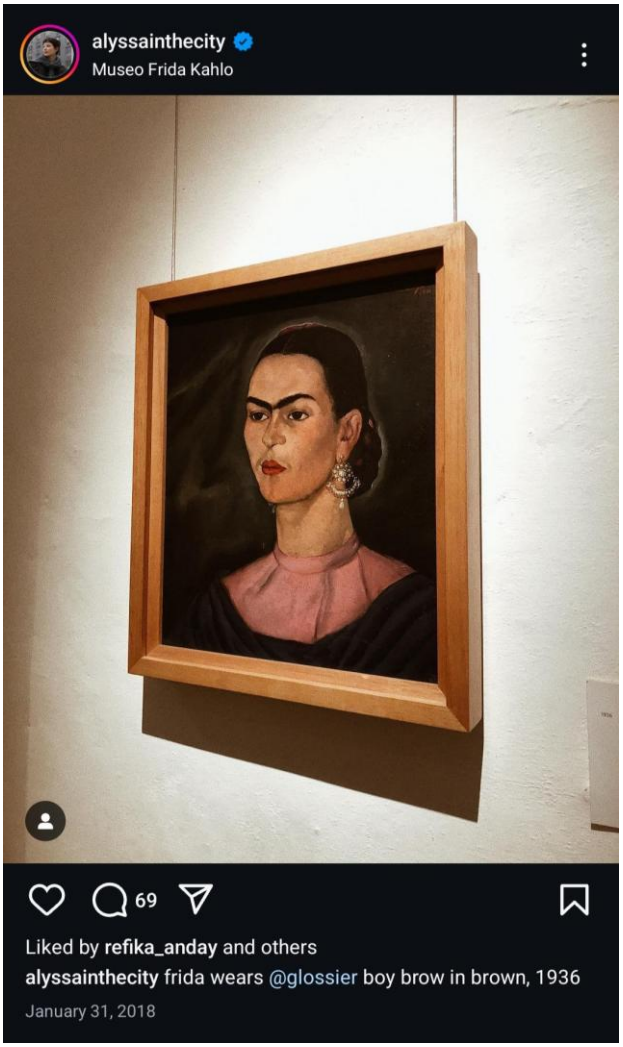


Figure 13. Instagram post with caption Frida wears *Glossier*'s Boy Brow in brown, 1936
Source: Instagram @alyssainthecity, 2018

If you wonder why Glossier stands out among Western brands, it is because it was once a benchmark and major reference point for beauty brands worldwide post-2017, including in Indonesia. Its community-based marketing approach inspired many, including another local brand, Kitschy.

Just like Glossier and Into The Gloss, Glossier itself stemmed from Into The Gloss, a beauty blog Emily Weiss launched in 2010 during her internship at Vogue. It was her passion project aimed at making beauty feel accessible and uncomplicated. Emerging in the pre-Instagram era, the blog became a bridge for how digital images circulated and shaped beauty trends. Before influencer marketing dominated, Into The Gloss thrived on personal recommendations, creating a sense of authenticity and trust.

Similarly, Kitschy builds on its roots in community engagement through Overheard Beauty (OHB), an inclusive Instagram-based beauty platform started in 2017, followed by the brand Kitschy in 2019. The way OHB nurtures its followers engagement echoes Glossier's origins, with their hashtag #RacunOHB. This allowed OHB and Kitschy to produce not just beauty products but also subculture. Owning their merchandise, from nylon skorts, tote bags, pouches, water bottles, and keychains, signals brand loyalty and belonging. This mirrors Glossier's aesthetic-driven merchandise strategy, like pink hoodies, lighters, water bottles, keychains, and pocket mirrors to create emotional attachment. In Q1 2025, Kitschy's newest fragrance trio launch centers around the message of "girlhood is never just one thing," offering solidarity through self-expression and community.

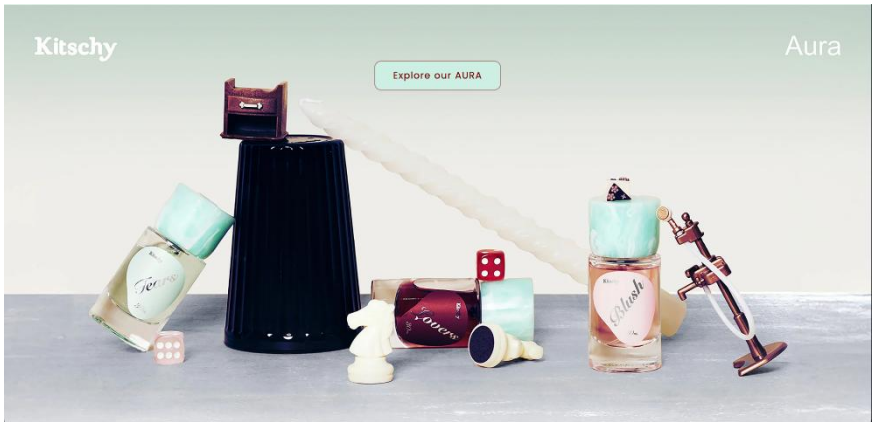


Figure 14. Landing page of *Kitschy* website in March 2025.
Source: Kitschy Beauty, 2025

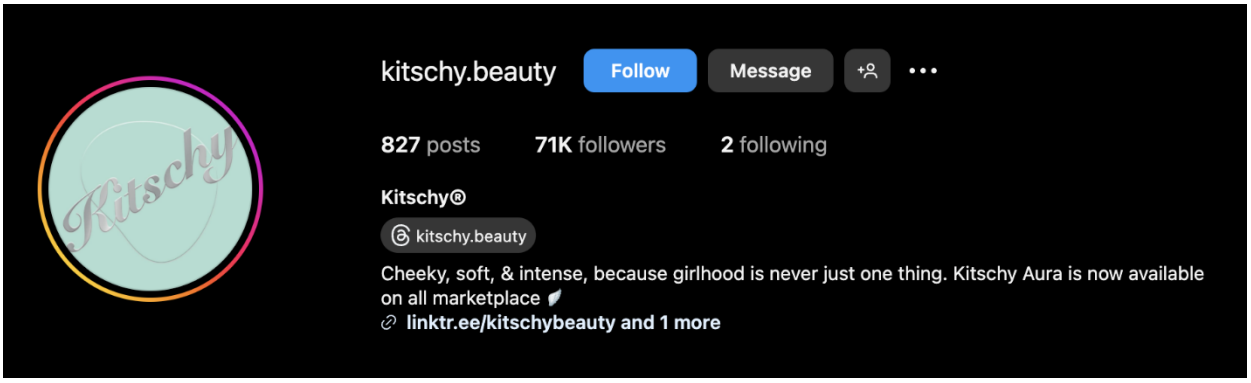


Figure 15. Instagram profile of *Kitschy* with slogan for its newest fragrance trio.
Source: Kitschy Beauty, 2025

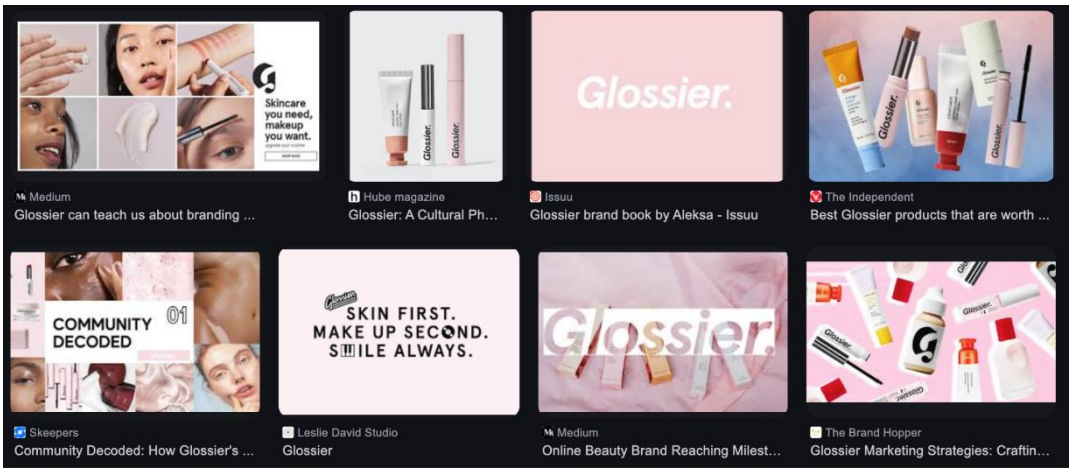


Figure 16. Product and Brand related images of *Glossier*, captured from search engine.
Source: Google, 2025

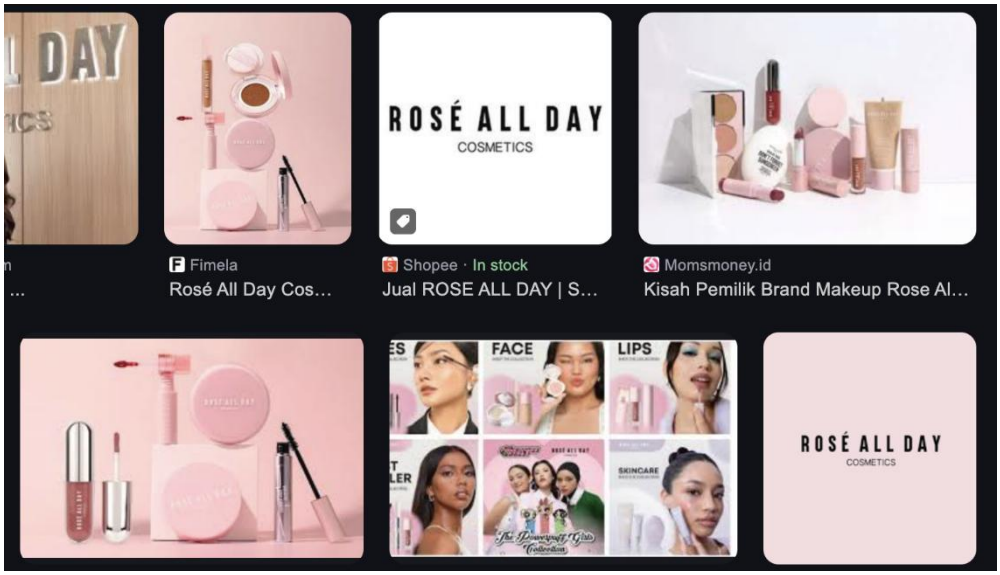


Figure 17. Product and Brand related images of *RADC*, captured from search engine.
Source: Google, 2025

All in all, Glossier's influence shaped global beauty branding, including Indonesia's Rosé All Day Cosmetics and Kitschy. These brands capitalize on circulating aesthetics to engage consumers by channeling unfulfilled desires for pricier foreign brands and offering branding aesthetics similar to the desired products. While Glossier and Kitschy differ in key visuals and color tones, RADC approaches more similar key visuals, nuance, and color palette to Glossier's, yet at one-third to half of Glossier's price points. This is not mere imitation. It reflects localization and adapting global beauty narratives to fit Indonesian consumer realities.

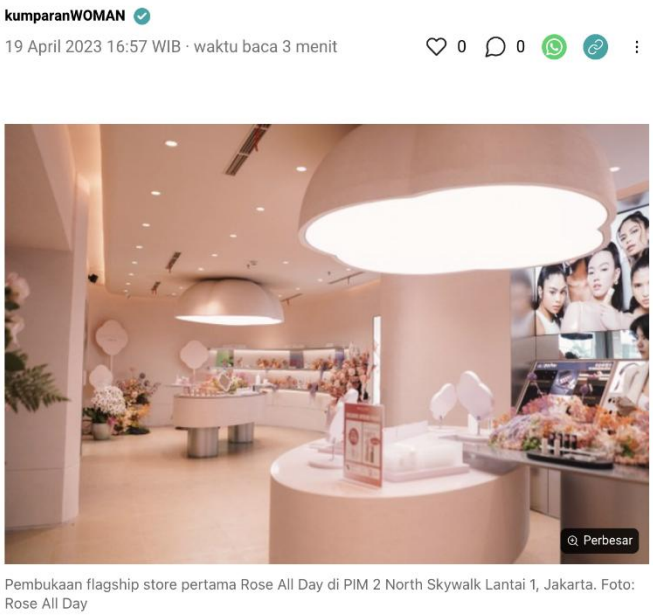


Figure 18. The first flagship store of *RADC* opened in Jakarta in 2023, after 5 years of the business.
Source: Kumparan Woman, 2023

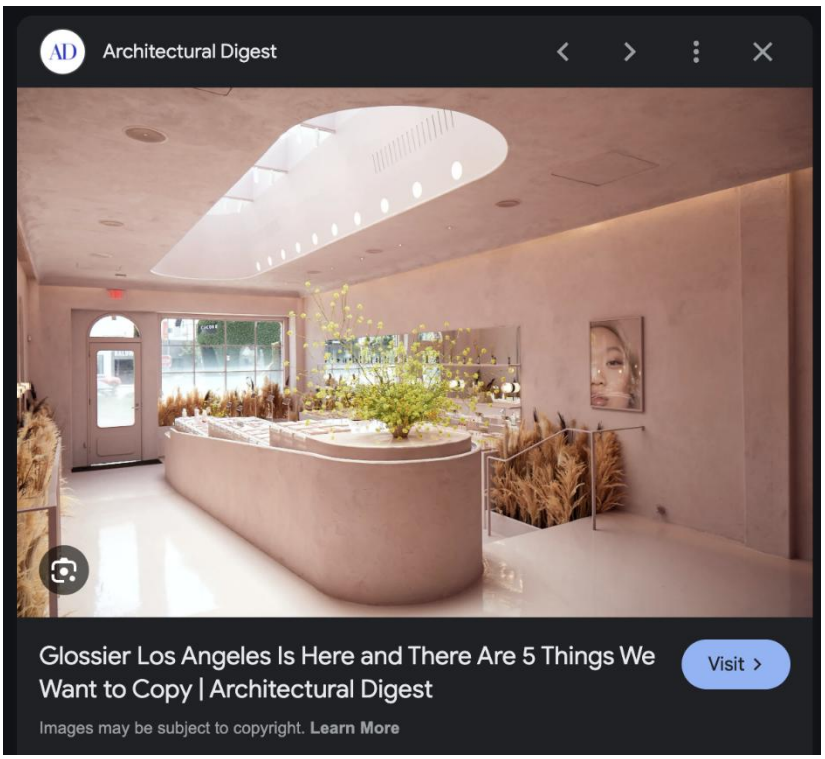


Figure 19. The first *Glossier* permanent flagship store in NYC was opened in 2018. The second one in LA was opened in 2021.
Source: Architectural Digest, 2021

From Buttercup's rebellious spirit to Glossier's celebration of individuality and freedom, these cultural moments reveal both the potentials and constraints of consumer-driven feminism. Positively, we could appreciate its emphasis on natural beauty and individuality that marks a significant shift from traditional, exclusionary beauty norms. In other words, Glossier, Kitschy and RADC became symbolic allies for self-acceptance, acts of liberation, and as a sisterhood in the girlhood. Those who once sold to the 2000s "Girl Power" may now shift to the Glossier era as a renewed expression of empowerment. Even Glossier's reviews section reflects this, showing its appeal across generations, especially among consumers in their 40s and beyond. This demographic often holds significant purchasing power and is increasingly literate in social media and image-driven culture, proving that aesthetic storytelling and digital engagement are strongly linked to consumerism.

Looking back at the 10 Add Yours templates, the selected images of "aesthetics" now align clearly with Buttercup's enduring relevance and the recent cultural phenomena. They linked intimately with sentimental, leisure, purchase-based activities, such as coffee, Y2K digital camera, pink-toned aesthetic products, curated home decor, and wellness or sports. These become signifiers of both personal taste and participation in shared visual culture.

In conclusion, we see a triangular relationship between The Powerpuff Girls and "Girl Power." The narrative of empowerment, liberation through consumerism, and the act of sharing on social media platforms as a form of digital presence and self-branding. These cultural moments reveal the cyclical nature of trends that blend feminism, consumerism, and self-expression. As it continues, where aesthetics becomes language and lifestyle becomes cultural participation, it's adapting to new cultural contexts and reflecting the evolving relationship between empowerment, identity, and consumption.

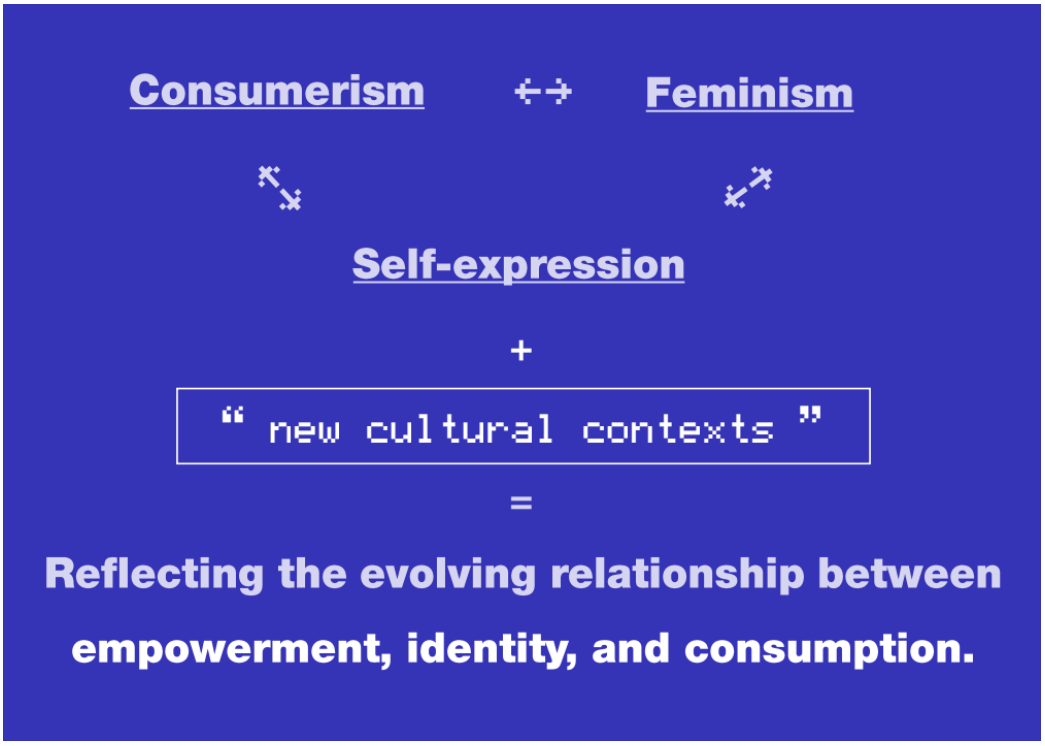


Figure 20. The triangular relationship as a cyclical nature of trends.

CONCLUSION

This research emphasizes how contemporary beauty-related subcultures function primarily as modes of identity construction mediated by consumerism and digital aesthetics. From the images and aesthetics circulation, they generate not the common cultural products, e.g., books, music, or arts. Instead, the combination of image and text produces new subcultural terminologies: lexicon. Terms like "dark feminine," "clean girl," "vanilla girl," "that girl," to "glossier girl" illustrate how aesthetic performance is not just personal expression but also a consumer act. These cultural activations reflect a post-feminist idea emphasizing individualism and curated belonging, while tightly intertwined with consumerism that goes beyond purchasing behaviors.

Through the analysis, the implications of this research lay on three interrelated cultural phenomena shaping contemporary female identity and aesthetics on social media:

Girl Power reflects a post-feminism, individualistic ideas, and asserting identity through curated consumerism and belonging. This beauty-oriented digital identity was a rejection of traditional male power structures among girls and young women, manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and self-reliant attitude.

Girl Cores represent fluid cultural memories that are continuously reinterpreted, recycled, and popularized. Emerging from something niche to something mass, these aesthetics challenge patriarchal norms, e.g., the decline of "The Ingenue Trope" and the resurface of female gaze pleasing aesthetics. Yet, Girl Cores is hardly pinned down to cultural products, but essentially used for self-branding, self-identification, and online projection.

Girlhood embodies collective experience and solidarity, reconnecting with second-wave feminism's embrace of femininity. This re-entry to Girlhood reclaims traditionally feminine identities and counters masculinized ideals such as the "Girlboss" or "Cool Girl." However, these Girl Trends (Girl Cores and Girlhood) can be seen as the natural extension of Girl Power.

The widespread acceptance of this consumerist logic as typical feminine behavior risks obscuring critical engagement with how agency is mediated by market forces and algorithmic control. While these trends promote empowerment narratives, they often do so through

uncritical consumer participation, with self-curation largely linked to brand alignment and visual signaling. Therefore, consumerism itself is not an actual subculture but it functions to trigger the agency, working hand-in-hand with images to activate and shape desire.

Additionally, social intermediality, algorithmic influence, and evolving cultural phenomena narrow down aesthetic exposure and reshape the way cultural memory is circulated online. Social media algorithms do not just reflect cultural tastes. They also mediate cultural production and self-conception. This raises critical questions about individual agency in an era where identity is shaped by algorithmic visibility, curated aesthetics, and consumption patterns. For example, references to fictional characters suggest media-driven aspirational identity formation. Similarly, the possible contemporary definition of aesthetics often reflects a sense of aestheticized leisure shaped by image consumption.

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