

SPECIMEN



**ON FEMININITY AND
PERFORMATIVITY**

PERSONALITY #1

\$333 BOOK GIRL

Channel your inner intellectual with a lifetime supply of books you'll never read, stacked in a deliberately haphazard manner next to bookshelves adorned with stuffed animals and a desk littered (again, deliberately) with empty leatherbound notebooks, wax-sealed pens, and fake plants.



ADD TO CART

PERSONALITY #2

\$444 STANLEY GIRL

An adult sippy cup, overpriced fanny pack, and unremarkable yet coveted leggings are the best way to let the world know you mean business. Forget the girlboss craze—you're younger and don't need a corporate job because you're still in college and/or living off your parents' money. Show it off!



ADD TO CART

PERSONALITY #3

\$777 COQUETTE GIRL

Why let go of girlhood? Hold onto your best moments by decorating everything in baby pink, dressing yourself up like a baby doll, and acting like a baby around middle aged men. Romanticize getting groomed and being young with elegant vintage decor, hordes of retinols and collagen supplements, and a slimming eating disorder.



ADD TO CART

PERSONALITY #4

\$666 FEMGEL

Embrace being "not like other girls" and indulge in your own mental illness. Exacerbate your social isolation and ineptitude by developing an insufferable online presence among other anti-recovery women who have a narcissistic obsession with being sad and try to mask it as yearning.



ADD TO CART

WHY WOMEN

As Jia Tolentino describes in her essay "Always Be Optimizing," a woman is constantly being preened for capitalistic success. She is encouraged to forgo meaningful relationships in exchange for transactional ones that fit neatly into her tight schedule: a therapist, personal trainer, and nannies instead of friends or family, a "work husband" instead of a real life partner. Her sexuality and femininity are weaponized under the guise of empowerment in order to keep her compliant—in other words, mass consumption is not just a material pursuit. Capitalism idolizes the woman who can exist entirely on her own, calls her "self-reliant" or "self-starting," and watches her convince herself it's not loneliness, but a necessary step in protecting her peace or improving her lifestyle or saving her from some other innate human experience or emotion. Her life is reduced to the unpaid or costly labor of "prioritizing" herself, her self that has instead become a consumptive checklist to better operate in a society that is indifferent to her existence at best. Encarnacion Gutierrez-Rodriguez explores this in "The Precarity of Feminization;" women are constantly performing unpaid and unvalued labor to uphold society's standards. Not only are women expected to succeed professionally in a corporate environment, but maintain a pristine home life for multiple people with no compensation.

A woman is not only expected to keep on top of accepted social conventions and physical attributes, she is expected to exhibit them with ease to even be passable as a human being. Girls online have seemed to pick the idea of "aesthetics" as the cure to this predicament. Instead of having to figure out their own tastes and potentially facing backlash, young women instead subscribe to a mass identity defined entirely by visual stimuli and material possessions. They provide the perfect guide to optimization and lend a sense of control to women who would otherwise feel entirely powerless in a world that prioritizes efficiency, productivity, and perfection. She is told exactly what she should buy, how she should dress, how she should talk, and what she should look like. Each of these communities exists in a void, its participants shouting into the echo chamber until they remember to hold everyone at arm's length. It allows her to fit comfortably into the patriarchal capitalist society we live in while giving her the illusion of autonomy, opinion, and individuality.

Still, women have agency. Women can willingly participate and engage with their own subjugation because, in some ways, it does serve them. It can certainly be easier than pushing back. After all, in a world that equates beauty with morality and value, why would you knowingly stray from the expectations laid bare before you? Victimizing intelligent women who make these choices about how to live their own lives is worse than participating. It only serves to further strip women of their autonomy, exchanging informed decisions for stupidity, subservience, submission. It may be a trap, but it is always a choice.

FAKE IT

A GIFT FROM MEN

While many of these identities are exaggerated femininity or otherwise corruptions of traditionally feminine traits, they still subscribe to the male gaze in that their manifestations can only thrive in the patriarchal capitalist society we live in; one can't have "book girls" or "femcels" without the male definition of what makes a girl hot or not. Everyone is or can be watching you on the internet, and therefore everyone on the internet is constantly aware of who will be perceiving them and how. The woman online is, as Margaret Atwood has already aptly described, her own voyeur. Any performance she puts on is through the eyes of everyone else and how they might perceive her.

Lauren Michèle Jackson further describes the male gaze for the New Yorker, exploring how this lense developed by the patriarchy was popularized through film and TV, depicting the system's view of women within it. It's clear through the male gaze that the patriarchal function of women is to sit and look pretty unless otherwise preoccupied by bending to the man's whim, often sexually.

Being surrounded by this point of view in pop culture, consuming it as if it's one's own can lead women to accept it as some kind of truth. It's become instinct for women to cater every aspect of their appearance to other people, adjusting their outfits, hair, makeup, and even mannerisms and personalities to better suit the people around them. It's a defense mechanism, the one they've been taught through media that asserts a woman's position is that of servitude. Even if a woman is, say, a femcel, this anti-man persona is still entirely informed by the male gaze and working specifically against it. Talk about playing hard to get.

WHO IS IT, REALLY?

During my senior year of high school, I worked part-time at Barnes & Noble. I applied to the job because I loved reading and had wanted to fuel the habit in this way since I was able to read, but also because I expected a low-stress and monotonous environment. It generally fulfilled my lackluster expectations, and I would only later come to realize how ill-informed BookTok and the internet were.

The demographics of readers or, at least, those who purchased books did not align with the online image. The main customers were everyone except teen-aged white girls. Any digital space is not necessarily representative of the general population, so the content we consume on social media is naturally replete with missing demographics and misrepresentation. It is crucial to abandon strictly online cultural practices or positions and recognize that while the internet might not ring true, its negative implications can extend to the real world.



“LADY” DAKOTEN



Dakota Warren is a twenty-four-year-old writer born in Australia and currently residing in England. She rose to internet fame on TikTok, where she posts short-form video content relating to books, fashion, and writing. Social media is her full-time job, but she self-describes as a full-time creative. Her internet presence also extends to Instagram and YouTube, where she respectively posts image and long-form content about the same topics.

Dakota's social media accounts began as anyone else's do, with a messy, personal appearance that isn't exactly easily palatable or meant for consumption. Scroll back far enough on her accounts, and it becomes evident that she has since curated her online presence to fit a particular character. What was once genuine content now feels shallow and performatively intellectual, perpetuating exclusivity of the humanities for pretty, wealthy, white women.

One of the prerequisites for being her fan is the ability to form parasocial relationships; her comment sections consist of stock praise about her appearance or taste punctuated by questions one might ask a friend (addressing her as “Lady”).

She is tall and thin and blonde and her friends are similarly white and trim. She advertises books based on moods, never addressing the demographics of the authors or her fans. Coasting along the pale waves of the algorithm, she thrives. In her defence, she has admitted that her success was most likely spurred by her appearance.

AND BY THE WAY,

What allows one to achieve the status of “book girl” is left unsaid, and although apparent, it is worthy of note: they’re privileged financially and demographically, white or white-passing, with enough money to buy every new feel-good romance on the shelf and look good doing it. They’re allowed to perform intellectualism because they don’t actually require excessive or impressive levels of intelligence and knowledge to succeed; they are pretty and young and eager, and that is more than enough. The beauty is allowed to exhibit brains for the sake of it.

The proliferation of “girl dinners” and “girl hobbies” that boast simplistic, mindless pastimes as a staple of being a woman—yes, a woman; many of the participants in these “girl” activities were adult women, often in their mid- to late-twenties—contributed wholly to the “book girl” phenomenon, developed in the wake of mass female infantilization online. (See: “I’m just a girl.”) So, the aestheticization of something more mature and educated is almost welcome.

Despite being a more adult pursuit, the manifestation of reading and writing as a performative hobby online was still distinguishable through terms like “book girl.” In this case, as opposed to previous uses of “girl” to infantilize adult women, “girl” has started to become synonymous with “hot.” It’s not really about being smart or a nerd or reading or being creative, it’s about looking good while conveying these traits. And, as per usual, this “looking good” can be defined by compliance with eurocentric beauty standards. Hotness, whiteness, and youth are all in cooperation to colonize intellectuality.

Search “book girl” on Pinterest and you’ll find pale brunettes or fake-tanned blondes either pulling a book from the shelf (not reading) or holding a book conveniently opened exactly half way through (more likely than not, not reading). They’re dressed up, with their hair done and wearing tastefully and endearingly oversized sweaters or tight, dainty tanks.



paris bookstore <3



Reading is a hobby



Reading is a hobby



Reading is a hobby



reading



Library outfit picture idea



Why I love



Women of color, on the other hand, don’t take up a comparable amount of space at the forefront of on-line bookish communities. Books by authors of color and/or queer authors aren’t prioritized in the same way white, heteronormative novels are. That said, readers are unequivocally a diverse group. Marginalized participants simply don’t get as much exposure as their straight white counterparts on the internet.

Saidiya Hartman coined the concept of critical fabulation, or the act of filling in the blanks of histories of the oppressed, in order to better convey the realities of oppression and the enslaved, due to the fact that history is most often recorded by those with power. Now, anyone can document anything, but those with systemic power are still the ones gaining the most recognition or exposure for their content. Access to information is easier than ever before, but it is necessary to employ a kind of critical fabulation nonetheless; we need to fill the gaps left by the algorithm where content by more diverse creators is stifled, because it is essential that online spaces accurately reflect the real world.

To outshine the privileged, like in any professional or academic environment, it is not only necessary to outperform but overperform. There must be an excess of labor that, in the end, garners insufficient reception at best. And even then, success isn’t guaranteed. In this scenario, marginalized individuals are victim to even more brutal standards of performativity and optimization.

And so, it’s necessary to imagine that the pseudo-intellectual circles have inspired more genuine consumption among those who must be doubly thorough in their pursuits in addition to those who traditionally get recognition. People of color, queer people, and women are not all separate, but each trait provides another barrier one must pass to be respected or validated. To uphold the “book girl” caricature is to erase intellectualism and intelligence, especially among those marginalized. The postergirl is reflective of an antagonistic ideal, not a reality.

YOU’RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH TO PRETEND

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