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'Eyo, mixed girl check': The commodification of embodied performance in the #mixedgirlcheck trend on TikTok

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Abstract

Feminist media research has provided a wide range of studies exploring how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within the neoliberal platform economy. Popular feminist ideas and social media representations are often criticized for their lack of diversity and strong focus on Western, white, able-bodied, upper-class ciswomen. In this article, we expand on existing literature by focusing on creators' self-representations under the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok. The nomenclature of #mixedgirlcheck implies to present a different form of girlhood ('mixed') with the potential to subvert popular femininity. Through critical discourse analysis, we analysed 100 TikTok videos to answer our research question: 'How do creators represent their identities in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok?'. Our analysis revealed four prominent patterns in this trend: (1) the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, (2) negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging, (3) embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family and (4) capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality. We discuss how TikTok's neoliberal platform logic rewards performances of the 'mixed girl' that cater to a white, heterosexual, cisgender dominant gaze, uncritical of discriminatory structures such as racism, sexism or heteronormativity. This paper contributes to platform studies by critically examining how TikTok's neoliberal platform logic shapes and rewards identity performances under #mixedgirlcheck, revealing both its reinforcement of dominant discriminatory structures and its affordances for momentary ruptures in hegemonic discourses on 'mixed' girlhood.

Keywords

Critical mixed race, TikTok, platform capitalism, feminist media studies, identity

Introduction

Identity negotiations are distributed on new social media via trends and memetic performance; one example is the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok. In this article, we contribute to the study of new social media platforms and feminist media research by critically examining how TikTok's neoliberal platform logic shapes and rewards identity performances under #mixedgirlcheck, revealing both its reinforcement of dominant discriminatory structures and its affordances for momentary ruptures in hegemonic discourses on 'mixed' girlhood. Ideas of difference and belonging are not created by social media but human societies are shaped by 'great classificatory systems of difference' (Hall, 2021b: 359–360). The construction of difference and belonging is organized by discursive constructs that structure regimes of representation such as race, gender or class (e.g. Hall, 2021b: 266–267). Consequently, discursive power relations shape representations. Importantly, different power relations, symbolic representations and identity constructions are intersectional, meaning that 'reciprocally constructing phenomena', like class, age, gender, sexuality, race, nation and ethnicity, are entangled and together 'shape complex

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social inequalities' (Hill Collins, 2015: 2). The classification of differences through power not only operates as an 'extrinsic force' but has also 'become a constitutive element in our own identities' (Hall, 2021a: 266–267).

Within modern-day neoliberal 'technologies of self and governmentality', the reinterpretation of subjectivities 'in alignment with values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and market competition' has afforded the commodification of difference in identity representations (Ganti, 2014: 94). As 'a structural force' and 'an ideology of governance', neoliberalism globally shapes people's lives and subjectivities (Ganti, 2014: 89) and intersectionally influences people's socio-economic realities (e.g. Melamed, 2015: 77). While neoliberalism thus promises success through self-commodification and entrepreneurialism, it simultaneously governs the very conditions and structures that uphold the unequal distribution of wealth and life chances.

Social media have been both shaped by and are shaping neoliberal societal structures. Research here has for instance pointed to phenomena of commercial exploitation and market concentration on a few leading platforms, 'surveillance capitalism' (Berry, 2019: 71–73) and 'the constitution of a neoliberal subjectivity' (Roberts, 2014: 93–94) where users turn themselves into profitable brands (see also Banet-Weiser, 2012). Especially feminist media scholars have put forth critical insights into the latter. Analysing gender performances on social media, they emphasize the inherent contradictions in contemporary feminism in simultaneously challenging and conforming to traditional norms (Wynne et al., 2021). Movements like postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism are thus characterized by ambivalence in shaping representations (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 18–19). These representations are often criticized for their focus on white, middle class women (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2).

TikTok is one of the most important social media platforms with a large active userbase, especially among young users (Koetsier, 2023) and thus poses a crucial site for the study of users' self-representation on social media. The guiding research question of the study is 'How do creators represent their identities in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok?'. The paper first presents a review of feminist media research on commodified self-representation on social media. Afterwards we will introduce the case of the #mixedgirlcheck on the platform TikTok. After describing the study's method, the paper will present the study's results. Our analysis revealed four prominent patterns in this trend: (1) the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, (2) negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging, (3) embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family and (4) capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality. We discuss how TikTok's neoliberal platform logic rewards performances of the 'mixed girl' that cater to a white, heterosexual, cisgender dominant gaze, uncritical of discriminatory structures such as racism, sexism or heteronormativity. Simultaneously, TikTok's affective trend affordances allow for brief moments of connective ruptures in this dominant discourse on 'mixed' girlhood.

Neoliberal self-commodification on social media – feminist perspectives

Platform users' self-presentation on their profiles has often been related to socially dominant and stereotypical identity constructions (e.g. Hearn, 2017). Building upon Butler's (2015) work, gender performance on social media can be understood not merely as an expression of internal identity but as a reiterative practice shaped by societal expectations. The neoliberal logic of platform economies places pressure on creators to engage in self-branding where the performance of identity becomes commodified (Abidin, 2020; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2015). Generally, 'the technological capacities of the Internet' offer various 'strategies of self-branding' (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 54). Banet-Weiser (2012) uses the term 'brand' to describe 'the intersecting relationship between marketing, a product and consumers' (p. 4). Importantly, she emphasized brands' cultural significance beyond economic aspects, stating 'branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations' (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 4). The imperative of self-branding on social media often manifests in the form of 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2016), where creators continuously manage their online personas to maintain visibility and economic viability. This process involves a delicate balance between presenting oneself as authentic and relatable while also crafting a marketable identity that aligns with prevailing cultural and market demands.

Smith and Watson (2010, 2014) introduce the term 'automediality' to describe how the medium itself plays an active role in shaping the subjectivities that are presented. This concept challenges the traditional view that media are merely 'tools' for expressing a pre-existing self, arguing instead that the choice of medium shapes self-expression, and the materiality of the medium plays a crucial role in forming the subjectivity being portrayed. Consequently, media technologies do not diminish or oversimplify the inner self; rather, they expand the possibilities for self-representation. New forms of media reshape ideas about identity, as well as the rhetoric and methods of self-presentation, creating new forms of virtual sociality and community that are not reliant on physical encounters.

Feminist media research has provided a wide range of studies exploring how individuals navigate and negotiate their identities within the neoliberal platform economy. Commodified femininity is particularly prevalent in the influencer/blogosphere as depictions of idealized feminine economic success stories aimed at positioning personal brands in competition to others and in neoliberal

individualist singularity (e.g. Duffy and Hund, 2015). Performances of the feminine self are hemmed into the dominant neoliberal ideology (McRobbie, 2015) by the extension of social control through platform corporations and their curation regimes. Feminine self-representations are thus constructed in anticipation of established impositions and demands of an imagined audience and the algorithms that facilitate or restrict access to them.

The capitalist and neoliberal logics of social media platform corporations and consequently self-branding and representation on their sites are to be understood inherently intersectional as they perpetuate and create inequalities of race, sex, gender and so on. Surplus value is often harvested not by those creating it, and it is often based on free and unrecognized labour of racialized creators in the first place (Ile, 2022; Lorenz, 2020; Turner and Hui, 2023). Racialized influencers or creators, for instance, are not just often unrecognized for their labour; they also are compensated worse (Christin and Lu, 2023). A core instrument of platform corporations and marketers to justify racialized pay gaps and to incentivize mass-marketable forms of online self-performance are metrics (e.g. engagement, following, views and so on) that essentially reward purely quantifiable growth (Christin and Lu, 2023: 10–12). Racialized creators are hence often coaxed to performing what Turner and Hui (2023) call 'palatable' online selves that allow them to reach a substantial audience and maintain an idealized image of authentic racialized subjects.[1]

TikTok as a platform

Research on TikTok phenomena has flourished in recent years (TikTok Cultures Research Network, 2021). TikTok foregrounds its 'For You Page' (FYP), which organizes content via an opaque algorithm to present an endless stream of short videos. While platforms have always facilitated certain forms of online self-performance through profiles and interactions and suppressed others (Szulc, 2019), TikTok's FYP has centered profile curation as the core cultural practice of online self-performance. Creators form 'ad hoc publics' (Bruns and Burgess, 2015) through the use of sounds and memetic performances (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Therefore, topics are not necessarily represented with sets of hashtags alone; rather, they entail various contexts and narratives. Accordingly, remixing and recontextualization are core practices of TikTok content creation that situate the creator's self within a broader imagined community of users that is embedded within trends (Primig et al., 2023).

Sounds and audio memes are of primary importance on TikTok. The sentiment and meaning of a piece of content can depend entirely on the sound used with its video (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022). Zhao and Abidin (2023), for instance, analysed the use of audio memes and sound snippets in videos criticizing the 'fox eye challenge' trend. They found that sound remixes were often used to convey creators' stances toward this topic. As Primig et al. (2023) found, creators often 'show a considerably high degree of audio editing. In such instances, music is not used only to underscore a mood, but its rhythm, speed, lyrics and motifs are carefully selected and timed perfectly to match the visual content' (p. 6). Lee and Lee (2023) emphasized that hashtags still play an important role of 'narrative extension' but that audio memes and dance trends carry substantial affective meaning.

TikTok's audiovisual memetic affordances further foreground the embodied self-presentation of identity. For instance, female identity on TikTok is often confined to extreme normative ideals of femininity catered towards the Eurocentric and patriarchic gaze (e.g. Chen and Zeng, 2023; Kennedy, 2020; Sandall, 2024). Further, research on the #BlackLivesMatter found that the platform's imperative of foregrounding creators' self-performance often favoured White creators' visibility, rather than amplifying marginalized voices (Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund, 2022). Lee and Lee (2023) analysed the #stopasianhate movement on TikTok as gendered and affective 'space-making practices' through which Asian creators used the platform's affordances to create and spread counter-discourse. Zhao and Abidin (2023) observed similar patterns in Asian creators' counter-discourse concerning the 'fox eye challenge'. Finally, Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022) explored TikTok self-performance by migrants as a way to transgress the physical borders of cultural belonging and nationality.

The #mixedgirlcheck

The 'mixedgirlcheck' trend is a reference to identity by its nomenclature. The #mixedgirlcheck TikTok trend is part of the broader category of check-trends, which usually entail some form of embodied evaluative performance (e.g. fit-checks presenting one's outfit). The most popular version of the sound trend used in #mixedgirlcheck videos originated from the user @ariananjones.[2] It comprises a vocal exclamation of 'Eyo, mixed girl check!' followed by a musical snippet of Jack Strauber's 'Buttercup' in the TikTok typical fashion of sound remixing.

While there is no universal definition of the term, 'mixedness' is most commonly understood in terms of 'racial mixedness'. The concept of 'racial mixedness' is based on an essentialist conception of homogenous races that can be combined, resulting in a mixture. This conception misses the acknowledgment that race is a discursive construct that 'produce[s], mark[s] and fix[es] the infinite differences and diversities of human beings through a rigid binary coding' (Hall, 2021d: 330–331). We enclose 'mixed race' in quotation marks to emphasize the concept's social construction.

While it is based on an essentialist conception of race, discourses on 'racial mixedness' have complicated ideas of homogenous races. Vest (2016) wrote that 'the possibility of mixed existence creates "discomfort", a "crisis of

racial meaning", or else elicits a fear of annihilation, political betrayal or capitulation with colonialist and racist projects' (p. 96). Similarly, Furedi (2001) argued that 'the person of mixed parentage was a 'moral anomaly' in the racial imagination' (p. 38). Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky (2021) recounted that racial mixedness is historically linked to weakness and impurity while ironically also implying beauty and potentiality. The romanticization of 'mixed-race' individuals is connected to portraying them as potential saviours who could alleviate societal racial conflicts (p. 19).

These assertions suggest that 'mixed race' generally represents a positioning outside the norm. However, representations of mixedness have still been influenced by dominant norms and hierarchies. Collins (2021), for instance, stated that 'mixed-race narratives … have tended to similarly prioritize light-skinned, racially ambiguous, cisgender representations of multiraciality' (p. 108). Moreover, Collins noted 'compulsory heterosexuality as means to reproduce desirable human characteristics' (p. 111–112). Sexton (2008) asserted that the 'fiction of wholesome interracial relationships requires their desexualization' in multiculturalist narratives, muting the symbolic and political meaning of racial Blackness especially (p. 154–155).

Research on 'mixedness' on TikTok has so far revealed understandings of the term as the union of two people, such as a 'mixed couple', and their performance on TikTok (Civila and Jaramillo-Dent, 2022). 'Mixedness' as an identity expression of a single person has been studied in the trend of #WasianCheck focusing on 'young mixed-race Asian people['s]' digital media use (King-O'Riain, 2022). Similarly referring to 'mixedness', the #mixedgirlcheck trend's name further entails a reference to gender. Popular feminist ideas and social media representations are often criticized for their lack of diversity and strong focus on western, white, able-bodied, upper-class ciswomen (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). The #mixedgirlcheck claims to present a different form of girlhood ('mixed') with the potential to subvert popular femininity. Choosing the trend as object of investigation thus allows for an analysis of online identity representation in a unique platform environment shaped by neoliberal ideology influences. This study thus contributes to platform studies by examining how TikTok's neoliberal platform logic influences the commodification of identity and the reinforcement of or resistance against dominant cultural narratives through the #mixedgirlcheck trend. To investigate how creators represented their identities in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck, we posed the research question: 'How do creators represent their identities in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok?'.

Method

Following the sampling approach of previously published TikTok research (e.g. Cervi and Divon, 2023; Civila and Jaramillo-Dent, 2022; Zhao and Abidin, 2023), we used a specific hashtag (#mixedgirlcheck) to access the study's material. We decided to use the hashtag and not simply the 'mixed girl check' sound by @arianajones to include the platform's typical mixing and expansion of contexts. Notably, however, much of our final sample (41%) used the original sound with the #mixedgirlcheck hashtag (the sample's remaining sounds were created by 52 individual sound creators who, as typical for TikTok, often re-upload slightly different remixes of already popular sound snippets).

We used the 4Cat tool through Docker and Zeeschuimer in the Firefox browser (Peeters et al., 2023) to access TikTok videos using the hashtag #mixedgirlcheck on March 24, 2023. In this manner, we retrieved both audiovisual materials and metadata. The data collection process began with accessing tiktok.com. We created an account and initiated a search using the hashtag #mixedgirlcheck. Then, we navigated to the 'Videos' tab and scrolled through the presented videos. In total, 395 TikTok posts were accessed and archived through Zeeschuimer. For in-depth analysis, we then created a random sample of 100 TikTok posts from the original material. The random sample was drawn on a meaning-sufficiency (Braun and Clarke, 2022) basis. During the coding and analysis, we regularly met and exchanged information and ideas about the process to determine whether we have found what others have called 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016) or 'meaning sufficiency' (Braun and Clarke, 2022) – less popular in qualitative research but widely referred to as 'theoretical saturation'. We were satisfied with the information power of the analysis after roughly 70% of the material was analysed and decided to include 30 more videos for bolstering our results` reliability. We saved all the videos as .mp4 files[3] to mitigate any potential data loss. Analysing items within the app offers numerous benefits for robust data analysis procedures; however, as anticipated, some of the posts were deleted or removed between our data collection and coding. Therefore, these posts were coded using the downloaded files. Through this process, we ensured integrity and reliability in our research.

Our approach was rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA typically engages with media texts beyond their immediate denotation and aims to uncover how they are bound and facilitated by discourse (e.g. Fairclough, 2003; Hall, 1997). CDA is thus primarily focused on how 'discourse "rules in" [and out] certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write or conduct oneself […] in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it' (Hall, 1997: 44). CDA allows researchers to focus on the ways some forms of self-expression are fostered or facilitated while others are suppressed – this extends to information and communication technologies and, as studied here, the cultural self-mass reproduction on sites of platform corporations. Initially,

each author inductively viewed 10 TikTok posts. To structure the material and guide our attention, we then agreed on analysis heuristics that focus on the platform dimension (situating the creator of the video in the context of TikTok), the action in front of the camera (what is the narrative, i.e. what is happening) and the camera action (how is the video produced; also in relation to its platform context). The heuristics are presented in Supplemental Appendix 1. We then went through the material in iterative cycles and regularly discussed our interpretations until we determined that we reached sufficient explanatory power or 'meaning sufficiency' (Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2022).

We refrained from presenting visual examples of the data to protect the video creators' privacy. This decision aligns with the ethical principle of social media scholarship (Boyd and Crawford, 2012), especially feminist media scholarship, of actively striving to protect research subjects' privacy and agency (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012). Instead, we comprehensively described the content and analysed its nuanced visual messages in aggregate.

Results

Most analysed videos followed the same basic pattern accompanied by the original #mixedgirlcheck sound,[4] underscoring the prevalence of memetic performance on the platform (e.g. Zulli and Zulli, 2022). They usually began with an introduction accompanied by a voiceover ('Eyo, mixed girl check'). Then, they continued by presenting the creator's parents (usually showing edited images or photographs of them). Finally, they ended by presenting the video creator. However, the sample also included deviations from this structure. These exceptions did not use the original sound or refer to their creators' parents when illustrating their 'mixed' identity. Thus, our analysis revealed different approaches to the construction or performance of 'mixed' girlhood using the hashtag #mixedgirlcheck. The networked memetic performance of 'mixedness' was generally bound to sound trends that guided the videos' affective narratives.

Usually, the videos' participants were young women. They focused on one person and did not reveal many background objects. With few exceptions, the videos' 10-s length matched the duration of the 'Eyo, mixed girl check' sound. Most often, the users' profiles showed a consistent style in their posts (e.g. all posts were related to beauty and fashion). Most of the videos did not represent interactions with other users—that is, stitching or reacting to other users' comments. Some exceptions were responses expressed as comments below the videos. Our investigation revealed four prominent patterns in the videos: (1) the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, (2) negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging, (3) embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family and (4) capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality.

The embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage

Often, nationality was used to construct the creators' 'mixed' identities. The primary reference point was the identities of the creators' parents. First, an image of each parent alone was shown, accompanied by text stating their nationality, frequently complemented by the respective country's flag. Thus, the parent images served to illustrate this nationality, and the parents represented a typical example of the nationality presented. After appearing individually, the parents were usually depicted together (e.g. at their wedding). Finally, the creators were shown to have resulted from their parents' 'mixture', sometimes expressed with the equal sign, such as '= me'. The parents' nationalities and cultures were further accentuated by representing the parents in traditional clothing or showing them in contexts connoting cultural heritage, such as old Chinese temples.

This approach represents a very static and homogeneous conception of nationality. This conception became even clearer when ideas of nationality and race were explicitly conflated. Examples included videos in which the father was referred to as Black while the mother was Polish or those describing the mother as White accompanied, by German and British flags, while the father was described as Vietnamese and Chinese. This type of description, on the one hand, represents the conception of racially homogeneous nations (in these examples, Germany and Britain were depicted as White nations). On the other hand, it assigns a nationless culture to specific races, such as Blackness. Race was also constructed in relation to the perceived majority racial group in a given context. For instance, while creators based in the United States did not label a parent of Asian heritage as White, creators based in China labelled the Chinese nationality as White.

At times, the creators' parents were ascribed more than one nationality. These nationalities were then accumulated by the creators, who presented themselves as having, for instance, four nationalities. This accumulation of nationalities in one identity suggests a cross-generational definition of 'mixed' identity that seemed exclusively bound to bodily markers and the idea that nationality passes on through kinship. This bodily focus was also apparent in that, alongside the creator's looks, alleged different cultural or national influences were usually not depicted in practices, behaviours, artefacts or the like.

Another approach to hinting at the creators' parents' differences was merely presenting parents without specifying their race, nationality, culture or ethnicity. A creator's ultimate self-presentation as a 'mixed girl' suggested that the creator regarded their parents as different. The bodies that appeared in the videos were, therefore, expected to clearly indicate these differences. The creators expected their audiences to harbour the same assumptions about phenotypes as themselves. In other words, bodies signified not

only phenotypical difference but also the 'mixedness' of the parents' relationships and children. Thus, categories of phenotypical difference were assumed to be a universally understood signifiers, which was also evident in the emphasis on single features, such as an 'afro', to express racial identities.

Negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging

Some videos challenged the assumption that universal identity signifiers denote authenticity. Very prominent here were references to racial authenticity. Racial authenticity refers to the belief that particular racialized attributes—such as hairstyles, speech or living areas—are 'the components of the template from which … [a particular racial identity] originates' (Johnson, 2003: 2). Thus, it works as an arbitrary 'trope manipulated for cultural capital' to maintain an ingroup identity and exclude others (Johnson, 2003: 3). Therefore, it can both reproduce and challenge dominant representations (Johnson, 2003: 3). Different creators in this study's sample addressed their 'experience of race as boundary-specific' (Maragh, 2018: 597) due to others' assumptions about racial authenticity. Examples include expressions such as 'people say I'm not Black enough'. References to not being perceived as 'Black enough' illustrate the politics of belonging via assumed racial authenticity (Eversley, 2004: x). Thus, the creators demonstrated an embodied rupture in deviating from others' assumptions about racial authenticity that reproduce dominant ideologies in what constitutes Blackness.

However, this rupture was also used to counter dominant ideologies concerning racial authenticity. An interesting trend used the sound of an episode of the Netflix series *Big Mouth*. In the sound the series' character Missy, responds to comments questioning her Blackness. She states, 'You don't get to tell me how Black I am'. In using this sound, the creators clarified that their racial identities were not defined by others' perceptions. Thus, they broke from normative ideas about racial identities and appearances. In this way, the embodied experience of race was transferred to a connective, memetic performance of race that is facilitated and constrained by the trend's affective narrative register. The sound encompasses both the performance in front of the camera (what ought to be said and done) and the affective meaning (what the creators' embodied experience feels like and what ought to be felt), binding creators to an imagined community of users who feel similarly and express this feeling through the sound. Primig et al. (2023) referred to such communities as 'affective audio networks'.

Other creators addressed the repercussions of their bodies being read as signifying particular identity traits by presenting their experiences with harassment, including catcalling, insults, derogatory comments and objectifications. Typically, an image of a creator's body was used to illustrate their 'mixed' appearance, yet these videos focused on othering processes through comments by other people. These examples represented universal assumptions about identities, essentialization and homogenization that informed harassment in the forms of actions and comments. Interestingly, some examples also conflated different identity categorizations such as race and sexuality. One such post represented a group of Black boys calling for the female creator's attention before she rejected them. The boys conclude that the creator must only be attracted to White people. Their conclusion represents various assumptions: (1) the creator's heterosexuality, (2) racial identity as a basis for sexual preference and (3) the boys' superiority (representing patriarchal structures) and unquestioned suitability as sexual partners (framing the creator's rejection as abnormal deviance). This example not only represents intersectionality in the creator's harassment experiences but also in the entanglement of race, gender and heteronormativity. This kind of content was fairly exceptional under the #mixedgirlcheck hashtag. One creator even justified such a video by stating that she found the comments she received funny and, therefore, decided to post the video.

Embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family

As already described in the subsection on the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, a biological understanding of 'mixedness' tied to the combination of two sexually distinct parents (typically male and female) dominated most videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck. Thus, heterosexuality is presented as a crucial prerequisite to 'mixedness'. The parents' bodies served as not only gendered illustrations of their assigned races, nations or cultures but also the genetic prerequisites to their children's bodies.

A common structure in most of the videos published as part of the #mixedgirlcheck trend (1) presented each parent individually, (2) presented both the parents together (commonly at their wedding) and (3) depicted the creator as the result of their parents' relationship. Thus, these videos largely focused on parents and their relationship, presenting them in different relationship stages, from getting to know each other to having a child. They were mostly shown in their youth and seemed to have very romantic, harmonious relationships. This treatment was contrasted with their alleged difference.

The parent couples seemed to be represented exclusively in monogamous relationships. No other partners (or anyone else, such as relatives or friends) were introduced as part of their relationship history. Furthermore, all parent pairs represented 'mother' and 'father' roles. The sample did not include families with two mothers or two fathers. While the parents' genders were not discussed, the videos suggested cisgender parents. The mothers were usually represented as young, feminine, with long hair, wearing

dresses and jewellery. Conversely, the fathers exhibited masculine performances with short hair and trousers, engaging in athletic activities, such as hiking or motorbiking. Text and emoji enhanced the parents' gendered introductions. For instance, princess emojis accompanied the mothers, while ascriptions such as 'gangster' in one of the trend's sounds described the fathers' masculinity.

Depicting the parents' gendered bodies to explain the creators' identities greatly emphasized their heteronormative, monogamous relationships. Thus, the videos applied the 'narrative frame of a heterosexual family arrangement' (Butler, 1993: 144) and many 'constant and repeated effort[s] to imitate' hegemonic heterosexuality (Butler, 1993: 125). Details about their love, marriage and relationship before childbirth that might have been related to gendered roles were not mentioned since these stories represented the hegemonic norm of how a family starts – a cis man and cis woman meet, fall in love and have a child[5] (Butler, 1993: 125–126). Thus, the videos reinforced a hegemonic idea of heteronormativity and monogamy by romanticizing the parents' relationships and assuming their naturalness.

However, these videos' reinforcement of hegemonic heterosexuality was also interesting because of how they represented relations of kinship, race and class. The videos represented the ideal of a nuclear family in which a couple of cisgender, heterosexual parents live together with their biological children. When associated with the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage (see the subsection on the embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage), the reinforcement of hegemonic heterosexuality adds a biological component to the static conception of different races, nationalities or cultures.

Capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality

Across the themes discussed above, the video creators always established their unique positioning as a 'mixed girl'. Often, this emphasis was increased by focusing on creators' beauty, a recurring theme across the sample. Filters that distorted the creators' features to make them seem more conventionally attractive such as beauty filters and the sparkling star emoji, a strong focus on creators' faces and different poses presented the creators' bodies in accordance with feminine beauty ideals, such as smooth skin, large eyes, curvy hips and long hair. Inserted ascriptions such as 'looking like Zendaya' further emphasized the attractiveness of a 'mixed race' appearance. Such references to global celebrities presented this appearance as desirable and profitable. In rare cases, added rhetorical deviation from an opaque norm ('I don't even look mixed') determines the implicit essentialized standard of *looking mixed* as a structural opposition, that is it is made explicit that there is an expectation of *looking mixed* that cannot generally be fulfilled (hence *not looking mixed*)—as described above, this essentialist standard is also problematized with specific reference to Blackness by the trend sound from the 'Big Mouth' series ('You don't get to tell me how Black I am').

Mainstream discourses linking a feminine 'mixed race' appearance to 'exceptional beauty' (Collins, 2021: 111) or sexual desirability are not new. The stereotype of the 'diva' that emerged with television culture after World War II, for instance, described a light-skinned, straight-haired Black woman who fulfilled Western beauty standards as a 'classical beauty' (Stephens and Phillips, 2003). The use of such discourses for commercial purposes is, similarly, not new. Hall (2021d), for example, mentioned 'commercial multiculturalism' in describing the exploitation and consumption of 'difference in the spectacle of the exotic "other"' (p. 410). Interesting, however, was the strategic use of the video creators' othered positions (see Hall, 2021b: 264) to gain capital through TikTok's social media logic.

Thus, embodying the 'mixed girl' is a form of branding (see Banet-Weiser, 2012: 4) that employs various societal discourses about 'mixedness'. Central to these performances is an emphasis on individuality and an extraordinary positioning outside normative lived experiences. The 'mixed girl' brand promises insights into this lived liminality and (in most cases) emphasizes this position's desirability. The sound trend of 'Eyo, mixed girl check' represents the successful capitalization of this brand, allowing the related videos to spread widely through algorithmic connectivity.

Importantly, this form of self-branding in platform capitalism is not necessarily or exclusively tied to financial incentives. Instead, self-branding is a broader cultural phenomenon rooted in the neoliberal logic of individualism and self-optimization. The self, in this context, becomes a curated yet mass-marketable construction, which the #mixedgirlcheck trend exemplifies particularly well. This dynamic reflects what Reckwitz (2020) describes as 'compository singularity', where individuals are expected to craft unique identities that still conform to normative ideals. For creators within the #mixedgirlcheck, this paradox is evident: while they appear to celebrate their individuality as 'mixed', they are simultaneously incentivized to conform to beauty standards and representations that are already culturally and algorithmically marketable. That is, while participation in the trend can be empowering and mundanely enjoyable, it is important to recognize that its incentivized essentialist modalities are explicitly in line with capitalist platform politics that retain racialized inequalities and injustice by predatory inclusion[6] (see McMillan Cottom, 2020).

Discussion

The presented patterns show different aspects of users' self-representations under the 'mixedgirlcheck'. In (1) The

embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, users use their parents' images to embody a given culture or nationality reflects the classification of human bodies in which 'culture and nature operate as metaphors for one another' (Hall, 2021b: 367). This signifies a binary coding of naturalized differences (Hall, 2021c: 330–331). This coding is represented in the numerical understanding of two different parents who combined to produce a 'genetic mix' of those differences. In this manner, the bodies of the parents and children in the videos represented a 'genetic code' (Hall, 2021b: 368) that could distinguish between groups of people (Hall, 2021b: 369). Thus, the bodies work as texts that can be read to make sense of these differences (Hall, 2021b: 369). Rather than being deconstructed, essentializing assumptions about race, nationality and ethnicity are reinforced. That is, explaining creators' appearance through reference to their parents reproduces beliefs about rigid binary differences. Moreover, it caters to societal imaginations that assume racial, national and ethnic homogeneity as a norm and demands the explanation of deviations therefrom. In this context, 'mixedness' is what Fanon (1999) regarded as the 'object' whose bodily consciousness depends on others' gazes (p. 417).

This general pattern aligns with and reproduces a discourse of explanation, where 'difference' (e.g. mixed-race identity) is situated as something requiring justification or clarification. The typical justification of a *best-of-both-worlds* or 'good' mix (with the also available structural opposition of a 'bad' mix) is well documented in media and cultural studies from various contexts (see e.g. Collins, 2021: 108; Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatzky, 2021: 19; Furedi, 2001: 38; Vest, 2016: 96). In that sense, racial ambiguity and 'mixedness' (also as an outcome of 'breeding') that align with gendered and racialized beauty standards and the utopian fantasy of a future without race are palatable ideas often advanced in seeming opposition to negative or devaluing ideas found in manifold contexts (e.g. Elam, 2011; Haritaworn, 2007; Kamada, 2009; Mahtani, 2014; Nyong'o, 2009; Waring, 2013). It is important to note that this dominant pattern is reciprocally shaped by TikTok's platform mechanics, which incentivize homogeneous cultural mass-self-reproduction within trends. Specifically, the platform's reliance on embodied performance, pop-culture remixing and audio memes (Primig et al., 2023) encourages the repetition of easily recognizable narratives, reinforcing normative representations. In other words, the structure of trends inherently favours homogeneity. Nevertheless, as observed in Pattern 2, users can strategically utilize these same mechanisms to extend the discursive range of a trend, challenging its normative boundaries and introducing more nuanced perspectives.

(2) Negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging presents users' efforts to challenge assumptions of universal identity signifiers and demonstrates their embodied ruptures in deviation from others' assumption of authenticity and belonging. Videos falling under this pattern foreground their lived experiences and emphasize intersectionality therein. However, self-representations like these were rare in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck. The use of an online space to critically address dominant ideologies (Maragh, 2018: 605) was, thus, less common in this trend.

However, these videos point to the fact that at least some creators are openly aware of the essentializing nature of a *best-of-both-worlds* normativity in the trend and position themselves explicitly in structural opposition to the ideal of pattern (1). While this is washed out by the general tendency of the trend, it showcases that the same platform infrastructure could be employed for more critical engagement with dominant discursive constructions of 'mixedness', yet this is difficult in current platform politics and increasingly unlikely with platforms' recent accelerated return to promoting right-wing libertarian content policies in face of surging right-wing power across Europe and in the United States. It also reiterates the inherent problem of the 'good' or 'best-of-both-worlds' utopian fantasy of a raceless future that is criticized in the literature (e.g. Mahanti, 2014; Nyong'o, 2009), as such notions violently neglect racialized realities in favour of unrealistic double-standards and neo-conservative nostalgia for a unified and uniform humanity that never existed and cannot be brought about by eugenics.

Pattern (3) Embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family describes the common focus on heteronormative, monogamous relationships and nuclear families in the trend. Since Western societies hegemonically organize kinship through nuclear families (Patterson, 2019: 48), these units are commonly associated with stability (Patterson, 2019: xi), based on 'capitalist principles' (Patterson, 2019: 58) and supported by 'economic systems … to create access to opportunities that increase one's chances to thrive' (Patterson, 2019: 58). Justifying these privileges, therefore, 'requires the idealization of bourgeois family life' (Butler, 1993: 178). The videos represented this idealization in romanticizing nuclear families and reinforced hegemonic assumptions about kinship, sexuality and gender while concealing inequalities that result from heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist and racialized power structures.

Pattern (3) further amplifies the dominance of an essentialist understanding of 'mixedness' which already became apparent in pattern (1). 'Mixedness' is thus understood as the result of the biological combination of two distinct races, nationalities or cultures that are represented by two sexually distinct parents. Instead of advancing understandings of 'mixedness' that go beyond the focus on genetic prerequisites (as for instance depicting cultural influences in practices, behaviours, artefacts or the like), this essentialist understanding of mixedness excludes families outside a heteronormative, nuclear family model. The essentializing nature of this dominant discourse reflects how the platform logic and societal norms shape and constrain

representations of identity, rendering some possibilities of 'mixedness' invisible or illegible within this framework.

The last pattern, (4) capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality, finally discusses the embodiment of 'the mixed girl' as form of branding. This is an overarching pattern pertaining to all videos analysed. In their performance of 'the mixed girl', creators stage themselves as a unique individuum outside the norm. Consequently, the performance of 'the mixed girl' on TikTok adheres to the individualistic logic of a neoliberal order that is manifested in platform politics. As with other check trends, creators enter the contest of likable TikTok personas but with specific focus on embodied features. The addition of filters and pop culture references to the sound trend evoked a playfulness in embodied expressions of 'mixedness'. This playfulness made the content mundanely consumable through a normative gaze and catered to TikTok's capitalist norm of viewing as a form of consumption. Thus, it allowed the creators to connect and make their content spreadable. We emphasize that self-branding in this context extends beyond monetization. It is part of a broader system of cultural reproduction in which 'to be' increasingly means 'to perform oneself online' in 'compository singularity' (Reckwitz, 2020), that is unique yet conforming with ideals marketable in platform capitalism. In trends like the mixedgirlcheck, this manifests in creators aligning with aesthetic and embodied performances that gain visibility and validation within the platform logic, even as they perpetuate inequities tied to race, beauty standards and valued attention.

Conformity to an ideal of mixedness in accordance with feminine beauty ideals satisfies the neoliberal desire for individuality while simultaneously reinforcing this need by sustaining and benefiting from the platform's trend-driven infrastructure. As McMillan Cottom (2020) points out, platform capitalism is racial capitalism and 'extraction and exploitation in the digital society uniquely feel good' (p. 446). Platforms profit from this dynamic by monetizing identity performances, extracting value from creators' self-representation while perpetuating structures of inequality that drive continuous engagement and content production. Meanwhile, when one searches the trend on Google, the meta description text of '#mixedgirlcheck' portrays that well: 'Explore the unique beauty of *mixed girls* and their diverse heritage with engaging videos and discussions on mixed identity'.

Summarizing, our results show how creators assert their visibility in videos posted under the #mixedgirlcheck on TikTok. While the nomenclature of the trend promised to represent a different form of girlhood ('mixed') with the potential to subvert popular femininity, we found that the representations both reinforce and challenge traditional representations of femininity and online girlhood as well as dominant cultural narratives on authenticity and belonging. In that the position of the 'mixed girl' continuously occupies the position of the other whose appearance and belonging is explained (see discussion of Pattern 1). The creators' approaches to (successfully) commodify this positioning might be questioned regarding TikTok's neoliberal platform logic: While the majority of videos thematized the 'mixed girls' positioning in line with dominant narratives and stereotypes, creators that critically engaged with these assumptions hardly ever occurred with one of them even feeling the need to justify her critical approach. The platform thus seems to reward performances of the 'mixed girl' that cater to a white, heterosexual, cisgender dominant gaze, uncritical of discriminatory structures such as racism, sexism, classism or heteronormativity.

The dominant embodied performances under the #mixedgirlcheck thus illustrate how corporeal means 'ensure the maintenance of existing power relations' within contemporary neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2015: 3). Feminist media literature has emphasized 'neoliberalism's heightened demands for bodily capacity' (Puar, 2012: 149) with reference to the upholding of male dominance through 'a carefully disguised […] dispositif which takes the form of feminine self-regulation' (McRobbie, 2015: 3). Our analysis adds to this in revealing the intersecting identities in neoliberalism's manifestations on social media platforms like TikTok. Thus, commodified embodied identity performances not only ensure male dominance but at the same time reinforce further inequality generating structures such as heteronormativity, whiteness and class privilege.

Conclusion

TikTok's provisions to establish connections through trends using sound and narrative templates allow users to easily construct their identities. To explore to what extent these possibilities of mundane embodied performance of the 'mixed girl' afford reinforcement or subversion of dominant discourses of normative femininity, we analysed the case of the #mixedgirlcheck hashtag on TikTok. Studying this trend is important because it sheds light on how platform logics influence identity construction and representation, particularly in marginalized contexts like 'mixed' girlhood. Exploring creators' understandings of 'mixedness' in their embodied performances under the #mixedgirlcheck reveals how social media trends can simultaneously reinforce dominant discriminatory structures—such as racism, sexism and heteronormativity—while offering moments of resistance or alternative narratives. This dual dynamic provides valuable insights into the broader socio-cultural impacts of platforms like TikTok on identity politics and highlights the need to critically engage with how digital spaces shape lived experiences and societal norms.

Our analysis revealed four prominent patterns: (1) an embodied performance of 'mixed' heritage, which reinforced essentializing assumptions about race, nationality and ethnicity that demanded the explanation of deviations from an assumed norm; (2) negotiating embodied ruptures in normative authenticity and belonging, which challenged

assumptions about universal signifiers of authenticity; (3) embodied heterosexual performativity and the idealization of the bourgeois family, which reinforced hegemonic heteronormativity and presented heterosexuality as a crucial prerequisite to 'racial mixedness'; and (4) capitalizing on the performance of embodied individuality, in which 'mixed girl' embodiments functioned as branding that used social discourses of 'mixedness' with a focus on feminine beauty ideals. Our results illustrate the complex interplay between self-expression, commodification and representation. Thereby, neoliberal platform logics afford the reproduction of dominant narratives and stereotypes which however are hidden behind depoliticized mundane everyday performances of embodied self-representations of identity.

In other words, TikTok's memetic and vernacular cultures, facilitated by its reciprocal curation mechanism, incentivize the reproduction of marketable and easily recognizable narratives, leading to the dominance of homogeneous notions of mixedness within the mixedgirlcheck trend. The platform's reliance on embodied performance, pop-culture remixing and audio memes encourages cultural mass-self-reproduction that reinforces normative representations. However, our findings also reveal that creators display a degree of reflexivity towards this mechanism. By engaging with the primary trend hashtag while simultaneously challenging its normative expectations, some creators participate in a *counter-trend* that problematizes the essentializing gaze of the primary mixedgirlcheck trend. This indicates a complex interplay between platform-driven homogeneity and user agency, illustrating how vernacular cultures on TikTok can both reinforce and resist dominant discourses.

Importantly, this invisible reproduction of dominant discourse did not originate on TikTok but is entangled with a broader system of cultural reproduction. As McMillan Cottom argues: '[…] [t]he racialized social hierarchy produced these Internet technologies' and 'the platform-mediated era of capitalism that grew from Internet technologies specializes in predatory inclusion' (p. 443). Thereby, marginalized subjects are included 'into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms' (McMillan Cottom, 2020: 443). Performing themselves as aligning with gendered and racialized beauty standards thus grants creators under the #mixedgirlcheck visibility and satisfies the neoliberal desire for individuality while simultaneously reinforcing this need by sustaining and benefiting from the platform's trend-driven infrastructure. Interesting here is the performance of creators who do resist dominant discourses and neoliberal platform logics. While they were rare in our sample, negotiations of embodied ruptures under the #mixedgirlcheck provoke the ontological follow-up question to our analysis: 'What is it in platforms that could facilitate disruption of conformity to dominant discourse?'

As any study, ours comes with limitations; The sampling and focus on female-presenting creators did not allow for generalizable claims about the mixedness discourse on TikTok as a whole. Another limitation of this study is the cultural hegemony of U.S. American pop- and platform culture. Although TikTok (developed by ByteDance) is not a U.S. company, it is heavily shaped by U.S.-centric discourses and cultural references. This influence is evident in the trend sounds analysed here, which draw on English-language pop culture, such as Netflix's Big Mouth. While full proficiency in English or being U.S.-based is not strictly necessary to participate in the trend – given the global familiarity with U.S. cultural exports – the trend itself, as well as our analysis, is also shaped by this cultural context. Consequently, our findings are limited to the branch of TikTok using the English hashtag sampled. Additionally, as researchers, our scope is constrained by language and cultural barriers. For example, we could not analyse similar trends that might exist in other languages or cultural contexts, such as Asian, African or some European languages, which may be less globally distributed but potentially relevant to the topic.

Further, an important limitation stemmed from the non-reactivity of our approach. We could only draw inferences from performances of the 'mixed girl' under the specific conditions we observed. Further research that focuses on specific regional or cultural contexts could broaden the scope of discourse analytical research on the performance of 'mixedness'. For instance, we identified several hashtags that could serve as focuses in such research (e.g. #blasian and #asiangirl), as well as hashtags that referred to specific discourse statements of both empowerment and crisis (e.g. #embraceyourskin and #identitycrisis). Further, modes of racial capitalism and the particular reconfiguration of society in a platform economy context might be explored in more depth to make sense of the presuppositions of individual efforts of self-representation. To that end, interview studies and ethnographic fieldwork seem as important as quantification of perpetuated and created inequalities within platforms' attention economy and users' engagement in trends and self-branding. In conclusion, our study provides a critical examination of the #mixedgirlcheck trend on TikTok and contributes to platform studies and feminist media research on self-representation and -commodification within neoliberal platform logics online.

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Supplemental material

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Notes

1. While we focus on the neoliberal politics of social media platforms and their reproduction of social inequalities, it is important to mention that social media at the same time can become spaces for marginalized groups to negotiate belonging (e.g. Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022) and that platform affordances can be used to spread counter-discourses (e.g. Steele, 2021).
2. In our random sample, 25% of the videos used the sound by @arianananjones, which makes it the most prevalent in our sample. The original sound by @arianananjones is present in 17.6K videos on TikTok today (17 December 2024).
3. Videos are stored on secure university servers with access limited to the authors for the duration of the research project.
4. Thus, the sound used was not necessarily the original upload by @arianananjones. Users on TikTok often re-upload slightly adapted versions of an established sound (e.g. faster, slower or shorter).
5. One of the sounds used for the #mixedgirlcheck trend even vocalizes exactly these steps in presenting "It all started when my mum met my dad. They fell in love, and had me" (link to TikTok sound: https://shorturl.at/dkovL).
6. Predatory inclusion as in McMillan Cottom's words is the logic, organization and technique of including marginalized consumer citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms (p. 444).

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