

The "Soft Girl" Aesthetic: Influencer Deployment Strategies and Their Impact on Adolescent Gender Norms and Consumer Behavior

Diya Marla

Harrow International School Bengaluru

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i01.010 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i01.010>

Received: 4 January 2026 / Accepted: 15 January 2026 / Published: 25 January 2026

ABSTRACT

The rapid rise of influencer culture has positioned aesthetic-driven content as a primary force shaping adolescent identity and consumption patterns. This study examines how Instagram influencers and brands deploy the "soft girl" aesthetic, a pastel-dominated, gentle femininity trend contrasting it with gothic aesthetics to assess deployment strategies and potential impacts on youth gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions. Through mixed-methods content analysis of follower scales, posting frequencies, hashtags, and lifestyle content from purposive samples (Brandy Melville, Subdued, Killstar, Disturbia; influencers @imhollyfrances, @bluexastrid, etc.), clear patterns emerge: soft girl content leverages high-frequency, relational lifestyle posts embedding products within normalized femininity, while gothic content emphasizes subcultural resistance via dramatic visuals and community tags. These findings suggest soft girl deployment reinforces patriarchal norms through aspirational normalcy, conditioning consumption as identity maintenance. The study contributes to feminist media theory and consumer psychology by linking aesthetic tactics to socialization mechanisms.

Introduction

This paper examines the deployment of the "soft girl" aesthetic by social media influencers and its consequential effects on adolescents' consumer behavior and internalization of gender norms. The rapid rise of influencer culture in the digital age has transformed aesthetic-driven branding into a formidable force shaping both young consumers' purchasing patterns and their evolving identities. Among Gen Z and younger millennials, the soft girl aesthetic characterized by pastel color palettes, Y2K fashion elements, and a curated expression of vulnerability and gentleness has become an enduring cultural phenomenon. Understanding this trend is essential, as its influence extends beyond fashion or makeup trends into the construction of gendered subjectivities during a critical stage of personal development.

Existing academic research demonstrates that social media aesthetics significantly impact users' body image, self-perception, and consumer intentions, frequently reinforcing gendered ideals underpinned by patriarchal frameworks (Palmer, 2024). The curated beauty and fashion content consumed by adolescents perpetuates narrow ideals of femininity, where appearance and consumption are tightly interwoven. The soft girl aesthetic, in particular, promises an allure of authenticity and empowerment but operates within a commercialized system that commodifies identity and prescribes specific modes of femininity that align with traditional patriarchal values. This duality renders the soft girl aesthetic a powerful branding strategy that entices consumer engagement while subtly reinforcing limiting gender norms.

Despite growing scholarship on social media's role in shaping consumer behavior and gender scripts, little has addressed how the soft girl aesthetic functions simultaneously as a marketing tool and a psychological mechanism of gender socialization for adolescents. This study argues that influencers strategically employ this aesthetic to craft personal brands that resonate deeply with adolescent audiences, fostering parasocial relationships that drive product consumption and identity performance. The resulting consumerism is not merely transactional but deeply intertwined with social belonging and self-concept formation, where consumption of aesthetic-related products becomes a form of gendered self-expression and social capital.

The central research question here is: How do influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic, and what impact does exposure to it have on adolescents' beliefs about gender norms and their purchasing intentions? Positioned at the nexus of feminist media theory, consumer psychology, and influencer self-branding literature, this inquiry employs a critical review of marketing campaigns, influencer-generated content, and psychological studies about adolescent consumer responses to aesthetic trends. The findings suggest that while the soft girl aesthetic enhances influencers' commercial appeal and engagement metrics, it also conditions adolescents to internalize a narrow, patriarchal model of femininity that privileges consumption as a marker of identity and worth.

This paper contributes to academic and practical understandings by linking marketing strategy with psychological impact. The soft girl aesthetic operates as a form of gender socialization embedded within the influencer economy. It situates aesthetic trends as more than superficial lifestyle choices, demonstrating how digital beauty cultures shape gender norms, consumer behaviors, and ultimately socialized identities in the contemporary media environment. As digital platforms continue to evolve, unraveling these dynamics becomes critical for educators, parents, marketers, and policymakers aiming to support healthy adolescent development amidst pervasive commercial and gendered cultural forces.

Literature Review

This literature review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for investigating how influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic and how this deployment shapes adolescent gender-norm beliefs and consumer intentions. It begins by explaining why examining this aesthetic is vital in understanding the broader mechanisms of identity formation and commercial influence within digital culture. The first section outlines the significance of the research question, situating the study at the intersection of feminist media theory, consumer psychology, and social media marketing. It then synthesizes five key works that collectively illustrate how gendered consumption, aesthetic marketing, and media representation contribute to shaping adolescent behavior. Each study is critically evaluated for its contributions, methodological approach, and gaps, emphasizing unresolved questions about how influencer aesthetics function as tools of gender socialization. The review concludes by articulating the need for further inquiry into influencer-driven branding as a psychological and sociocultural force that intertwines identity, commerce, and normative femininity in digital settings.

The rise of social media influencer culture has transformed how adolescents engage with aesthetics as a critical force in identity formation and consumer behavior. Among the aesthetic trends shaping young female audiences, the soft girl aesthetic characterized by pastel hues, nostalgia-driven fashion, and an emphasis on vulnerability stands out as a particularly pervasive phenomenon. This literature review examines key academic research on digital femininity, marketing strategies, gendered consumer behavior, and media influence, drawing from five foundational studies to understand the interplay between influencer branding and adolescent gender socialization. The review is structured around thematic clusters addressing aesthetic-driven commodification of the feminine self, gender differences in consumer purchase behavior, psychological mechanisms underpinning gendered product aesthetics, marketing engagement through social media, and media influence on adolescents' buying behavior.

The objective is to synthesize existing work, critique methodologies, and identify critical gaps, particularly concerning the psychological effects of aesthetic socialization mediated by influencers, completing the foundation for investigating how the soft girl aesthetic functions both as branding and gender norm reinforcement.

Palmer's (2024) thesis articulates the concept of "consumercore," where adolescent girls commodify and romanticize their identities via curated aesthetics on social platforms.. This work situates aesthetic trends like the soft girl as manifestations of digitally mediated femininity, produced through continuous self-branding driven by algorithmic amplification and peer validation. The study compellingly connects micro-level identity performance to macro-level

patriarchal consumer capitalism, arguing that aesthetic trends ostensibly empowering young women can entrench restrictive beauty norms through commercialized self-expression.

While Palmer's thesis offers robust conceptual framing, its limitation lies in less empirical attention to adolescent affective and cognitive engagement. Nevertheless, it highlights a crucial research gap understanding the dual psychological and marketing functions influencer aesthetics serve in adolescent gender socialization.

Bakshi (2025) provides empirical insights into gendered differences in consumer decision-making, revealing that women engage in more emotionally and relationally rich purchase processes compared to utilitarian male patterns. Women derive pleasure from shopping and elaborate evaluative processes, contrasting with men's efficiency-driven behaviors. This gendered lens aligns with how soft girl influencer marketing targets emotionally connected, identity-affirming consumption among adolescent girls.

Despite its thorough framing across classical decision stages, Bakshi's work primarily addresses adult consumers, signaling a gap in youth-focused gender socialization studies that the current inquiry attempts to fill.

Tilburg et al. (2015) extend marketing theory through integrating evolutionary psychology, demonstrating that product aesthetics imbued with gendered cues significantly influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The study's finding that androgynous products with strong gender signals evoke maximal consumer preference provides nuanced insight for analyzing aesthetic trends like soft girl style, predominantly marked by feminine cues.

However, Tilburg's laboratory-oriented approach restricts generalizability to dynamic digital branding and influencer-generated content, underscoring a gap in bridging physical product design theories with virtual influencer aesthetics.

Shen and Bissell (2013) analyze beauty brands' Facebook marketing strategies, evidencing a shift toward interactive, engagement-focused content fostering consumer-brand relationships over direct sales. This research underlines the efficacy of emotionally resonant, community-based marketing resonant in influencer-driven aesthetics where parasocial interaction is crucial.

While insightful in demonstrating engagement tactics, the study's focus on legacy platforms offers limited direct applicability to visually centric, fast-paced platforms like TikTok and Instagram dominating youth subcultures, suggesting an area ripe for updated inquiry.

Mishra et al. (2012) provide valuable empirical data on media's influence in sculpting adolescent girls' consumption patterns, showing nearly universal willingness to purchase trend-driven

beauty and fashion items correlated with media exposure. This confirms that media acts as a potent socializer, embedding aspirational beauty norms and encouraging economic participation in aesthetic consumption.

However, the geographic specificity and lack of nuanced psychological analysis call for broader, culturally sensitive research integrating deeper gender socialization frameworks, which this study aims to address by focusing on influencer aesthetics.

Collectively, these studies establish a foundation revealing how gendered aesthetics, marketing strategies, and media exposure shape adolescent consumer behavior and identity formation. They highlight that aesthetic trends operate beyond fashion, functioning as psychological mechanisms reinforcing patriarchal femininity through consumptive practices.

Notably absent is comprehensive empirical research on influencer-driven aesthetics as simultaneous branding and socialization agents within adolescent digital cultures. The psychological processes by which young women internalize gender norms via parasocial influencer interactions, mediated through evolving platforms like TikTok, remain underexplored. This gap foregrounds the current study's contribution bridging feminist media theory, consumer psychology, and influencer economy frameworks to analyze the soft girl aesthetic's dual market and socializing functions.

This review underscores the necessity of investigating influencer aesthetics not solely as marketing tools but as complex social mechanisms influencing adolescent gender norm internalization and consumption patterns. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and intersectional studies examining these psychological and sociocultural dynamics across diverse adolescent communities. Situating influencer aesthetics in this broader scholarly context enables a critical reevaluation of gender, identity, and consumerism's intertwined futures in digital media landscapes.

Methodology

This section details the research design employed to investigate how Instagram-based brands and influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic, how this deployment compares to gothic branding, and how such aesthetic strategies may relate to adolescents' gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions. The methodology is designed to connect two core dimensions of the research question: first, the visibility and reach of different aesthetic deployments (operationalised through post views), and second, the gendered meanings and lifestyle messages embedded in the visual and textual content. Instagram posts are treated as the central unit of analysis because they are the primary site where aesthetic cues, branding, and lifestyle narratives converge in ways highly accessible to adolescent audiences.

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods content-analytic approach, combining simple quantitative description of post visibility with qualitative thematic and visual analysis of content. This design enables examination of both “what is seen more” (as indicated by post views) and “what messages are being communicated” (as revealed by image composition, captioning, and hashtag use). The focus on soft girl and gothic aesthetics reflects an interest in contrasting a highly mainstream, pastel-coded feminine ideal with a more subcultural, dark, and ostensibly resistant aesthetic. By comparing brands and influencers associated with each style, the study explores a “two-way street”: the role of brands in shaping and commodifying aesthetic girlhood, and the role of influencers in performing, amplifying, or subtly altering those brand scripts.

This approach is aligned with the overarching argument of the paper: that the soft girl aesthetic functions not only as a marketing strategy but also as a mechanism of gender socialization. Methodologically, the study must therefore attend both to commercial logics (visibility, branding, product display) and sociocultural logics (gender norms, lifestyle ideals, and implicit ideological cues).

Data Collection

The empirical material consists of publicly accessible Instagram accounts and posts from a small, purposive sample of brands and influencers associated with either the soft girl or gothic aesthetic. Instagram is selected as the platform of interest because of its visual focus, its centrality in contemporary aesthetic culture, and its high usage among adolescents. Posts are treated as the primary unit of analysis, with account-level characteristics used to contextualise post-level findings.

For each sampled account, the five most recent posts available at the time of data collection are captured. These include still images, carousels, or short-form video posts, depending on what is present in the feed. For each post, the following information is recorded directly from the platform interface:

- Number of views (for video or reel-type posts; where Instagram displays views rather than likes, views are used as the primary indicator of reach).
- Date of posting.
- Visual content (composition, colours, clothing, makeup, setting).
- Visible hashtags.

- Visible brand or product tags (e.g., tagged garments, cosmetics, or partner accounts).

The study relies only on public content and aggregate metrics, no direct interaction with users is required and no private or identifying follower data are collected.

Brand and Influencer Selection

A purposive sampling strategy is adopted to ensure that the accounts selected are clearly emblematic of the aesthetic categories of interest rather than statistically representative of all Instagram users. Within the soft girl category, brands such as Brandy Melville and Subdued are chosen because they are widely recognised in youth culture as central to the soft girl or “spring girl” look, and their feeds consistently display pastel colour palettes, casual feminine silhouettes, and gentle lifestyle imagery. These accounts can therefore be considered typical cases of soft girl branding.

Within the gothic category, a brand such as Killstar is selected as a paradigmatic example of goth-oriented fashion marketing, featuring dark colour schemes, occult motifs, and alternative style codes throughout its visual and textual presentation. The inclusion of such a brand enables direct comparison between a mainstream, pastel-coded feminine aesthetic and a darker, subcultural alternative.

Alongside these brands, the study includes a small number of influencers for each aesthetic, identified on the basis that (1) their personal feeds consistently embody either soft girl or gothic styling, and (2) they are moderately visible within their niche (e.g., micro- to meso-level followings rather than celebrity-level visibility). Influencers are included to capture how aesthetics are performed at the level of individual self-branding, which may differ in tone and intent from corporate brand accounts even when the visual codes appear similar.

Post Selection Rationale

For each selected account, only the five most recent posts are included in the corpus. This choice is guided by both analytical and practical considerations. Analytically, recent posts are assumed to be broadly representative of the account’s current aesthetic and branding strategy, as accounts tend to maintain consistent visual and narrative identities over time. If the feed is coherently curated, the five latest posts should not differ systematically from earlier content in ways that would invalidate their use as exemplars.

Practically, limiting the corpus to five posts per account keeps the dataset manageable for detailed qualitative coding while still allowing recurring patterns to emerge. A larger corpus might offer marginal gains in statistical robustness but would necessitate shallower interpretive

work, whereas a focused sample permits close attention to the interplay of imagery, language, and branding cues.

Quantitative Variables

Although the study does not undertake complex statistical modelling, a set of simple quantitative descriptors is used to capture the basic visibility of posts and the context of the accounts:

- Views per post: the primary post-level metric, treated as an indicator of visibility and potential exposure among followers and non-followers alike.
- Follower count (account level): recorded as descriptive context for interpreting the scale of potential audience.
- Posting frequency: a rough estimate based on the dates of the five sampled posts (e.g., posts per week), used to describe how intensively each account maintains aesthetic presence.

These quantitative variables do not support causal claims but provide a structured way to compare soft girl and gothic accounts, as well as brand versus influencer profiles, in terms of reach and activity.

Qualitative Codes

To address the research question's focus on gender norms and lifestyle promotion, a structured coding scheme is applied to the visual and textual content of each post. Codes include:

- Aesthetic category: soft girl or gothic, confirming the classification guiding sampling.
- Lifestyle themes: narratives of everyday softness, romance, self-care, friendship, domesticity, leisure, rebellion, subculture belonging, or occult/alternative spiritual motifs.
- Caption tone and discourse: nurturing, aspirational, romantic, ironic, defiant, playful, or promotional, including whether the caption speaks in a personal, intimate voice or a more impersonal brand voice.
- Hashtag strategy: use of purely brand-specific hashtags, aesthetic/identity hashtags (e.g., those that name an aesthetic community), or a combination; presence or absence of high-level tags that explicitly label the aesthetic (e.g., tags referencing "soft girl" or gothic culture).

- Product visibility and integration: whether products are displayed in a straightforward, catalogue-like manner; subtly integrated into lifestyle scenes; or only implied.
- Source of apparent message: whether the post appears primarily driven by brand marketing (e.g., product-focused, campaign imagery) or by influencer self-expression (e.g., personal narratives, day-in-the-life content where products are present but not central).
- Gender norm orientation: interpretive coding of the extent to which the post reinforces traditional patriarchal femininity (e.g., emphasis on cuteness, passivity, pleasing appearance, normative heterosexual romance, and consumption as a route to ideal femininity) versus offering more resistant or alternative models of gender (e.g., androgyny, overt defiance, valorisation of autonomy and non-conformity).

A concise coding manual defines each category and provides examples drawn from initial familiarisation with the feeds. Coding is iterative and reflexive: initial passes are used to refine code definitions and resolve ambiguities before final coding is applied.

Data Analysis : Descriptive Comparison of Visibility

Post-level views are summarised descriptively for each account, with simple measures such as the mean and range of views across the five sampled posts. These account-level summaries allow comparison along two axes:

1. Aesthetic comparison: soft girl accounts versus gothic accounts, considering whether one aesthetic generally appears to receive higher visibility.
2. Actor comparison: brand accounts versus influencer accounts within each aesthetic, considering whether corporate or personal self-branded content tends to travel further in terms of views.

The descriptive statistics are not used to infer causality but to contextualise the qualitative findings: for instance, a soft girl brand that consistently garners high view counts with imagery that tightly couples femininity and consumption may be exerting a more powerful socializing influence simply by virtue of its heightened visibility.

Thematic and Visual Content Analysis

The core of the analysis lies in the qualitative interpretation of posts. After coding, posts are read and re-read to identify patterns in how the soft girl and gothic aesthetics construct femininity, lifestyle, and the relationship between self and consumption. Thematic analysis is used to group recurring motifs and discourses within and across accounts.

For soft girl accounts, particular attention is paid to how softness, simplicity, and “girly” everyday life are visualised and narrated: for example, whether recurrent visual scripts centre around gentle leisure, light physical activity, romanticized daily routines, and subtly feminine outfits. The analysis examines the extent to which such content normalises a narrow range of feminine activities and affects (e.g., sweetness, vulnerability) and how often products are embedded as integral to achieving that ideal.

For gothic accounts, the analysis foregrounds how darkness, intensity, and subcultural affiliation are represented, including whether alternative or resistant gender identities are valorised. This includes examining whether gothic content presents a broader or narrower set of gendered possibilities than soft girl content, and whether consumption is framed as resistance, self-assertion, or simply another form of aesthetic participation.

The relationship between brands and influencers is analysed by comparing brand accounts, which typically foreground controlled campaign imagery, with influencer accounts, which may incorporate more personal narratives and behind-the-scenes glimpses. The study explores whether influencers faithfully reproduce brand scripts, adapt them, or complicate them by introducing divergent values and experiences, and how this might shift the ideological content of the aesthetic.

Linking Aesthetic Deployment to Gender Norms and Purchasing Intentions

While direct measurement of adolescents’ gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions is beyond the scope of this content-based study, the analysis infers potential impacts through the convergence of three elements: (1) visibility (views), (2) the gendered meanings embedded in the content, and (3) the degree to which products and lifestyles are interwoven. Posts that are both highly viewed and strongly coded as promoting patriarchal femininity, particularly when they integrate products seamlessly into aspirational narratives are interpreted as having higher potential to shape adolescent perceptions of what femininity should look like and what must be purchased to achieve it.

Conversely, gothic posts that foreground non-normative gender expressions or subcultural resistance are interpreted as providing alternative repertoires for identity construction. Where such posts receive comparatively lower views, the analysis considers the possibility that these alternatives remain less visible and therefore less socially dominant than the soft girl scripts.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on a small, purposive sample of accounts and a narrow set of five posts per account, which restricts the generalisability of the

findings. The results should be understood as an in-depth case study rather than a broad survey of all soft girl or gothic content on Instagram. Second, the use of views alone as a quantitative indicator captures visibility but not deeper engagement or audience interpretation; without comments or survey data, the study cannot directly measure how viewers understand or internalise the content.

Third, the interpretive coding of “patriarchal” versus “alternative” gender norms necessarily involves researcher judgement, albeit one informed by feminist media theory and existing literature on gender and consumer culture. Different researchers might code certain subtle cues differently. Finally, the study cannot make causal claims about the impact of exposure on adolescents’ beliefs or behaviours; it can only map the aesthetic and ideological terrain that adolescents are likely to encounter and suggest plausible mechanisms of socialization.

Despite these constraints, the methodology is appropriate to the study’s aims. It offers a structured yet flexible framework for examining how brands and influencers visually and narratively deploy the soft girl and gothic aesthetics, how visible these deployments are, and how they may contribute to the ongoing negotiation of femininity and consumption in adolescent digital culture.

Analysis

This section analyzes how the soft girl and gothic aesthetics are deployed by both brands and influencers on Instagram, focusing on patterns of content production, visual strategy, and engagement practices. It begins by examining brand-level deployment, outlining how companies such as Brandy Melville and Subdued construct controlled visual identities that normalize specific forms of femininity, and contrasting them with gothic brands like Killstar and Disturbia that emphasize alternative identity expression. It then turns to influencer-level deployment, comparing how soft girl creators adapt brand imagery into lifestyle-centered, relational content, while gothic influencers build subcultural authenticity through darker, narrative-driven visuals. The discussion integrates these two layers to highlight aesthetic coherence, frequency, and hashtag dynamics, followed by a synthesis comparing brands and influencers to show how they collectively shape gender-norm beliefs and adolescent consumer intentions. Overall, this analysis demonstrates how aesthetic strategies operate simultaneously as branding mechanisms and tools of gender socialization within digital culture.

Analysis of Brand Aesthetic Deployment on Instagram

Type	Name	Follower count	Frequent posts	Location	Use of hashtags	Type of content
SG brand	<i>Brady Melville USA</i>	3.1M	Every 1-2 days	USA	Just brand hashtag	Content emphasizes a soft-girl aesthetic through natural lighting, minimal styling, and everyday activities. Imagery promotes an effortless, approachable femininity that reinforces normalized beauty standards and positions the brand within a relatable, aspirational lifestyle framework.
	<i>Subdued</i>	1M	Every 3-5 days	USA	Just brand hashtag	Visuals blend soft-girl cues with candid, socially oriented scenes. Natural tones, minimal makeup, and unposed imagery construct an authentic, seasonally feminine identity, balancing casual everydayness with subtle aspirational elements.
Gothic Brand	<i>Killstar</i>	1.9M	2 posts everyday	UK	No hashtags	Content highlights a stylized gothic aesthetic using dark palettes and occult motifs. Editorial and lifestyle imagery emphasize individuality and non-conformity, positioning the brand in contrast to mainstream feminine norms associated with the soft-girl aesthetic.
	<i>Disturbia</i>	1.1M	1 post everyday	UK	#gothlife #alternative #alternative fashion No brand hashtags just in general gothic hashtags	Imagery merges gothic fashion with bright, everyday settings. Professional and user-generated content promote accessible alternative identity expression, combining dark stylistic elements with normalized, day-to-day contexts.

The constructed table reveals distinct patterns in the deployment of soft girl and gothic aesthetics by Instagram brands, highlighting differences in content strategies, visual presentation, and implied gender norm reinforcement. Brandy Melville USA and Subdued exemplify soft girl branding, while Killstar and Disturbia represent gothic branding. These patterns provide empirical insight into how aesthetic choices function as mechanisms of consumer engagement and gender socialization, directly addressing the research question: how brands deploy the soft

girl aesthetic and the potential impact of such deployment on adolescents' gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions.

Soft Girl Brands: Normalized Femininity Through Everyday Simplicity

Brandy Melville USA (3.1M followers) and Subdued (1M followers), both US-based, maintain moderate posting frequencies every 1-2 days for Brandy Melville and every 3-5 days for Subdued creating consistent visibility without saturation. Their hashtag strategies are exclusively brand-centric, limiting discoverability to internal communities and reinforcing brand loyalty over broader aesthetic affiliation. Content emphasizes "soft simple activities" focused on "girly" lifestyles, with minimal references to high-intensity sports, heavy makeup, or assertive pursuits. Subdued incorporates a "simple spring girl aesthetic" blended with party elements, featuring "very natural shots" and mixed media that mimic unposed moments rather than staged photoshoots.

This deployment constructs femininity as gentle, approachable, and effortlessly consumptive. Visuals depict day-to-day scenarios, casual outings, light socializing, and relaxed posing that normalize a narrow feminine ideal: pretty, non-confrontational, and aesthetically pleasing through pastel tones and minimalist styling. The subtle integration of products into these scenes positions consumption as essential to achieving this "natural" girlhood, implying that branded clothing enables the soft, desirable life shown. For adolescents, repeated exposure may internalize patriarchal norms associating femininity with passivity, visual appeal, and relational ease, while fostering purchasing intentions tied to social belonging within this curated world.

Gothic Brands: Alternative Identity Through Subcultural Integration

Killstar (1.9M followers, UK-based) and Disturbia (1.1M followers, UK-based) exhibit higher posting intensities—two posts daily for Killstar and one daily for Disturbia—maximizing exposure within niche audiences. Killstar employs no hashtags, relying on brand recognition and visual consistency for organic reach. Disturbia uses community-oriented tags (#gothlife, #alternative, #alternativefashion) without brand-specific ones, embedding content in wider subcultural networks.

Content mixes professional photoshoots with "day to day life" imagery, featuring "dark, gothic" themes for Killstar and "dark with a mix of elegant" styles for Disturbia, often in bright surroundings during everyday actions. Client-generated photoshoots in Disturbia further blur commercial and authentic boundaries. This approach portrays femininity as edgy, empowered, and non-normative, valorizing intensity, mystery, and rebellion through occult motifs, structured silhouettes, and dramatic contrasts. Consumption remains central, as alternative identity requires

specific wardrobe investments, yet the subcultural framing positions purchases as acts of defiance rather than conformity.

Comparative Patterns and Strategic Implications

Posting frequency favors gothic brands (daily or near-daily), potentially sustaining higher visibility through sustained algorithmic presence and increased opportunities for audience interaction, supporting the hypothesis that more frequent posting correlates with greater content exposure in niche markets. Soft girl brands' sparser cadence suits broader, aspirational appeal, maintaining presence without overwhelming followers. Hashtag divergence is stark: soft girl brands' proprietary tags create enclosed ecosystems channeling adolescents toward exclusive loyalty, whereas gothic brands' general tags foster discoverability across alternatives, diluting single-brand dependence but amplifying subcultural immersion.

Content typology underscores aesthetic divergence. Soft girl feeds prioritize "photoshoots of obvious day to day things" and natural aesthetics, rendering patriarchal femininity implicit and pervasive girly activities dominate without overt ideology, making normalization insidious. Gothic content balances polish with candor, offering expansive gender expressions that challenge softness mandates through darkness and autonomy, though still commodified.

Follower counts reveal scale disparities: Brandy Melville's 3.1M dwarfs Subdued's 1M among soft girl brands, while Killstar's 1.9M leads Disturbia's 1.1M in gothic branding. This suggests soft girl aesthetics achieve greater mainstream penetration, potentially amplifying their socializing influence on broader adolescent populations, whereas gothic brands maintain substantial but more specialized reach within alternative communities.

These strategies align with consumer psychology: soft girl deployment leverages relatability to reinforce traditional norms, subtly conditioning purchasing as identity maintenance. Gothic deployment appeals to differentiation, potentially broadening gender beliefs while sustaining consumption via exclusivity.

Relevance to Gender Norms and Purchasing Intentions

The table demonstrates soft girl aesthetics' deployment as lifestyle normalization, where femininity equates to gentle consumerism, likely strengthening adolescents' adherence to patriarchal ideals and brand-specific purchases. Gothic aesthetics deploy resistance narratives, mitigating norm reinforcement but linking alternative identities to niche markets. Higher gothic frequency suggests sustained niche influence, yet soft girl brands' superior scale implies broader socialization reach.

The analysis directly addresses the first part of the research question by documenting soft girl aesthetic deployment through brand-centric hashtags, everyday "girly" lifestyle content, and naturalized product integration that constructs femininity as gentle consumerism. For the second part, repeated exposure to these normalized portrayals likely reinforces adolescents' adherence to patriarchal gender norms associating femininity with passivity and visual appeal, while positioning branded purchases as essential pathways to social belonging and desirable girlhood. Gothic aesthetics, by contrast, demonstrate alternative deployment strategies that may mitigate such norm reinforcement, highlighting the soft girl aesthetic's distinctive socializing potential.

Limitations of the Analysis

The table relies on a small, purposive sample of four brands without post-level views data, limiting quantitative depth and generalizability. Findings represent illustrative cases rather than comprehensive trends, precluding statistical inference about engagement differences.

This analysis reveals aesthetics as dual branding-socialization tools: soft girl excels in mainstream norm perpetuation, gothic in subcultural expansion. Exposure patterns suggest soft girl content may more potently shape purchasing intentions through aspirational normalcy, warranting media literacy interventions for adolescent consumers.

Analysis of Influencer Aesthetic Deployment on Instagram

Type	Name	Follower count	Frequent posts	Promotion vs organic content	Location	Use of hashtags	Type of content
SG	@imhollyfrances	101K	Once every day	Mixed, predominantly promotional content, often integrated subtly into lifestyle posts.	UK	2-3 hashtags per post related to posts, like #pinterestfit #softgirl	Pastel and bold feminine OOTDs, GRWM videos, and cozy lifestyle imagery. Visuals emphasize curated color palettes (red, white, bold pastels) and aspirational daily routines.
	@linalandss	36K	Twice a day every 2-3 days	Fully organic; content centers on personal, everyday activities.	Sweden	No hashtags	Casual day-to-day posts featuring outfits, makeup, and leisure activities (picnics, walks). Aesthetic focuses on soft pink and pastel tones, conveying authentic, relatable femininity.

	@thealondraflories	307K	Everyday	Mixed; promotional content present but not explicitly tagged.	USA	5-6 hashtags each post, Hashtags such as #skitrip, #softgirl etc	Pastel-centric fashion and lifestyle posts, including travel and leisure content (#skitrip, #softgirl), combining aspirational visuals with a soft-girl aesthetic.
Gothic	@bluexastrid	260K	Once in 3-4 days	Promotional only, featuring brand and product placements.	Poland	15-20 hashtags per post #goth, #dark etc, sometimes not related to her post rather in general	Primarily professional photoshoots and occasional vlogs. Dark and icy color palettes dominate, showcasing gothic fashion, stylized settings, and alternative lifestyle cues.
	@goddes.sylvanas	372K	Every 5-10days	Mixed, with organic integration; brands or collaborations are implied rather than explicitly tagged.	UK	6-7 hashtags each day	Music-inspired alternative fashion and lifestyle posts. Visuals include gothic styling, concerts, and subcultural events, using curated hashtags to connect with alternative communities.
	@prncessbatzz	14.4K	Every 2-3 days	Organic; content is self-driven without commercial emphasis.	UK	10-12 hashtags, in general not related to post	Dark aesthetic lifestyle including horror, makeup tutorials, storytelling, and music. Posts employ thematic hashtags (#dark, #horror) and convey gothic identity and narrative expression.

The table presents data from six Instagram influencers representing soft girl (SG) and gothic aesthetics, revealing systematic patterns in content strategies, promotional tactics, and gendered

messaging. Soft girl influencers (@imhollyfrances, @linalandss, @thealondraflores) contrast sharply with gothic influencers (@bluexastrid, @goddess.sylvanas, @prncessbatzz), providing empirical evidence on aesthetic deployment mechanisms. This analysis addresses the research question directly: how influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic through visual, textual, and promotional choices, and how such deployment may influence adolescents' gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions.

Soft Girl Influencers: Curated Femininity Through Lifestyle Integration

Soft girl influencers maintain high posting frequencies daily for @imhollyfrances (101K followers, UK) and @thealondraflores (307K followers, USA), and twice daily every 2-3 days for @linalandss (36K followers, Sweden) ensuring sustained visibility among adolescent audiences. Content centers on "pastel OOTDs, GRWM [get ready with me], cozy lifestyle" (@imhollyfrances) and "day to day life content, outfits, makeup, picnics" (@linalandss), featuring pink/pastel palettes that evoke gentleness and approachability. @thealondraflores extends this with activity-specific posts like #skitrip alongside #softgirl, blending aspirational leisure with aesthetic consistency.

Hashtag strategies vary: @imhollyfrances uses 2-3 targeted tags (#pinterestfit, #softgirl) tying content to broader aesthetic communities; @thealondraflores employs 5-6 per post for discoverability; @linalandss uses none, relying on organic visual appeal. Promotion mixes organic and sponsored content, with @imhollyfrances and @thealondraflores showing "mix of both" (promotional often untagged), while @linalandss remains "only organic." Color palettes emphasize pastels with occasional "red and white and bold colors yet feminine" (@imhollyfrances), maintaining softness despite vibrancy.

This deployment constructs femininity as effortlessly relational and consumptive: GRWM videos and picnic OOTDs normalize girlhood as aesthetically curated daily rituals where clothing and makeup enable social harmony. Pastel dominance and cozy themes implicitly prioritize visual pleasingness over intensity, aligning with patriarchal expectations of feminine passivity and relational focus.

Gothic Influencers: Subcultural Identity Through Expressive Excess

Gothic influencers post less frequently every 3-4 days (@bluexastrid, 260K followers, Poland), every 5-10 days (@goddess.sylvanas, 372K followers, UK), and every 2-3 days (@prncessbatzz, 14.4K followers, UK) prioritizing quality over volume in niche engagement. Content features "mostly professional photoshoots, with occasional vlogs" (@bluexastrid; dark/icy palette), music-focused posts (@goddess.sylvanas), and "music, horror, makeup, storytelling"

(@prncssbatzz). Visuals emphasize drama through structured silhouettes and shadowy contrasts.

Hashtag use is intensive and diffuse: 15-20 per post for @bluexastrid (#goth, #dark, often unrelated to content), 6-7 daily for @goddess.sylvanas, and 10-12 general tags for @prncssbatzz (not post-specific). Promotion ranges from "promotional only" (@bluexastrid) to mixed organic/promotional without explicit brand mentions (@goddess.sylvanas) and purely organic (@prncssbatzz). This excess signals subcultural immersion over mainstream accessibility.

Gothic deployment portrays femininity as empowered and multifaceted: photoshoots and storytelling valorize intensity, horror, and musical affiliation, challenging soft girl norms through edginess and narrative depth. Dark palettes and vlogs position consumption as identity assertion within alternative communities.

Comparative Patterns: Frequency, Promotion, and Community Building

Posting cadence favors soft girl influencers (daily/near-daily), potentially amplifying exposure via algorithms favoring consistency, while gothic sparsity suits dedicated niches. Promotion reveals strategic nuance: soft girl mixes untagged sponsorships with organic lifestyle (@imhollyfrances, @thealondraflares), blurring commercial boundaries; @linalandss's pure organic approach enhances authenticity. Gothic influencers range from overt promotion (@bluexastrid) to subtle integration (@goddess.sylvanas), with @prncssbatzz fully organic.

Hashtag divergence underscores ideological splits: soft girl's targeted, post-relevant tags (#softgirl, #pinterestfit) foster aesthetic affiliation; gothic's voluminous, general tags (#goth, #dark) embed content in expansive subcultures, prioritizing scene belonging over individual promotion. Follower scales vary, gothic leaders (@goddess.sylvanas: 372K, @bluexastrid: 260K) rival soft girl mid-tier (@thealondraflares: 307K), indicating viable alternative reach.

Content typology highlights norm contestation: soft girl's cozy, relational visuals normalize patriarchal femininity as pastel-mediated ease; gothic's dramatic, narrative-driven posts expand gender expressions through darkness and autonomy.

This analysis directly addresses the research question: "How do influencers deploy the 'soft girl' aesthetic, and what impact does exposure to it have on adolescents' gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions?" Soft girl deployment occurs through high-frequency, pastel-dominant lifestyle content (GRWM, OOTDs, picnics) that integrates promotion subtly via untagged mixes and targeted hashtags, constructing femininity as gentle, relational consumerism. Frequent exposure likely reinforces adolescents' adherence to patriarchal norms prioritizing prettiness,

passivity, and social harmony while channeling purchasing intentions toward aesthetic-enabling products, as daily rituals normalize branded wardrobes as girlhood essentials.

Gothic deployment, by contrast, uses sparser, hashtag-saturated posts emphasizing dark drama and subcultural storytelling, offering resistant femininities that valorize intensity over softness. This may broaden adolescents' gender beliefs, mitigating patriarchal reinforcement, though consumption persists as identity currency. Soft girl's higher frequency and relational appeal suggest greater normative impact on broader youth demographics.

Limitations of the Analysis

The table draws from a small purposive sample without post-level views data, constraining quantitative depth and generalizability. Findings illustrate representative cases rather than population trends.

Soft girl influencers thus deploy aesthetics as insidious socialization tools, embedding patriarchal femininity in aspirational normalcy to drive purchasing; gothic influencers counter with subcultural expansion, highlighting aesthetics' dual branding-normative functions among adolescents.

Comparative Synthesis: Brands vs. Influencers in Aesthetic Deployment

The comparative analysis of brand and influencer tables reveals complementary yet divergent strategies in deploying soft girl and gothic aesthetics, illuminating their collective influence on adolescents' gender-norm beliefs and purchasing intentions. Brands (Brandy Melville, Subdued, Killstar, Disturbia) establish aesthetic foundations through controlled, high-scale visual worlds, while influencers (@imhollyfrances, @linalandss, @thealondraflores, @bluexastrid, @goddess.sylvanas, @prncessbatzz) personalize and amplify these through relational authenticity. This synergy addresses the research question by demonstrating how soft girl deployment operates as a sophisticated ecosystem reinforcing patriarchal femininity via mainstream accessibility, contrasted with gothic's niche resistance.

Scale disparities underscore market positioning: soft girl brands achieve dominance (Brandy Melville: 3.1M followers) over gothic counterparts (Killstar: 1.9M), mirroring influencer patterns where soft girl mid-tier (@thealondraflores: 307K) approaches gothic leaders (@goddess.sylvanas: 372K). Brands prioritize scale for broad socialization; influencers leverage mid-range intimacy for parasocial bonding. Posting cadence reveals optimization: brands balance frequency (soft girl: 1-5 days; gothic: daily), while influencers intensify soft girl visibility (daily) against gothic sparsity (2-10 days), suggesting algorithmic prioritization of consistent, relatable content for adolescent feeds.

Content convergence amplifies normative power. Soft girl brands' "soft simple activities" and "natural shots" align seamlessly with influencers' GRWM, OOTDs, and picnics, creating unified scripts of pastel-mediated gentleness. Hashtags evolve from brands' proprietary enclosures (#brandy, #subdued) to influencers' community bridges (#softgirl, #pinterestfit), funneling adolescents into expansive yet brand-aligned networks. Promotion blurs: brands integrate subtly; influencers mix untagged sponsorships with organic lifestyle (@imhollyfrances, @thealondraflares), rendering consumption "authentic" self-expression. Gothic parallels show brands' dark mixes with influencers' photoshoots/storytelling, transitioning from proprietary visuals to subcultural hashtags (#gothlife, #alternative), though voluminous influencer tags (@bluexastrid: 15-20) dilute focus compared to brands' restraint.

Gender-norm implications emerge clearly. Soft girl ecosystems normalize patriarchal femininity across actors: brands' day-to-day girly scenes + influencers' cozy rituals construct girlhood as passive, pretty consumerism, likely conditioning adolescents to internalize softness as desirability while linking purchases to belonging. Gothic counterparts offer resistance—brands' elegant darkness + influencers' mystical narratives expand femininity toward empowerment—but commodification persists, tying alternative identities to niche wardrobes. Soft girl's higher frequency/scale suggests dominant socialization; gothic's intensity fosters counter-narratives for receptive youth.

This brand-influencer interplay confirms soft girl aesthetic deployment as insidious norm reinforcement: controlled brand foundations gain relational traction via influencers, channeling purchasing toward "effortless" femininity. Gothic deployment, while resistive, remains subcultural, highlighting aesthetics' role as dual socialization-commerce mechanisms. Exposure patterns imply soft girl content more potently shapes adolescents' beliefs and intentions, warranting targeted digital literacy.

Results

Soft girl brands (Brandy Melville USA and Subdued) and gothic brands (Killstar and Disturbia) show clear differences in scale, posting frequency, hashtag strategy, and content type. Brandy Melville (3.1M followers) and Subdued (1M) post moderately often—every one to two days and every three to five days respectively—using primarily brand-specific hashtags and focusing on soft, simple activities and everyday scenes centered on “girly” lifestyles. Their content consists of photoshoots of apparently day-to-day activities and natural-looking images, with an emphasis on casual, feminine clothing and light, approachable styling.

Gothic brands Killstar (1.9M followers) and Disturbia (1.1M) post more intensively, at roughly two posts per day for Killstar and one per day for Disturbia. Killstar uses no hashtags, relying on

dark, gothic images that mix professional photoshoots with day-to-day content. Disturbia uses community-oriented tags such as #gothlife, #alternative, and #alternativefashion rather than brand-only labels, and its visuals combine dark, elegant styling with both professional and client-generated photoshoots set in bright, everyday surroundings. In summary, soft girl brands maintain a controlled, brand-centric soft feminine world, while gothic brands occupy a darker, alternative visual space embedded in subcultural communities.

Influencer-level patterns

Soft girl influencers (@imhollyfrances, @linalandss, @thealondraflores) and gothic influencers (@bluexastrid, @goddess.sylvanas, @prncessbatzz) extend and personalize these brand-level aesthetics. Among soft girl influencers, follower counts range from 36K to 307K, with high posting frequencies: once daily for @imhollyfrances (UK, 101K followers) and @thealondraflores (USA, 307K), and twice a day every two to three days for @linalandss (Sweden, 36K). Their content consists of pastel or lightly colored outfits of the day, get-ready-with-me routines, makeup, and everyday activities such as picnics, presented with a soft or feminine palette. Hashtag use is moderate and typically tied to aesthetic communities (#softgirl, #pinterestfit, trip- or event-specific tags), with a mixture of organic and promotional content, including sponsorships that are sometimes untagged.

Gothic influencers show a different configuration. Follower counts range from 14.4K to 372K, with posting frequencies from every two to three days to every five to ten days. @bluexastrid (Poland, 260K) posts primarily promotional professional photoshoots and occasional vlogs, using a large volume of general gothic tags (15–20 per post). @goddess.sylvanas (UK, 372K) posts less frequently (every five to ten days) with music-centered content and mixed organic/promotional material, and moderate hashtag use. @prncessbatzz (UK, 14.4K) posts every two to three days, with organic content focused on music, horror, makeup, and storytelling and uses numerous general hashtags. Overall, soft girl influencers emphasize high-frequency, lifestyle-based content with soft feminine styling, while gothic influencers emphasize darker, performance- or narrative-oriented content with lower posting intensity and heavier reliance on broad gothic/alternative hashtags.

Cross-cutting patterns

Across both brands and influencers, soft girl content is characterized by everyday, naturalized depictions of femininity embedded in casual life scenes, moderate and targeted hashtagging, and a balance of organic and promotional material. Gothic content is characterized by darker, often more theatrical visuals, closer ties to subcultural labels through hashtags, and a mix of promotional and organic content that foregrounds alternative identities. Soft girl brands tend to

be larger in follower scale, whereas gothic influencers can rival or exceed soft girl influencers in reach within their niche.

Discussion

This discussion examines how the soft girl aesthetic is deployed across brand and influencer ecosystems and how this deployment influences adolescent audiences. It begins by mapping how brands construct a controlled visual identity of gentle, pastel-coded femininity and then shows how influencers translate this aesthetic into relatable, everyday rituals through personal storytelling and lifestyle content. The following sections explore three central dimensions. The first analyzes deployment mechanisms, detailing how brands and influencers merge commercial and organic narratives to create authenticity. The second discusses implications for adolescents' gender-norm beliefs, highlighting how recurring aesthetic cues help normalize traditional femininity and shape perceptions of acceptable girlhood. The third considers purchasing intentions, assessing how the soft girl aesthetic converts stylistic performances into consumer desire by embedding products within aspirational daily life. Together, these sub-sections connect the study's results to the overarching research question by showing how strategic aesthetic deployment reinforces gender socialization while sustaining influencer-driven consumer economies.

Deployment of the soft girl aesthetic

The results illustrate that deployment of the soft girl aesthetic occurs through a layered ecosystem involving both brands and influencers. At the brand level, soft girl aesthetics are presented through controlled visual narratives that foreground gentle, visually pleasing everyday life. Brandy Melville and Subdued repeatedly show young women in relaxed, casual situations wearing simple, feminine clothing, with minimal presence of physically demanding activities or disruptive, unconventional styling. This content normalizes a narrow form of femininity as soft, approachable, and aesthetically understated, with branded garments serving as the key material components of this lifestyle.

At the influencer level, this aesthetic is personalized and made relational. Soft girl influencers translate brand imagery into intimate, everyday rituals: dressing routines, daily outings, and social moments. Pastel or lightly feminine color palettes, cozy or romantic settings, and "authentic" glimpses into day-to-day life reinforce the idea that being a "soft girl" is not only a fashion choice but a way of living. The frequent posting cadence ensures that followers encounter this aesthetic regularly, and the use of aesthetic-community hashtags connects these posts to wider soft girl networks beyond a single brand. The mixture of organic and promotional

content—especially where promotional material is untagged—reduces the visibility of commercial intent and frames consumption as natural self-expression.

Together, these findings indicate that influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic by translating brand visual strategies into highly visible, emotionally resonant lifestyle content. The aesthetic is not simply displayed but lived, narrated, and repeated, forming a consistent script of gentle, aesthetically curated girlhood.

Implications for adolescents' gender-norm beliefs

This deployment has important implications for adolescents' gender-norm beliefs. The soft girl aesthetic, as observed, emphasizes softness, visual harmony, relational ease, and a gentle everyday life. The absence or marginalization of more assertive, physically demanding, or non-normative feminine behaviors indirectly constructs these as less compatible with desirable girlhood. Adolescents repeatedly exposed to soft girl content are likely to encounter a model of femininity strongly aligned with traditional patriarchal norms: prioritizing appearance, emotional softness, and social acceptability over autonomy, confrontation, or difference.

Since these norms are conveyed through aesthetically pleasing, seemingly authentic content, they may be internalized not as external expectations but as desirable personal goals. Influencer content that frames soft girl routines as self-care or empowerment further blurs the line between self-determined identity and adherence to structured gender norms. Thus, the deployment of soft girl aesthetics by influencers appears to function as a subtle mechanism of gender socialization, reinforcing conventional femininity under the veneer of individuality and choice.

Implications for adolescents' purchasing intentions

The results also suggest clear links between aesthetic deployment and potential purchasing intentions. Both brands and influencers embed products—clothing, accessories, makeup—within aspirational everyday scenes rather than displaying them in isolation. For soft girl brands, outfits appear as integral to the depicted lifestyle; for influencers, garments and cosmetics are presented as part of daily routines and self-presentation practices. In both cases, products are framed less as discrete items and more as necessary components of an overall soft girl identity.

This integration is likely to stimulate purchasing intentions among adolescent followers who seek to approximate the aesthetic and lifestyle they observe. The use of brand-specific hashtags by soft girl brands and aesthetic tags by influencers facilitates discovery and repeat engagement, while the blurred boundaries between organic and promotional content may reduce critical awareness of commercial messaging. In contrast, gothic content links consumption to subcultural belonging and alternative identity; however, soft girl content benefits from greater mainstream

appeal and higher frequency, suggesting stronger impact on normative purchasing patterns among a broader adolescent audience.

Taken together, this demonstrates that influencers deploy the soft girl aesthetic through frequent, lifestyle-centered, visually cohesive content that aligns closely with brand imagery while adding relational depth and perceived authenticity. This deployment reinforces traditional gender norms around femininity by continually associating girlhood with softness, visual appeal, and unobtrusive daily routines. At the same time, it encourages adolescents to view branded products and soft girl styling as essential to achieving a desirable feminine identity, thereby influencing purchasing intentions. The comparison with gothic brands and influencers underscores that while alternative aesthetics offer different gender scripts, the soft girl aesthetic's reach, integration with everyday life, and alignment with mainstream norms position it as a particularly potent force in adolescent gender socialization and consumer behavior.

Conclusion

This study systematically examined how influencers and brands deploy the soft girl aesthetic on Instagram and assessed the potential effects of this deployment on adolescents' consumer behavior and gender-norm beliefs. Through a mixed-methods content analysis, the research compared soft girl brands (Brandy Melville USA, Subdued) and influencers (@imhollyfrances, @linalandss, @thealondraflores) with gothic counterparts (Killstar, Disturbia, @bluexastrid, @goddess.sylvanas, @prncessbatzz). Instagram posts served as the primary unit of analysis, with data on follower scale, posting frequency, hashtag strategies, content types, and promotional patterns systematically coded and interpreted. This design enabled a granular view of aesthetic deployment mechanisms while linking empirical patterns to theoretical frameworks from feminist media theory, consumer psychology, and influencer economies.

The findings reveal a cohesive soft girl ecosystem characterized by high visibility, relational authenticity, and seamless product integration. Brands established foundational visual worlds of "soft simple activities" and "natural shots," portraying femininity as gentle, pastel-mediated everyday life devoid of intensity or disruption. Influencers personalized these scripts through frequent GRWM routines, OOTDs, and picnics, blending organic lifestyle content with untagged promotions to frame consumption as effortless self-expression. Hashtag strategies evolved from brands' proprietary enclosures to influencers' community bridges (#softgirl, #pinterestfit), channeling adolescents into expansive yet commercially aligned networks. In stark contrast, gothic brands and influencers emphasized darker, narrative-driven content—professional photoshoots, music storytelling, and subcultural immersion—with voluminous general tags (#gothlife, #alternative) fostering niche belonging over mainstream normalization.

These deployment patterns directly illuminate the research question. Soft girl aesthetics are operationalized through sustained, algorithm-friendly frequency (daily influencer posts) and relatable lifestyle rituals that normalize patriarchal femininity: passivity, visual pleasingness, and relational ease. Adolescents encountering this content repeatedly are likely to internalize a narrow feminine ideal where girlhood equates to aesthetic curation, with branded products positioned as indispensable enablers. Purchasing intentions are thus cultivated not through overt sales but via aspirational immersion—pastel wardrobes become synonymous with desirability and social harmony. Gothic aesthetics, while offering resistive scripts of edginess and autonomy, operate at lower frequencies and niche scales, limiting their counterbalancing potential against soft girl's dominant reach.

Beyond immediate digital interactions, these findings connect to broader sociocultural phenomena. In real-world contexts, the soft girl aesthetic's mainstream penetration may exacerbate gender imbalances in adolescent development, reinforcing stereotypes that prioritize appearance over agency during critical identity formation years. Speculatively, widespread exposure could contribute to heightened body surveillance, reduced participation in STEM or leadership pursuits (perceived as "un-soft"), and normalized consumerism as emotional coping—patterns echoed in rising youth mental health concerns tied to social media. Educational settings might observe shifts toward relational over competitive behaviors, while retail sectors benefit from sustained "aesthetic churn" as trends evolve yet retain feminine conformity. Policymakers addressing digital literacy could target this subtlety, as soft girls insidious normalcy evades traditional advertising critiques.

The gothic aesthetic's marginality highlights platform dynamics favoring accessible, non-disruptive content, potentially stifling diverse gender representations. Future real-world effects might include polarized youth subcultures mainstream soft girl conformity versus niche gothic rebellion mirroring broader societal tensions around femininity in post-#MeToo landscapes. As President Trump's reelection signals cultural backlashes against progressive gender narratives, soft girl aesthetics may gain further traction by repackaging traditional norms as empowering "self-care," influencing everything from campus fashion to political self-presentation among Gen Z.

Several limitations temper these interpretations but also underscore the study's illustrative value. The purposive sample of emblematic accounts, while theoretically justified, precludes statistical generalizability; findings represent typical cases rather than population trends. Reliance on aggregate metrics (follower counts, posting patterns) without post-level views or comments limits engagement insights, capturing visibility but not persuasion. Interpretations of "patriarchal reinforcement" draw from theory yet remain researcher-subjective, warranting audience

validation. The cross-sectional design cannot trace causal exposure effects, and platform-specific focus (Instagram) may not generalize to TikTok's algorithmically amplified short-form content.

These constraints invite rigorous future directions. Larger-scale quantitative studies could employ machine learning for hashtag networks and engagement modeling across thousands of accounts, testing correlations between soft girl exposure and purchase data. Qualitative audience research—surveys, focus groups, or diaries with adolescents—would elucidate interpretive processes: do viewers perceive soft girl content as empowering or constraining? Longitudinal designs tracking individuals over months could measure shifts in gender attitudes or spending patterns. Cross-cultural comparisons (US vs. Europe vs. Asia) would reveal how local norms mediate aesthetic impacts, while experimental manipulations (A/B aesthetic feeds) could establish causality.

Platform evolution demands attention: as algorithms prioritize "positive" content, will soft girl dominance persist, or will AI-generated influencers disrupt human authenticity? Intersectional lenses race, class, ability could unpack how aesthetics exclude non-white or plus-size bodies, extending beyond binary soft/gothic frames to "clean girl," "coquette," or "that girl" variants.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates a clear imbalance: soft girl aesthetics are systematically pushed further through scale, frequency, and mainstream relatability, while gothic alternatives remain subcultural. By linking empirical deployment patterns to socialization theory, the study reveals influencers not as radical disruptors but as reproducers of gendered hierarchies, where consumption sustains normative femininity. This insight calls for media literacy curricula emphasizing aesthetic critique, ethical branding guidelines prioritizing diversity, and research prioritizing youth agency in digital cultures. Recognizing and redressing this partiality remains essential for equitable adolescent development amid influencer economies' unchecked expansion.

References

- Bakshi, S. (2025). Impact of Gender on Consumer Purchase Behaviour. *Abhinav National Monthly Refereed Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*, 1(9), ISSN 2277-1166.
- Mishra, R., Dayal, V., & Mishra, S. (2012). Impact of Media on Buying Behaviour of Adolescent Girls. *Asian Journal of Home Science*, 7(1), 100-103.
- Palmer, A. (2024). *Consumercore: The Girl Commodification and Girl Romanticization of Girl Self Because Girl Internet Said So*. Honors Thesis, Ohio University.

Shen, B., & Bissell, K. (2013). Social Media, Social Me: A Content Analysis of Beauty Companies' Use of Facebook in Marketing and Branding. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 19(5), 629–651.

Tilburg, M. van, Lieven, T., Herrmann, A., & Townsend, C. (2015). Beyond “Pink It and Shrink It”: Perceived Product Gender, Aesthetics, and Product Evaluation. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(4), 422-437.