

zoom zoomer

a report on online
youth culture

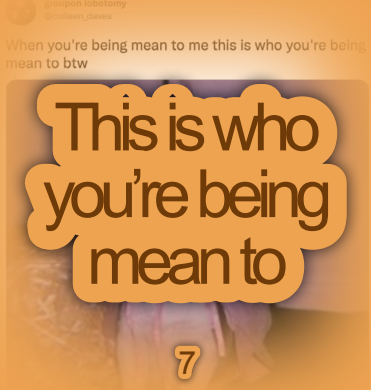
the gender
expression edition

The Hmm



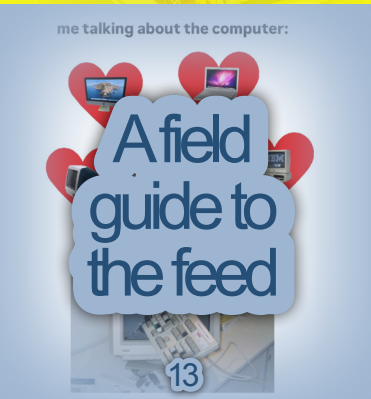
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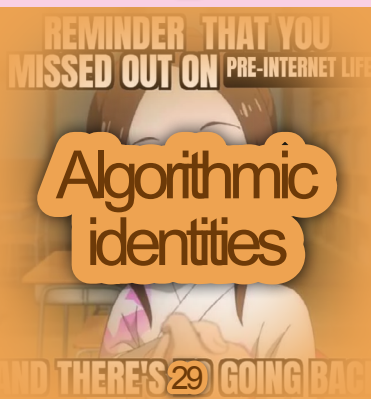
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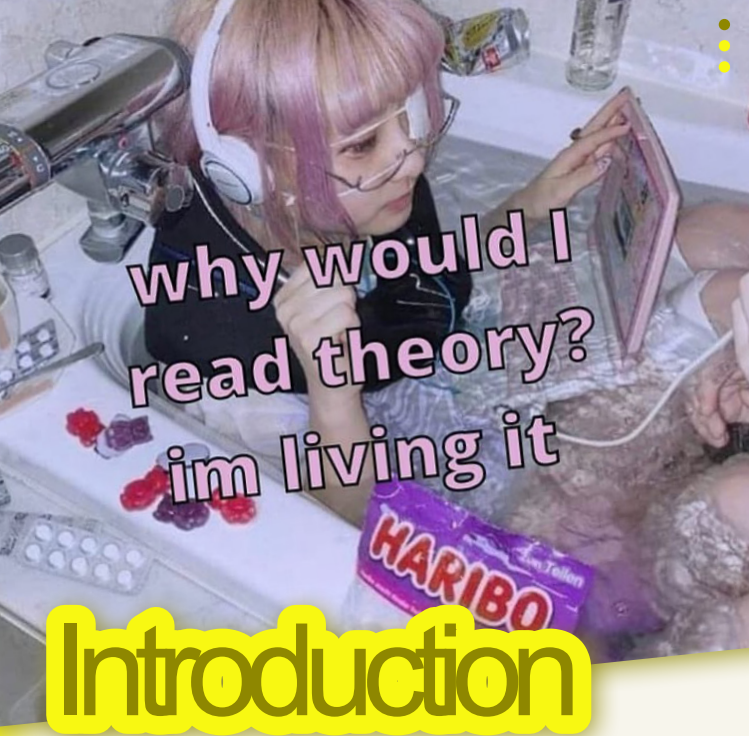


getting a "i love your brain" comment on a

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Whenever young people and the internet come up in the same breath, the conversation often defaults to panic. Which new challenge is going to sweep through high schools? Which trend is rotting their brains? Which algorithm will hijack their attention next? It's always the same story, one about young people that never thinks to ask them anything. Most commentary on youth and digital media works like this. The young get cast as spectators of their own lives, their behaviour diagnosed by people who can't be bothered to understand the platforms, or the kids on them.

Youth culture used to mean subculture. Punks, goths, ravers, emos, all these were scenes you joined in person, built on a formula of music plus style plus a belief system, where the look wasn't just an amalgamation of aesthetic choices but said

something about who you were and where you wanted society to go. To belong you had to go all in, online and off, or get called a poser.



Where does youth culture live now?

Dead or just mutated, the thing has clearly moved. Its iconography, rituals, in-jokes, ways of dressing; an entire apparatus that used to happen in bedrooms and bus stops and the back of the class, now takes place in online spaces for the whole world to see. This leaves a lot of room for speculation, misunderstanding, and moralising.

Zoom Zoomer, a report on online youth culture, is a publication by The Hmm. Refusing the usual hand-wringing about young people and their phones, The Hmm is a platform for internet cultures, founded in Amsterdam in 2016. For a decade it has explored and celebrated the creativity sparked by virtual interactions and the technologies shaping them, treating online life as something to take seriously.

From its studio at NDSM in Amsterdam, The Hmm offers curious (inter)national and local audiences playful, engaging insights into how online life actually works and experiments critically with new technologies. It does so across accessible events

and symposia; research, dossiers, and publications; and educational programmes and hands-on workshops with students.

The Gender Expression edition is an exploration into how young people express themselves online. How do viral online trends and memes influence how young people shape their identity – also away from keyboard – or how they relate to each other? What role does the internet play in shaping young people's futures?

In *Zoom Zoomer*, The Hmm combines its year-long research for their 2025 theme *This Is Who You're Being Mean To* – examining gender expression online – with conversations with young people in Amsterdam, specifically media & design students from ROC Amsterdam. 15–20 year olds who grew up with the internet, active as both lurkers and, at times, content creators.

We ain't scared of
no media !!
literacy crisis





Understanding Face Filters
@NDSM Open 2023

groupon lobotomy
@colleen_daves

When you're being mean to me this is who you're being mean to btw



amanda
@THECOOLISSUE

when you're mean to me this is what you to



This is who
you're being
mean to

You may have seen it. A wet-eyed cat, or a trembling hamster, usually captioned *when you're being mean, this is who you're being mean to*. This meme format is a conduit for self-expression: it casts the poster as a small creature with limited agency and under constant scrutiny. In the digital zoo we are the animals, pulling the cuteness on like a costume and padding around inside it, harmless and adorable and exempt from expectation. Cuteness is worn as digital armour—armour which has been engineered for frictionless spread and the reliable jolt of recognition.

The Hmm's theme *This is who you're being mean to* focuses on gender expression online. The internet is often seen as a space where you can explore your identity and experiment with gender expression. These days, this form of identity exploration coexists alongside a broader trend towards more cis-heteronormative gender roles.

With our first symposium on 16 May 2025 we did a deep dive into the Girl Online. Following the rise of the *girlboss* a few years ago, a more passive, cute image of women is now gaining ground. Trends such as *girl dinner* and *girl math* point to a form of self-infantilisation. This shift does not only affect women; across all genders, we see a reluctance to fully embrace adult life, often linked to economic difficulties and changing life expectations, particularly amongst millennials and Gen Z.



At the same time, we see that the concept of 'being a girl' is also being questioned, reframed and appropriated in online spaces. Behaving like a girl online can be a fruitful strategy for working with the algorithm.

But these gendered ways of presenting ourselves don't come from nowhere. They are already circulating, ready-made identities that we learn to slip into. Our performance online is therefore less structured around individual agency, and instead we're increasingly shapeshifting, fast, into whatever the algorithm will feed and protect. The early internet promised you could go online and become whoever you wanted. This promise has faltered.

Before we mourn the passing of the old internet, it's worth remembering why it foments such nostalgia. For many people, the early text-based web was the first place where identity—and gender in particular—could be explored away from the fixed expectations of offline life. People described rather than displayed themselves, leaving room for ambiguity and imagination. For countless young people, the internet offered a first language for understanding who they were.



The rise of social media shifted this dynamic. Real-name policies and image-first platforms tied online identities more closely to offline selves. Self-expression became more public, more persistent, and more accountable to existing social circles. There was still room to experiment, but increasingly within the boundaries of a recognisable, legible identity.

Today, we inhabit an algorithmic internet. Platforms no longer simply connect us to other people; though they have always presented themselves as neutral, they actively shape what we see and how we present ourselves. Recommendation systems reward content that is predictable and easy to categorise, encouraging identities to become more legible, consistent, and sometimes more exaggerated. Parallel to a blooming of gender non-conformity and gender exploration online, many of these systems have amplified increasingly reactionary and cisheteronormative ideas about how women and men are expected to look and behave.

Lem, 18

By now, my feed has been customised so that I really only see the things I want to see. I also quickly scroll past AI-generated content, because I don't want to see that right now.

I'm so deep in my own niche that I don't catch the general memes or Brainrot. But in my space, there are other funny memes that I recognise, while everyone else doesn't.

What platforms do you use?

TikTok

Twitter

CapCut

ChatGPT

SnapChat

ING

YouTube

A03

Twitch

Vinted

Reddit

Netflix

Instagram

Adobe

Procreate

Spotify

Games

9292

Pirating sites

WhatsApp

FaceApp

Discord

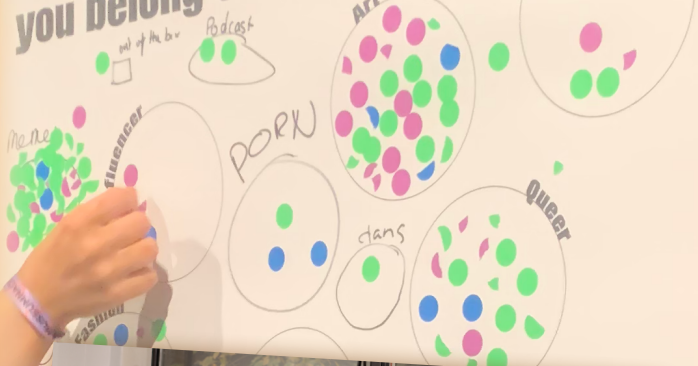
LinkedIn

Hayday

Pinterest

VPN

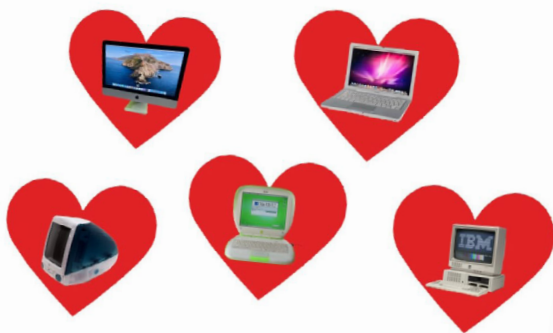
What online communities you belong to?



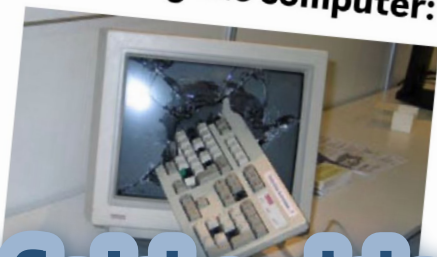
The Hmm on Online Identity
@ FOAM, Museumnacht 2024



me talking about the computer:



me using the computer:



A field guide to the feed

Generative AI has made it nearly free to produce infinite mediocre content, also known as slop. Slop now competes with, and increasingly buries, the human-made stuff. The dead internet theory, what was for years merely an ominous, Black Mirror-style conspiracy, is now seemingly the current state of affairs.

As of May 2026, researchers estimate that more online articles are now created by AI than by humans.¹

¹ <https://graphite.io/five-percent/more-articles-are-now-created-by-ai-than-humans>

The aesthetic toll is the least of it. When a feed fills with synthetic faces and synthetic bodies, the baseline of what an ordinary human is supposed to look like drifts toward the impossible. The face the algorithm rewards is already halfway to an AI doll, and a real, unedited person starts to read as the anomaly. With generative AI becoming the most-used consumer product of our time, the fears that we are increasingly outsourcing our intelligence and agency to the algorithm are ballooning.



In early 2026, 20-year-old looksmaxxer Clavicular was all over the internet. His fame began on the (niche) livestreaming platform Kick, before crossing over into the mainstream offline world – walking in fashion shows and being analysed in hundreds of articles. Clavicular has optimised himself, his entire life, for algorithmic traction. “*All I think about is content*,” he said in one of his streams. His muscled body has taken on such an extreme form that it looks less like a real body and more like an image of one. For Clavicular, his body seems less like something to be cared for in a healthy way, and more like an object to be manipulated and optimised, whether through workouts or surgery. Clavicular is an example of an algorithmically-driven persona – almost a human hybrid. As internet researcher Aidan Walker puts it: “*When everything is content, everything is measurement first and meaning second.*”²

2 <https://howtodothingswithmemes.substack.com/pl/clavicular-and-contentmaxxing>

Some of the young people we spoke with publish their own content online, which has given them a deep understanding of how the algorithm works. They said it's just like getting to know a friend: the more time you spend with it, the better you learn what it responds to, what it rewards, and what it ignores:

Amy, 19

If the algorithm really picks you up and promotes your videos on YouTube, you'll see that you get a lot more views, followers, and subscribers.

But it does depend on how active you are. For example, if I don't upload anything for nine or twelve days, YouTube stops promoting my videos. Then you have to start over very carefully and rebuild everything from scratch.

Of course, it isn't all slop, and pretending otherwise is its own kind of panic. Running against the grain of all that frictionless scrolling is a small, real movement of young people deliberately reaching for friction: call it frictionmaxxing. Alongside the hacky entrepreneurs and grindset influencers (who peddle 'non-stop hustling' as their life motto), there are researchers and journalists, artists and makers, educators and therapists who share their knowledge with the world. Of course, the danger is that none of it is sorted from the toxic stuff at the source; the algorithm doesn't know the difference and, frankly, doesn't care. But it's there, and any honest account holds both: brainrot and the kid who started reading closely because of a girl on TikTok with a stack of paperbacks.

Lem, 18

The platform I use the most is YouTube.

When I'm working on school assignments, I play YouTube videos in the background. These are usually three-hour-long theory videos, or videos of someone making a costume.

I also have a favourite streamer who plays video games, and I watch videos about game theory, game narratives, and how games are played.

I only half-listen to them, but it helps me focus. That's because I have really severe ADHD.

Jo-Ann, 19

I don't have Snapchat. It's kind of a self-protection measure.

What it does to our attention is the separate complaint, and the one the kids themselves raise the most: the doomscroll, the hours that vanish, the flat grey afterfeeling. That's the part even the most fluent users want out of, and this is a topic we'll cover more in next edition of *Zoom Zoomer*.



Doom Scroll

What do you learn from...?



School

being productive
studying
calculus
being punctual
adobe
fighting
journalism
general knowledge
life lessons
how tired you really are
planning
coding
social interactions
what people are like
trends
clothing hypes
the news
how products work
9/11

The Internet

photography
english
gaming
DIY/art
fixing computers
personal hygiene/care
healthy lifestyle

Family & friends

habits
manners
sewing/crochet/painting



HEARTBREAKING: Poor girl
has to get out of the soft
warm bed even though she
is so so so so comfy

Everyone is a girl online

During the Hmm's symposium *Girl Online*, the writer K Allado-McDowell put the stakes plainly: these aren't just networked identities but full-blown realities. Identity gets constructed online and then carried into the street, into how people vote, through the feedback loops and filter bubbles that can curdle into conspiracy. And the next turn is already arriving: AI as a biomorphic, hallucinating technology, where not only gender but other properties start to come loose, and identity begins breaking out of human-centred shapes altogether.

The girl has always been a compelling figure, both in the popular imagination, and in theory: *girl power*, *girlboss*, Tiqqun's 'Young-Girl', the cycle of being told your strength is cutest when it's marketable. The girlboss promise has curdled, and the girl got more self-aware about it all: *Girl math*, *girl dinner*, *we are all girls online*, *I'm just a girl*, *you can't expect me to work!* These trends show that performing like a girl has evolved into an accessible, relatable style of online posting that resonates well, regardless of a person's gender. There are men who want to be so babygirl. The mancave is now rebranded into the *boy apartment*. 2023 got crowned the year of the girl – courtesy of the Barbie movie that came out that year – and the girl moved in and never left.



Bernard | Professional Dog
@BowTiedBernard

Girl Math

- Under \$5? It's free
- Returned a \$50 item? Made \$50
- Returned \$50 and spent \$100 afterwards? Spent \$50
- Will never spend \$500 on Amazon but will spend \$100 five times

I'm just a girl



Lizet, 16



I was really into the 'clean girl' aesthetic for a while. But now I really think, 'That's just not me'.

The reflex is to read this as regression: women curling back into the dollhouse, men refusing to grow up. That reading misses the tactic. As Alex Quicho puts it, going into prey mode flips a fixed power dynamic: make yourself small enough and the rules stop applying to you. Bedrotting, girl resting, lazy girl jobs, the 35-year-old 'girl' who is simply too hot to work. Jernej Markelj sees these trends as a form of passive resistance: a refusal to continue playing along with a system that imposes the responsibilities of adulthood but no longer offers its rewards.

At the Girl Online symposium, Mela Miekus and Mita Medri gave the mode its patron saint, the silly girl. Not the sad girl, not the femcel, not the girlboss, but the delulu shitposter throwing a deliberate spanner in the works. To sillify is to do your tasks and relationships in such pointedly stupid ways that neoliberal logic can't process them. Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic's irreverent meditation on *cute accelerationism* pushes the same reflex further, weaponising the generational accusations of being chronically online, infantile, and overly obsessed with artificial internet subcultures and transforming these mocked traits into a radical philosophical blueprint.

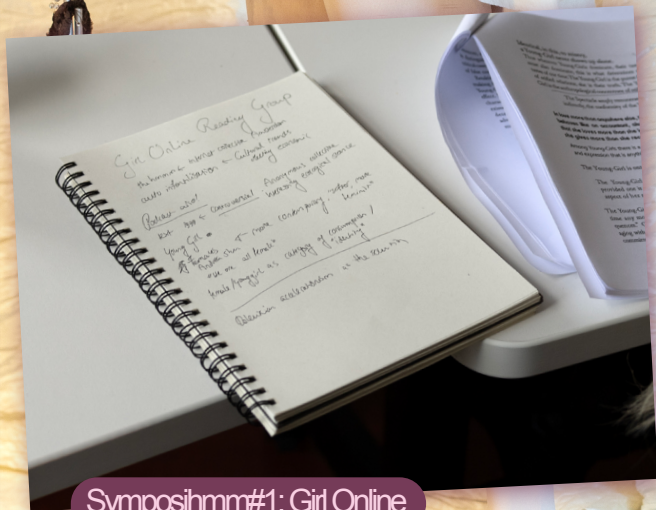


Silly girl springtime! Am I right, ladies? ;)

The famous adage stated: “There are no girls on the internet”. Everyone is a Girl online now, the model citizen of consumer society who can only seduce by consuming according to Tiquun; the ideal product of the digital platform, per Quicho. Because the internet dissolves the concept of a ‘stable interior self’ into a fluid stream of digital projections, the girl becomes the baseline condition of modern digital survival: a decoy that may allow us to participate online with some intention and agency.

Caught in a web of total exposure, torn between privacy and visibility, between being real and ideal, the Girl is not an inherently emancipatory subject but the default condition of contemporary vulnerability. In The Hmm’s 2025 dossier, Socrates Stamatatos turns on the cute-accelerationist mood from within: its love of regression, of becoming an object or a softened commodity-self, mirrors neoliberal affect markets a little too snugly. It aestheticises surrender while the techno-authoritarian machinery grinds on. The fantasy of dissolving the human is a luxury available to those whose humanity has never been in question. Stamatatos writes in favour of a deliberate slowness as resistance to the flattening pressure of platform metrics. The Girl can refuse to be hurried toward erasure by the machinery of acceleration, instead allowing herself to unfold in her own time.





mm#1: Girl Online



The best version of yourself

If half the feed performs helplessness, the other half performs total command, an absolute control over the self. Gymfluencers, finfluencers, hustlepreneurs, looksmaxxers are the 'bro science' pitched as the forbidden knowledge "they" don't want you to have. Higher education keeps getting more expensive and less trusted at the same time. Meanwhile the humanities have been systematically devalued, defunded, and hollowed out. Into that vacuum slithers the livestream guru with a protein shake and a multi-step plan.

Consider the suffix that defines this ideology. To -maxx is to grind a single attribute to its ceiling, and the suffix attaches to anything: looksmaxxing, gymmaxxing, moneymaxxing, even bedmaxxing. It treats the self as a stat sheet, every trait a slider you're failing to drag high enough. The figures the scene venerates are aspirational and cautionary in the same breath, idols who sometimes died for the physique.

Jo-Ann, 19

I'm always proud of how I carry myself, how I present myself, and how I feel in my own body.

There was a time when I used to throw up everything I ate; that was truly rock bottom. Now I find myself consciously eating fewer calories because I want my muscle mass to show more clearly.

There's always a goal behind what I do. Even if I haven't gone to the gym one day, I think to myself: I still took enough steps today, and that's already quite an achievement. After all, I was in a wheelchair for a long time, and back then, none of that was possible.

That's why I'm especially happy now that I'm healthy and can just live my life. I don't really need anything more than that to have a successful life.

Lizet, 16

I think that's what people of this generation really need to work hard on: their own mental health.

During the HmM's symposium *The Best Version of Yourself* on 24 September 2025, we explored, together with creators, scientists and critics, the online fitness culture and wellness industry, and why it has become so popular online. Young people growing up today face an uncertain future. Going to university often means taking on student debt, finding a job is uncertain, and buying your own home seems almost impossible. The internet offers an escape route, but to take it, you have to play along with algorithms and prevailing beauty standards. Young people treat the internet like a video game: they 'game' with beauty to survive and earn money. A pumped-up body or plumped-up lips work well for the algorithm.



During the symposium, writer Günseli Yalcinkaya laid out the mechanics: mogging, mewing, looksmaxxing, hunter eyes against prey eyes. Lookism, the flat belief that the better you look, the better you'll be treated, splits into soft-maxxing (skincare, grooming and styling, wellness) and hard-maxxing (surgery, bone-smashing, peptides). It plays like a character creator in a video game: drag the sliders and watch the bar fill. Mogging your friends might earn you real money and high-value status, but no amount of mewing touches the thing actually making you anxious. The bar always rises.



Once you believe that the experts are frauds and the system is rigged against you specifically, you've entered the terrain of the sigma male: the lone wolf who's opted out of the hierarchy he claims not to care about, grinding in secret, beholden to no one. Set against a male loneliness epidemic and 'reject modernity, embrace masculinity' politics, the slip-road from self-improvement to genuine grievance is short and well-greased. Gender here is so plainly competitive and gamified that even people perfectly comfortable as their assigned gender pour extraordinary, painstaking labour into performing it correctly for the camera and an imagined audience.

Technology shapes how we see ourselves and one another. Our online behaviour does not necessarily have to be the same as how we behave in the physical world. The distinction between fiction and reality is blurring online. AI-generated influencers demonstrate that virtual figures are not merely fictional. They are social actors with genuine cultural influence. At the same time, human creators are adapting to algorithmic environments that treat them as virtual characters. Many major influencers carefully design their videos to maximise algorithmic performance and generate as many clicks as possible, adjusting titles and pacing to optimise how long people stay engaged.

When do you find it impossible to stop scrolling?

On the train

During a boring class

When I am in bed
or stoned

When I'm bored

At night



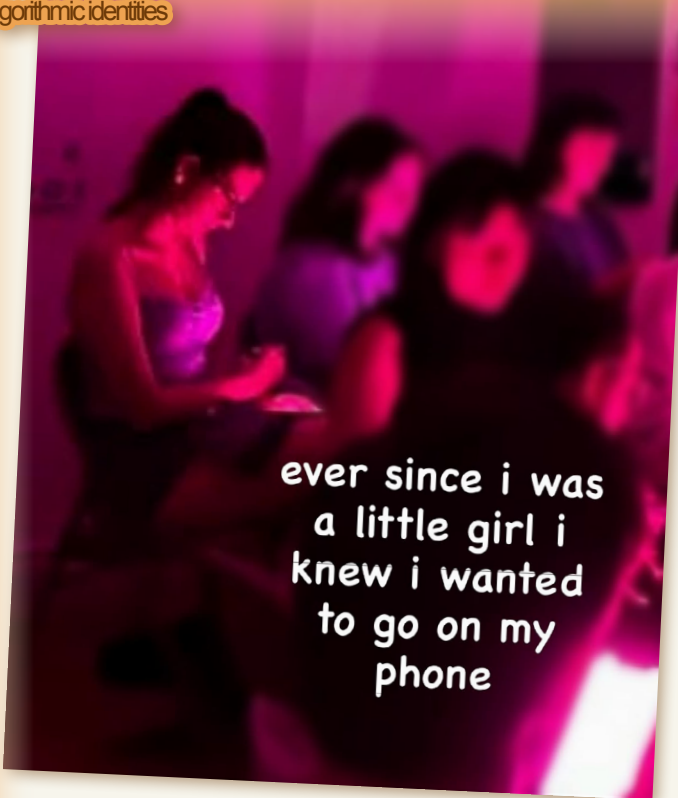
Symposium#2: The Best Version of Yourself

**REMINDER THAT YOU
MISSED OUT ON PRE-INTERNET LIFE**

AND THERE'S NO GOING BACK

Algorithmic identities

These modes—the Girl and the hustling optimiser—look like opposites, yet both are animated by the same underlying logic. The proliferation and decontextualisation of incel terminology (e.g. hunter vs prey eyes, canthal tilt) and its gender inverse (e.g. siren vs. doe eyes, angel vs witch skull) point to a resurgence of eugenics and phrenology. Eugenics and phrenology are nineteenth-century pseudosciences that linked physical and biological characteristics to human behaviour and intelligence. One example is phrenology, devised by Franz Joseph Gall, who claimed that a person's character and talents could be discerned from the

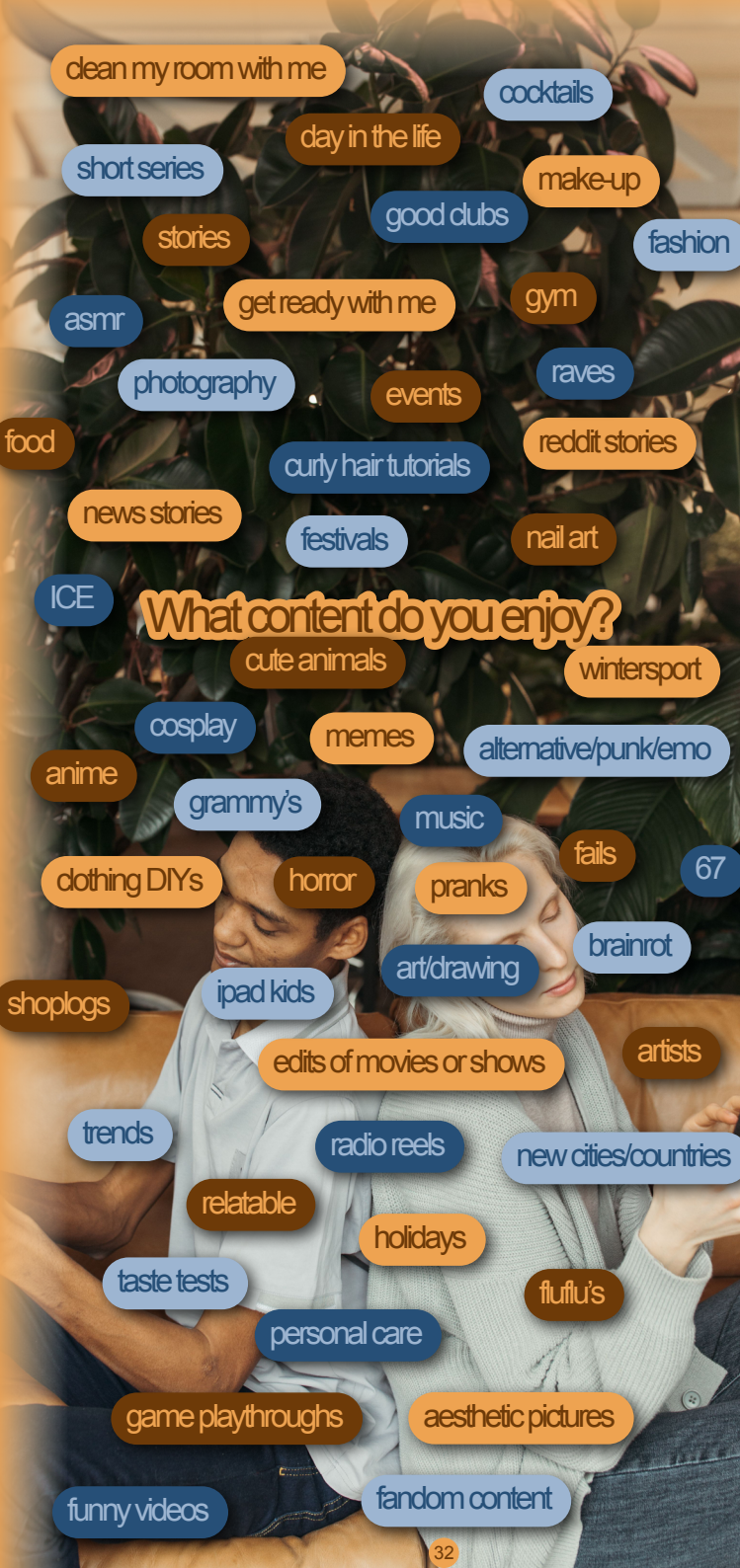


ever since i was
a little girl i
knew i wanted
to go on my
phone

bumps on their skull. These theories were misused to provide a 'scientific' justification for racial discrimination and social inequality. Meanwhile, gender non-conformity, which seemingly saw a boom in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, is reduced to jokes about abstract roommates named Sock who don't do the dishes.

The conservative backlash to so-called *Woke 1* (aka the Obama years) is insidious, because it burrows itself in vibes. Each aesthetic and -core one adopts, even down to the seemingly innocuous ones, like cottagore or dark academia, is not only already formatted and rewarded by the platform, but also, composed of the data which users themselves graciously offer up.

*i feel god
in this
are.na board
tonight*



clean my room with me

cocktails

short series

day in the life

make-up

stories

good clubs

fashion

asmr

get ready with me

gym

photography

events

raves

food

curly hair tutorials

reddit stories

news stories

festivals

nail art

ICE

What content do you enjoy?

cute animals

wintersport

cosplay

memes

alternative/punk/emo

anime

grammy's

music

fails

67

clothing DIYs

horror

pranks

brainrot

shoplogs

ipad kids

art/drawing

artists

edits of movies or shows

trends

radio reels

new cities/countries

relatable

holidays

taste tests

flufu's

personal care

game playthroughs

aesthetic pictures

funny videos

fandom content

hyperlinks are



everywhere

Luddites
or techno-
utopians?

Small mutinies are forming against this arrangement. Hand-soldered cyberdecks, dumb-phones, digicams, Riso-printed zines, alternative platforms that put taste and human recommendation in the place of metrics.

It would be easy to dismiss this as nostalgia, and partly it is. But something more interesting is underneath. For the generation whose whole life has been the feed, the

radical promise of the early web – go online, become anyone – isn't thrilling anymore. It's the water they were born in, and the water is contaminated. Touching grass is the new frontier. The platforms millennials built and boomers flooded in recent years read as cringe, sure, but the deeper move is a refusal of the platform paradigm itself.



And there's a colder pressure arriving in the name of protecting these same young people: under-16 bans and age-verification regimes slowly normalising having to prove your identity in order to be allowed online at all. The old anonymous or pseudonymous idea of the internet is replaced by an all-seeing oracle. Sold as child safety, much of it is the expansion of surveillance and a contraction of exactly the experimental, anonymous, identity-trying space that made the early web worth defending in the first place.

We do not protect young people's agency by removing it. These are conversations that deserve nuance, and they have to start by meeting young people where they are, and treating them as civic agents navigating a landscape no one has lived in before, on their own terms, in real time. Rather than keeping young people off the feed, how about we build the parts of it worth staying on?

David, 17

On YouTube Kids, even the most disturbing content – the sort of things children shouldn't be seeing – is deliberately uploaded.

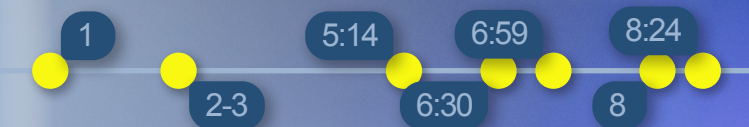
I read somewhere that the priority with children is to keep them watching. Children love colours, so they just keep looking at all those colours. And if you then take the phone away, they start screaming because they want to keep seeing those visual stimuli.

When I was little, I was allowed to play a game on my dad's iPad for one hour on Sundays.



Workshop: Make your own Slobject

What is your screentime
per day?
in hours



getting a “i love your
brain” comment on a
post is so magical
because it’s like,,,thank
you i made it myself 🥰



Glossary

This glossary represents a non-exhaustive cartography of emergent internet aesthetics, subcultures, and identities (era of the algorithmic feed, new forms of algorithmic identity, and FYP subcultures). Consider this your companion to the Zine.

Bro science

Bro science is fitness and training advice that doesn’t come from scientists, but from muscular athletes in the gym – so-called ‘bros’. It’s based on tall tales – “trust me, bro” – personal experiences, things you’ve heard or read somewhere yourself, and traditions, rather than actual scientific research. Bro science bears a strong resemblance to incel culture and to the online culture of fake news.

Clean girl

The clean girl trend is a beauty and lifestyle trend that emerged on TikTok, featuring high maintenance routines and a minimalist, polished look, achieved through skincare, wellness, and moderation. Critics point out that the baseline in question tends to be thin, wealthy and white, and that Black and Latina women wore slicked buns, hoops and glossy lips for years before the aesthetic got repackaged as a discovery. It also folds neatly into the wider *that girl* wellness push, where looking “clean” stands in for having your life in order.



Cottagecore

An aesthetic emerging from Tumblr and TikTok that romanticises rural self-sufficiency: baking bread, foraging, linen dresses, cottages wreathed in wildflowers. It reworks a pastoral fantasy of pre-industrial domesticity into a mood board, and gained real traction during the 2020 lockdowns, when staying inside made the outdoors aspirational. Critics note the politics are slippery: the same imagery of homestead and hearth can read as queer escapism or, one nudge to the right, as tradwife propaganda, and the ‘simple life’ it sells was rarely simple for anyone who actually had to live it. Its antonym is the hustlepreneur, who monetises every waking hour rather than fleeing the clock entirely.

Cute accelerationism (cute/acc)

Cute accelerationism (cute/acc) is a philosophical aesthetic and internet subculture that merges accelerationist theory with the aesthetics of cuteness, coined by Amy Ireland and Maya B. Kronic. It reframes traditional accelerationism – the idea that technological and capitalistic processes should be accelerated to force a radical transformation of society – by arguing that the aesthetic and psychological force of *Cuteness* is actually a major driver of this global acceleration. Where accelerationism usually speaks in registers of power, hardness and mastery, cute/acc locates real force in softness, smallness and the disarming pull of the adorable. Cuteness works by provoking care and surrender at once, and the theory reads that helplessness as a lure rather than a weakness, a way of capturing attention and desire that markets and machines already exploit.



wineandphilosophia [Follow](#)

Taking the bus: boring

Taking the bus while listening to classical music: Peasants. I'm a promising student on my way to an elite university. My wardrobe purely consists of expensive shirts and suits. I always carry a book around because I'm the epitome of intelligence. My decadent and hedonistic lifestyle will ultimately result in my demise.

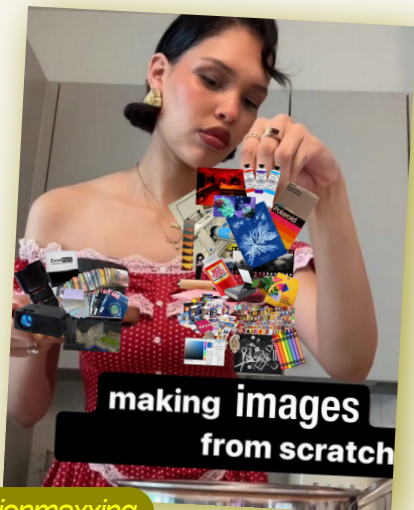
Dark academia

The look codifies into tweed blazers, oxford shirts, leather satchels, fountain pens, and annotated paperbacks, all in muted browns, creams, and forest greens. It privileges a

Western European canon, favouring the humanities over the sciences, and carries an autumnal, melancholic mood preoccupied with mortality and the costs of ambition. It crystallised on Tumblr in the mid-2010s and reached a mass audience on TikTok around 2020, when locked-down campuses lent its cloistered fantasy new pull. Critics argue it aestheticises elitism and a narrow, largely white vision of intellectual life.

Digital skin

A term for the customisable surface layer of online identity: filters, avatars, VTuber rigs, AI-retouched selfies and the smoothed, poreless face the front camera now hands back by default. It treats appearance as software, something patched and reskinned rather than lived in. The tension is that the 'skin' increasingly precedes the body, with people editing themselves toward a filtered baseline and, in some cases, asking surgeons to make the filter permanent. The word carries its gaming lineage on purpose. In games a skin is a cosmetic overlay swapped onto a fixed character model, a purely surface change that leaves the underlying body untouched, and that logic now describes faces too. It connects to Snapchat dysmorphia, the beauty-filter economy, and the flattening of features toward a single algorithmic ideal: bigger eyes, smaller nose, poreless glow. Its politics are about authorship and default: the smoothing is increasingly opt-out rather than opt-in, applied before you choose it. The face becomes a render. Its opposite is not the "real" face so much as the unedited one, which now reads online as a deliberate stylistic choice.



Frictionmaxxing

In a world rendered smooth by frictionless technology and the sycophancy of generative AI, frictionmaxxing reintroduces a sense of struggle on purpose: cold showers, dumbphones, handwriting. It borrows the *-maxxing* suffix from the looksmaxxing corner of the manosphere and turns it toward the opposite goal, optimising for resistance rather than ease. The critique writes itself: friction becomes one more thing to consume and post about, a premium struggle available to those whose lives are otherwise comfortable enough to add difficulty back in.

Gender

The term gender refers to the socially, culturally and societally constructed roles, behaviours and identities of men, women and other gender identities, as distinct from biological sex. Gender theory examines how these identities and norms are shaped, imposed and transformed by society, with influential thinkers such as Judith Butler.

Girlboss

Emerging from the 2010s wave of feminism, and coined in 2014 by Sophia Amoruso, founder of fast-fashion brand Nasty Gal, the girlboss is an aspirational moniker for a professionally successful woman. It promised empowerment through individual ascent and 'leaning in'. By the early 2020s it had curdled into a punchline as the model firms it celebrated faced walkouts and burnout allegations. The critique is that it swapped structural change for a personal brand and individual success in the corporate world. Its ironic descendant is the silly girl, who opts out of the optimisation project entirely.



Girl dinner

A platter of olives, a block of cheese, deli meat, pickles, tinned fish, some chocolate. This is not a breakfast of champions, but the so-called girl dinner, sustaining hordes of chronically online women. It was popularised on TikTok by Olivia Maher, who compared her meagre plate of bread, cheese, grapes, and pickles to a medieval peasant's meal.

Against the backdrop of bedrot fatigue, the girl dinner memefies coping for an overworked, burnt-out generation. And since some have dubbed our current regime ‘technofeudalism’, the peasant comparison might be more literal than she meant.

Girl math

Girl math takes the language of financial literacy and turns it into a self-deprecating bit about women and money, subjective mental shortcuts, and financial rationalisations, deployed with a wink. Examples: If you pay in cash, or from a pre-existing balance like Venmo, the item feels free, since your bank balance doesn’t visibly move. Return a €50 item, spend €100 on a new one, and you’ve really only spent €50. Anything under a fiver is basically free; anything you’ve already paid for is, by the time you use it, also free. The bit surfaced on a New Zealand radio segment in 2023 and spread fast on TikTok, sitting alongside *girl dinner* and *lazy girl job* in a wave of girl-prefixed formats that gently satirise feminine-coded behaviour. Its charm is that the logic is real: it just names the sunk-cost fallacy and mental accounting that everyone practises, then genders them for comic effect. The debate splits along familiar lines. Some read it as harmless humour reclaiming a joke about women being bad with money, others as reinforcing the stereotype it pretends to mock.



Hustlepreneur

A hustlepreneur is a product of the creator economy who financialises their entire existence. Freed from the 'shackles' of a regular 9-to-5, the hustlepreneur monetises the grind. More often than not, he generates wealth not from a tangible service, but by selling blueprints of his success to others. The *hustle* is not unlike a pyramid scheme: the wealth flows upward from aspirants, not outward from any underlying business. It thrives on the erosion of stable work and the creator economy's promise that anyone can escape employment through sheer optimised effort. Its close relatives are the finfluencer, the dropshipping guru, the crypto shiller, and the snake-oil salesman, all trading certainty to the precarious.

Incel / Femcel

Short for involuntary celibate, an incel is someone, typically a man, who blames their lack of sexual or romantic success on a rigged social hierarchy rather than on circumstance or choice. The subculture has developed an elaborate internal vernacular of red and black pills, Chads and Staceys, and ascension, and its more radicalised corners have been linked to real-world

violence. The femcel is its imperfect mirror: a mostly online female counterpart shaped more by self-loathing and irony than by the outward hostility that defines the male version, which is partly why the two are rarely treated as equivalent. Both construct identity, as the theory of Othering Online Discourse suggests, by positioning themselves as the misunderstood outsider.

Mogging

Mogging, from AMOG (*alpha male of the group*), is the act of visibly dominating someone by comparison, usually of appearance: standing next to a shorter man, out-jawlining a rival, being the more conventionally attractive person in the photo. It belongs to the looksmaxxing lexicon of the manosphere, where human worth is ranked on a brutally literal scale of bones and symmetry. The critique is that it turns every social encounter into a leaderboard, a zero-sum contest nobody agreed to enter. Its opposite would be simple regard, looking at another person without measuring yourself against them.



Mewing

Mewing is a tongue-posture technique, named after orthodontist John Mew, that its adherents claim can reshape the jawline and cheekbones without surgery by pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth. It spread from niche looksmaxxing

forums into the mainstream. In practice, mewing means holding the entire tongue flat against the palate, teeth lightly touching, lips sealed, ideally at all times. Adherents pair it with hard chewing and 'before and after' progress photos, folding it into the wider looksmaxxing project of optimising one's face through discipline. On TikTok and YouTube the term slipped into slang, with *mewing* becoming a joke gesture and a shorthand for self-improvement. Its appeal is legible: a free, do-it-yourself answer to facial insecurity in an era of front-facing cameras and appearance-ranking culture. Orthodontists caution that jaw structure is largely fixed in adults, and that any benefits are cosmetic and marginal at best.

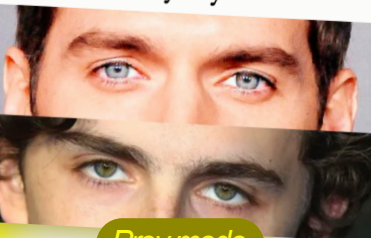


Manosphere

The manosphere is a loose network of blogs, forums, podcasts and influencer channels united by opposition to feminism and a shared belief that society is secretly rigged against men. It gathers men's rights activists, incels, Men Going Their Own Way, pick-up artists and fathers' rights groups under one roof, and overlaps heavily with the alt right. It runs on a shared vocabulary, much of it borrowed from *The Matrix*: to be *red-pilled* is to see through feminism's supposed deception, while *blackpill* thinking curdles into fatalism about looks and status

determining a man's worth. Its economy rewards figures like Andrew Tate, who package grievance into paid courses, coaching, and self-improvement branding aimed at young men. The pipeline is what worries researchers most: algorithmic feeds surface manosphere content to teenage boys, moving them from fitness and dating advice toward misogyny and radicalisation. Its rise tracks with real anxieties about male purpose, economic precarity, and loneliness, which it answers by naming a villain. Critics note it diagnoses genuine alienation only to redirect it into resentment of women.

Prey Eyes



Hunter Eyes



Prey mode

Coined by girl theorist Alex Quicho, prey mode identifies the prevalence of predator-versus-prey discourse online. The docile prey is vulnerable and at an evolutionary disadvantage, yet the tactical passivity it performs, going soft, small and illegible, can function as its own form of power and refusal. It names a structure of feeling in which softness is neither simply weakness nor simply strategy but both at once. Its counterpart is prey mode's supposed opposite, the predator, whose overt dominance the pose declines to compete with. The concept sits within a wider drift of online girlhood toward the small and the passive, adjacent to bimbofication, coquette styling, and the infantilised register of

much feminine-coded posting. Its politics are deliberately ambivalent: prey mode reads either as a savvy withdrawal from a game rigged toward aggression, or as a capitulation dressed up as resistance, and Quicho's framing holds both readings open rather than resolving them. It gains traction because it articulates something already latent, a pose women recognise performing. The stance stays legible only so long as it refuses to explain or assert itself.



Sigma male

Emerging from online masculinist subcultures, the sigma male is both a rejection of the alpha-beta hierarchy and its apotheosis. He's the self-reliant lone wolf, supposedly indifferent to status and competition, ranking outside the ranking system, too enlightened to play a game he's secretly winning. The far-right blogger Theodore Beale, better known as Vox Day, is usually credited with grafting the sigma onto the alpha-beta binary around 2010. Its appeal is a sleight of hand: reframe a lack of friends or romantic success as a deliberate, elite withdrawal rather than a failure.



Le me bed-rotting in
a cute pajama.

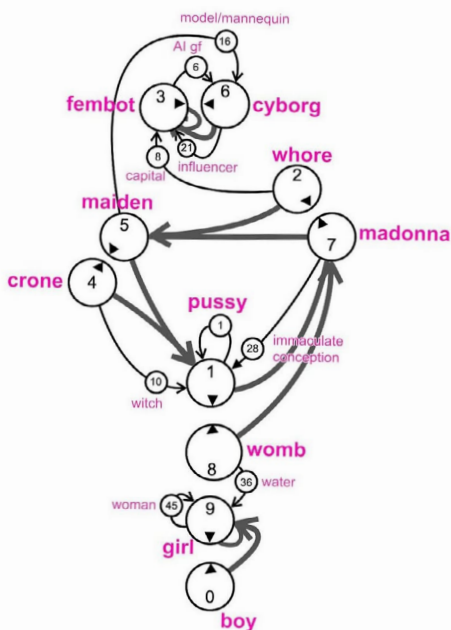
Silly girl

The latest in a lineage of online girl personas, after the Sad Girl, the Girlboss, and the Femcel. Coined by Mela Miekus and Mita Medri in their 2024 essay *Silly Girl Theory*, she's the delulu shitposter: chronically online, bedazzled vape, reading *Twilight* fanfiction and quirky feminist theory in the same sitting, mansplaining astrology, and refusing the hustle. To sillify, according to Mela Miekus and Mita Medri, is to propose a glitch to the hegemonic modes of doing and being, to perform actions, tasks, and relations in performatively silly ways that oppose neoliberal and patriarchal values. The silly girl feigns innocence but she's a modern trickster, fully "in the know".

Tradwife

The tradwife, or traditional wife, is an online persona built around domestic submission and adherence to traditional gender roles: home-cooked meals from scratch, many children, a husband cast as sole provider.

It presents itself as a lifestyle choice and a rejection of the girlboss burnout narrative, though its aesthetics shade easily into reactionary and sometimes explicitly far-right politics. The critique is that a genre about women staying out of public life is, paradoxically, a highly public and monetised media career – the mirror image of the girlboss it defines itself against.



Zoom Zoomer
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thehmm.nl



The Hmm on Online Identity
@ FOAM, Museumnacht 2024

Research shows the majority of teens see social media as a positive space for friendships and creativity:

74% of teens say these platforms make them feel more connected to their friends

63% say they give them a place to show off their creative side*

* <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/>



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