



BRILL

JOURNAL OF FEMININITIES (2025) 1–24

JOURNAL OF  
*Feminities*

brill.com/fem

# Tricks, Not Conflicts: The Loophole of the Girl Math Meme

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Received: 20 March 2025 | Accepted: 21 November 2025 |

Published online: 16 February 2026

## Abstract

This article examines girl math as an ambivalent yet emancipatory practice that neither seeks validation from dominant economic and epistemic structures nor directly challenges them. Instead, girl math operates through strategies of feigned incompetence, leveraging strategic algorithmic visibility to create an epistemic loophole where feminine-coded logic can, to an extent, exist on its own terms. While critics dismiss it as a trivial meme reinforcing gender stereotypes, we argue that girl math functions as trickster feminism, drawing attention to what is incomprehensible within masculine frameworks. Rather than confronting gendered power asymmetries, it reframes and subverts them by affirming hidden labour, costs, and skills associated with femininity. In doing so, girl math sidesteps neoliberal demands for self-discipline and productivity, instead embracing joyful inefficiency and humour as forms of resistance. Ultimately, girl math is not a miscalculation, but a tactical reframing of structures that have historically been rigged against feminine ways of knowing.

## Keywords

girl math – trickster feminism – gender politics – digital feminism – online femininities – humour as resistance

## Introduction

A product paid for with a gift card is free; spending an extra €20 is a valid solution to avoid paying €3 delivery costs; if you didn't spend any money today, it doubles your budget for tomorrow—that's girl math! If you wear an outfit but forget to take a picture in it, you never really wore the outfit; thinking you can get ready in 10 minutes—that's girl math too. The girl math meme is another variation in a recent series of girl-themed memes and microtrends, ranging from girl dinner to the "hot girl walk" and the "lazy girl job." Girl math achieved peak virality in the late summer of 2023 but continued to spark discourse well into 2024. The tongue-in-cheek meme, circulated by girl-identifying users, pokes fun at the so-called silly mental gymnastics used by women to justify their alleged irresponsible spending, but also supposedly illogical feminine ways of thinking more generally. Despite its light-heartedness, the meme has been coming under fire from all sides. Men have often viewed girls' math as confused, nonsensical, and plain wrong (Demopoulos, 2023; Walsh, 2023). Feminist critics see the meme as an infantilization of women, as trivializing their mathematical skills and thus reinforcing gender stereotypes. Girl math has also been accused of celebrating consumerist joys: a behavioural economist described it as an 'excellent exhibition of some of the biases' linked to irrational decision-making by consumers (Carver, 2023). For others, perhaps less literal-minded, it is 'merely a fun way to justify buying silly things while the world burns' (Cohen, 2023). In short, many consider it a fun joke at best, and anti-feminism or internalized misogyny at worst.

This article critiques these readings to highlight the ambivalent yet emancipatory potentials of girl math. We claim that these potentials lie in its 'subversive affirmation' (Arns & Sasse, 2005) of hyper-femininity performed by those who identify as a 'girl' and share the understanding of the gendered power asymmetries that underlie the economic and epistemological structures in which they are embedded. This excessive affirmation of financial and mathematical incompetence is a strategy of resistance that leans into this stereotype of femininity to weaponize this alleged incompetence (Zhou, 2021) and challenge the said gendered power asymmetries. To examine the playful forms of resistance enacted by girl math, our analysis focuses on the content circulated

by this trend as well as the responses of its wider affective public (Papacharissi, 2014), the ephemeral online collectivity of girls and other users mobilized by this trend. While we demonstrate that the formation of this affective public also creates a space for their direct critique, our contention is that girl math opposes the relevant structures of oppression non-antagonistically, *via* disidentification, strategic incompetence, irony, and humour. Therefore, we examine girl math as a form of trickster feminism, a politics that is, to use Ursula Le Guin's words, more about 'tricks than conflicts' (1989, 169). This politics draws attention to what is negligible, incomprehensible or invisible to, and remains outside of, the dominant masculine frameworks, and creates an alternative space of resistance, where the labour, costs, skills and ways of thinking associated with femininity are creatively renegotiated.

Instead of treating femininity simply 'as disempowering or as a sexist tool of the patriarchy' (Hoskin and Blair, 2022, 4), and 'something we should shed and eschew if we are ever to reach the goal of gender equality' (Hoskin and Blair, 2024, 3), we examine femininity at work with girl math as a playful tactic mobilized to negotiate marginalizing structures of power. In this way, we follow the approach of critical femininities (Hoskin and Blair, 2022), which, among other things, seeks to explore ways of reimagining femininity and reconceptualizing feminine power. As noted, several discourses view the girl math meme as a mere reproduction of oppressive stereotypes that frame femininity as emotional, illogical, and childish (Mortazavi, 2024; Stone, 2023). For instance, X user @gyarufem says that she hates that 'we've regressed back to making trends that portray women as stupid, and it's mostly women who are paddling them'; 'women are ironically making girl a prefix that means "X thing but stupid and unserious"'. Similarly, Walker (2023) suggests that girl-themed microtrends and memes 'do nothing to challenge the longstanding, historical dismissal of women's interests', and adds that this online girification often 'not only trivializes women's interests, but also women's suffering'.

Our argument does not entirely dispute these critiques but insists that this is not the whole picture. We follow Barton and Huebner (2020, 1) who claim that while 'such feminist critiques are important and necessary, they also unwittingly uphold the second-class status of femininity, reduce the complexity of all femininities, and erase the presence and power of multiple types of femininity'. From this perspective, analyzing girl math starting with the assumption that processes of girification are inescapably disempowering can, in fact, be disempowering. Our approach aims to demonstrate that girl math is not simply an oppressive form of self-trivialization or self-infantilization, but rather should be studied in a broader context. We argue that girl math is also a reclamation of girliness, which subverts normative femininity by 'doing it wrong on purpose' (Pierce, 2022, 210)

to challenge the oppressive structures that sustain its subordinate role. Girls constituting the affective public of girl math do so by leveraging their expertise in the complex, ambivalent, and dissonant labour of performing femininity.

Our engagement with girl math is informed by its examinations of other authors. At Amsterdam's *Institute of Network Cultures* fest\_final.final.final event, we were inspired by a rigorously witty presentation by Irma Mastenbroek, who is currently developing her theory of emotional calculus (forthcoming). Mastenbroek draws on Mela Miekus and Mita Medri's silly girl theory (2024), a powerful work of girl politics in its own right, to suggest that the girl math meme 'sillifies' and thus subverts the supposedly objective masculine field of mathematics. To sillify, write Miekus and 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' (*ibid.*). While our investigation does not foreground silliness as a tactic, we share with Mastenbroek, Miekus and Medri the aim of examining girl math as the collective feminine renegotiation of the gender inequalities inherent in the economic and epistemological structures that we inhabit. Our framing also resonates with Legacy Russell's (2020) articulation of glitch feminism in relation to hegemonic social systems, which theorizes the glitch as 'an error, a mistake, a failure to function' (7) that can become a strategic moment of refusal and non-performance, disrupting binary gender expectations. These disruptions allow queer, black, and other 'unreadable bodies' (68) that are marginalized within the system to assert their presence outside normative frameworks. Russell writes: 'What glitch feminism proposes here then is this: perhaps we want the break, we want to fail...The break an error, the error a passageway' (112–113).

While Russell conceptualizes the glitch as a 'socio-cultural malware' (116) of illegible non-performance, we suggest that girl math is a loophole that opens through deliberate overperformance of femininity: not exactly a rupture in the system that creates an unexpected portal, but rather a trickster's back door that provides comedic relief from the pressure to account for oneself under hegemonic masculine rules. It is a self-aware joke that plays with the idea of being bad with math and money, but instead of defending or apologizing, it leans into the seemingly erroneous logic. It bends the rules without quite breaking them, exaggerating femininity to flip the script on neoliberal rationality. We contend that the girl math loophole is a feminist tactic of playful refusal through subversive affirmation.<sup>1</sup> The figure of the trickster, we argue, is not outside of the

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1 While we use the loophole to describe a mode of playful refusal within digital meme culture and feminist critique, the term itself has a longer history in Black feminist thought. Most notably, it appears in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), where the

system, but one who navigates its contradictions creatively. In the context of girl math, the loophole is a trickster's tactic: a workaround within dominant logics that allows for subversive play without direct confrontation. Trickster feminism, in this sense, names the ethos; the loophole names the manoeuvre, or the tactical space that the trickster inhabits when they apply girl math.

Our analysis of girl math as trickster feminism is divided into three sections. We begin by situating the girl math discourse within the gendered interpersonal economies where femininity is disadvantaged. We distinguish girl math from the girl boss, an online persona that embodies entrepreneurial femininity. Whereas the girl boss pursues individual empowerment by seeking to master male-dominated economies, girl math mischievously contests them and embraces what exists beyond them. We show how its calculations wittily reframe the gendered economies of grooming, dating, and everyday consumption. In our second section, we elaborate on how the girl math meme can be seen as a refusal of increasingly defunct neoliberal rationality. Its financial silliness or 'splurging' should not be read simply as a feminine coping with complacent consumerism, but rather as a defiant act of wasteful expenditure (Bataille, 1988) that challenges the neoliberal norms prioritizing accumulation and productivity. We also suggest that the light-headed incompetence performed by girl mathematicians is a tactic leveraged to appear unthreatening to men and to gain visibility within the digital attention economy. Our third section engages with girl math as an affirmation of the sidelined feminine ways of thinking and knowing. We argue that girl math trend does not seek to assert itself within the dominant framework of femmephobic masculine epistemologies (Hoskin and Blair, 2024) but rather remains at the margins to explore and develop playful feminine epistemologies.

### **Girl Math, Subversive Affirmation, and Rigged Gendered Economies**

Girl math (tongue-in-cheek): 'everything under 5 euros is free'. Financial advisors (cautioning): 'small purchases can easily be girl-mathed' (Teo, 2023). The distrustful knee-jerk reaction of financial experts is perhaps not surprising,

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'loophole of retreat' refers to the cramped crawlspace in which she hid for seven years, both as a space of physical confinement and a space for subversive observation and survival. More recently, Simone Leigh's *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* symposium (Oct 7–9, 2022) explicitly drew on Jacob's loophole of retreat to create a space for Black feminist dialogue. While our conceptual framework of the loophole differs in positionality, we want to acknowledge this lineage and the broader tradition of reclaiming margins in feminist thought, which includes Legacy Russell's glitch feminism.

given that women in the US have been legally allowed to have their own bank accounts for no more than 50 years, having been previously perceived as ‘too irresponsible to manage their finances’ (Clark, 2023). This history of financial exclusion has led to a gendered discourse where women’s financial habits are scrutinized and dismissed as frivolous, while men’s spending remains unquestioned. This logic persists today in the implicit devaluation of feminine consumption. For example, a tailored suit for a job interview is likely to be seen as a ‘career investment’ for a man, whereas expensive makeup for a work event is more often viewed as a ‘splurge’ for a woman (Curran, 2023). As TikTok user and academic Zoe Condliffe (@dr.zoe.shesacrowd) also points out in her analysis of girl math (2023), this bias persists in the way purchases are socially perceived: ‘Why can men spend \$500 on tools, but I can’t spend \$500 on a Dyson Airwrap, even though I use it every day?’

In this light, girl math can be read as an act of economic resistance, a playful yet pointed refusal to engage with financial logic that is rigged against them. We suggest this strategy of resistance can be understood as a subversive affirmation, a practice developed in Eastern European socialist countries from the 1960s onwards. According to Arns and Sasse (2004, 2), subversive affirmation is ‘an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain [...] discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them’. ‘In subversive affirmation’, they add (*ibid.*), ‘there is always a surplus which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite’. The excess at work with girl math concerns the stereotypically feminine ineptness with financial calculations, which is here appropriated to renegotiate the very inequalities that ground this stereotype. This kind of trickster tactic functions as a loophole. The etymology of the word “loophole” also offers a dual metaphor for “girl math.” Initially, the loophole referred to a narrow slit in a fortress wall, used for shooting arrows or missiles at an enemy, providing a protected opening for striking while shielded. Since the 1660s, the word has also referred to a legal or rhetorical escape route—a means of slipping through or evading institutional constraints without directly confronting them (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Girl math plays with both senses as a form of trickster feminism, shooting out cloaked critiques from behind a shield of unthreatening girleness and feigned incompetence. Simultaneously, girl math exploits absurdities in the system’s own economic logic to slip through its constraints.

This kind of tactic is shared with Bimbo TikTok, another feminine affective public aiming to reclaim the derogatory figure of a bimbo, associated with the femininity that is ‘unintelligent, too sexual, lacking “class”’ (Pierce: 2022, 209). Similarly to girl math, the BimboTok public performs bimbohood to practice ‘disidentification’ which ‘pushes femininity through normativity and out the

other side: it becomes excessive, ironic, campy' (*ibid.*), thus denaturalizing gender, exposing it as a social construct. This feigned campy dim-wittedness of BimboTok is, to a similar effect, also directed towards the functioning of capitalist economy. In a gesture reminiscent of girl math, Chrissy Chlapecka, one of the central nodes of BimboTok, suggests that economic inequalities can be solved simply by printing more money. After being explained that this would just decrease the value of money, hence, not changing much, she confusedly exclaims: 'Stop talkin' to me about smart things ... All I know is that our problems would be solved if we just print more money! ... Capitalism is made up, this place I'm living in is made up! We didn't have to do this to ourselves' (cited in Pierce: 2022, 211). The feigned ignorance of a bimbo is here a playful tactic that refuses hegemonic economic logic, mobilized to draw attention to the historically contingent nature of capitalism, and to imagine—tongue-in-cheek—alternative systems of monetary value and wealth distribution.

Given their mistrust of capitalism, it is no surprise that TikTok bimbos stand in opposition to the girlboss, the online persona of entrepreneurial femininity which peaked in the mid-2010s. This hostility to the girlboss is shared by the girl math public. Condliffe (2023) sees girl math as the 'rebellious daughter' of the girl boss phase of feminism, where being successful meant that a self-managing woman could show no '[vulnerability] or failure, no room for being silly, being collective, it was about individualism and capitalism'. Instead of self-disciplining and optimizing to climb the corporate and social ladder, girl math leans into tactical incompetence and, as we elaborate later, wastefulness that is at odds with the calculatedness of neoliberal rationality. As such, both the bimbo and the girl math public testify to the decline of the post-feminism of the girlboss. According to Pierce (2022, 204), this new generation of online femininities rejected the 'ideology of "leaning in" to corporate success to close gaps of inequality for middle-class white women, refusing to distance itself from femininity, paying increasing attention to intersecting structures of oppression'. The girl boss hustled to carve out corporate territory for herself, following the blueprint laid out in books like *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers* (Frankel, 2014), a metaphorical bible for the aspiring 'SHEO'.

In contrast, girl mathematicians and digital bimbos do not strive to make it to the top. While not everyone can be a boss, anyone can be a girl. Importantly, the figure of the bimbo is feminine as well as queer. In Chrissy Chlapecka's "Bimbo Bible," (2020) the commandments include: 'be bad at math,' 'pink,' 'birth control,' and 'can somebody Venmo me?', forming a subversive gospel 'for girls, gays, and theys', in opposition to 'boring white straight people.' Both bimbos and girl mathematicians celebrate impracticality, communal joys, and

financial irreverence to humorously question the entrepreneurial structures that have been historically rigged against them.

While the girl math meme implicitly critiques this notion—by means of subversion—it mobilizes an affective public that is often critical in more explicit ways. Within this space, various forms of gendered power asymmetries related to spending and finance are examined. In a viral post on X, author and disability rights activist Imani Barbarin (@Imani\_Barbarin, 2023) defines girl math as ‘the recognition that time, convenience, and money are interchangeable currencies’, positioning it as an alternative economic logic that accounts for the hidden costs of labour imposed on women, costs that the dominant masculine economies typically ignore. User Jayne Strange (@ mxjaynestrangle) responds to Barbarin’s post by adding another layer of analysis:

I think you could even add perception/respect from others into that equation. Like, for certain purchases (purses, gel nails, hair care) you’re not just buying the thing, you’re also buying the way people treat you better when you have them.

This exchange highlights how feminine-coded consumption cannot be depoliticized as a personal preference. Women are interpellated to navigate social hierarchies where appearance directly affects treatment, opportunities, and financial stability. Girl math discussions in the affective public that surrounds the meme bring these hidden costs and labour of performing femininity to the forefront; it acknowledges that women who adhere to hegemonic beauty standards experience tangible economic benefits. In this sense, this discourse is not simply about justifying purchases, but more directly critiquing a system where the performance of femininity itself has financial implications.

The economics of heterosexual dating is equally subject to these gendered power asymmetries. Here, the girl math public touches upon topics like ‘going 50–50’ on dates. While splitting the bill is often framed as a fair and logical approach to gender equality, girl math reveals how this approach fails to account for the unpaid labour of feminine performance. As Nikita Redkar (Bimbo University on TikTok) explains in a video from early 2024 (Fig. 2), girls invest significant time and money into preparing for dates, including makeup, skincare, hair styling, and clothing, all of which carry financial costs. A full face of makeup, for instance, requires products that easily add up to \$100, she calculates, while the process itself takes precious time that could otherwise be spent working or resting. From an economic perspective, this aligns with opportunity cost theory. Redkar also argues that the time and resources spent on preparation represent a hidden financial loss that is not shared equally between gen-

ders. The patriarchal expectation that women ‘naturally’ invest in their appearance ensures that these costs remain invisible within the economy of dating. TikTok user Meech UGC (2023) adds up the calculations for the time and effort it takes to get ready before going out (Fig. 1), explaining that it takes her three hours of preparation before she can leave the house.

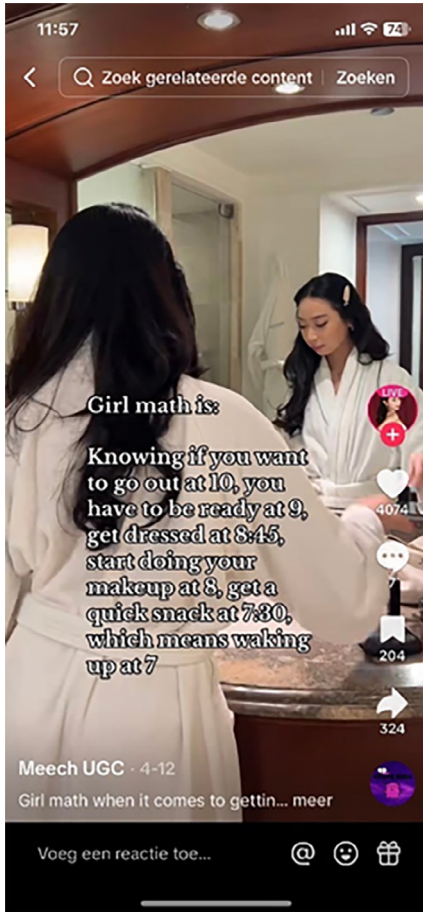


FIGURE 1 TikTok user @ugcmeech sharing her girl math calculations for the time and effort it costs to get ready for going out (2023).

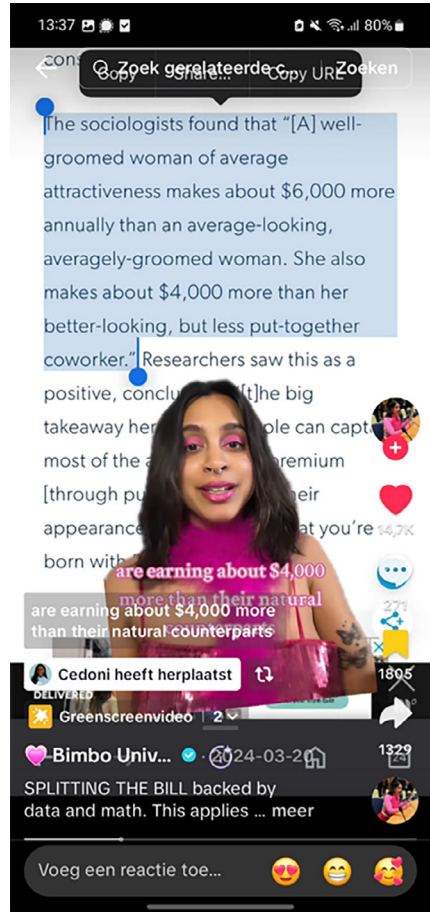


FIGURE 2 Nikita Redkar (@nikitadumptruck on TikTok) explains the ‘bimbo economics’ behind splitting the bill on dates (2024).

Another key example highlighting the gendered financial asymmetries that circulate within the girl math affective public is the concept of the blue tax, rather than the pink tax. The pink tax refers to the inflated cost of products

marketed toward women, from razors to haircuts to personal care products, despite being functionally identical to cheaper ‘male’ alternatives. As Redkar explains on TikTok (2024), the real driver of these pricing differences is not just corporate exploitation, but the psychology of consumption itself: ‘What are the two main drivers of purchasing decisions? Love and fear. And men’s biggest fear? Being perceived as feminine’. Women’s spending is shaped by expectations of femininity and the implicit demand to maintain a polished appearance for social and professional acceptability. Men’s spending, however, is shaped by the imperative to avoid femininity at all costs. As Redkar humorously proposes, if pink razors were the default, ‘watch the economy skyrocket as dudes scramble to buy Ultra Turbo Macho Viking razors’. Men would pay a premium not for quality, but for masculine distinction. The existence of the pink tax illustrates how economic rationality is coded as masculine, while financial inefficiency is feminized. Girl math is ridiculed for being ‘bad with money,’ but it is men’s refusal to buy pink razors that exposes the deeply irrational and affect-driven nature of male consumption. Men refuse to buy them, not because they are different, but because they are pink. In this sense, the girl math public demonstrates how gendered financial norms are equally absurd, but only one is taken seriously. While this discourse is more directly critical and does, as such, not follow the loophole logic, the girl math trend nevertheless creates a space where these critiques can be articulated.

### **Girl Math, Broken Promises of Neoliberal Rationality, and Weaponized LOLs**

Yet, girl math discourse does not only challenge these gendered economies linked to consumption, but targets something broader. We suggest that it can be seen as an implicit critique of the very promises associated with neoliberal rationality. This rationality underlies the warnings of financial advisors commenting on girl math, who caution that frivolous spending is ‘having actual real-world, financial consequences’ (Clark, 2023). A familiar logic supports their warnings: it’s not a problem if you have an avocado on toast once in a while, but if you spend €5 on it every day, that’s €150 a month, €1800 per year; if you’d invest that instead, you could have millions in 20 years. ‘When we use girl math and make justifications for our little purchases’, Clark writes, ‘experts agree that it stands in the way of setting ourselves up for the financial future’ (*ibid.*). The math on this calculation seems to be correct (at least in terms of the rules of algebra), but the ‘actual real-world’ it presupposes might no longer exist. This world has been increasingly disappearing since the 2008 financial

crisis, which Aris Komprozos-Athanasidou sees as the beginning of ‘the “reversal” of neoliberalism’s own promissory logic’ (Markelj *et al*, 2024), the gradual destabilization of ‘its ability to function by projecting promises that may never be fulfilled’ (*ibid.*). According to him (*ibid.*), this ‘legitimacy had typically been maintained through the concept of the entrepreneurial subject: individuals are seen as risk-takers, investing in their future through education, family life, employment, work ethic, asset investments etc. Insofar as the entrepreneurial self invests its time, effort and money rationally (enough), they will be able to live a good (enough of a) life, or so the story goes. Yet, once the odds that hard work, saving money, and smart investing will lead to upward social mobility, or even simply buying a house, become too minuscule, the legitimacy of the entrepreneurial logic of neoliberal reason begins to wane.

According to Komprozos-Athanasidou (2022), this shift corresponds to the emergence of *homo speculans*, a figure who supersedes that of *homo economicus*, which is central neoliberal form of rationality. Due to a fundamental shift in the economic circumstances (see, for instance, Adkins *et al*, 2020), *homo speculans* can no longer rely on (relative) certainties of utility-maximising rationality, and, hence, embraces and exploits our uncertain and volatile social reality. ‘Unlike *homo economicus* who might study medicine for a predictable return on investment in terms of salary and life stability’, suggest Komprozos-Athanasidou, ‘*homo speculans* faces a world where such certainties are unattainable’ (Markelj *et al*, 2024). In opposition to the girl boss, the online figure of entrepreneurial femininity that still buys into the promises of neoliberalism, girl math’s refusal to patiently accumulate savings and rationally optimize them seem to be well attuned to this shift. Perhaps the same can be said for 2024 viral sensation, Hawk Tuah Girl, who has recently engaged in an egregious act of speculation (McMahon, 2024). Moments after introducing her own cryptocurrency, the Hawk meme-coin, she and/or her team performed what is referred to as a rug pull, a scam where the digital coin creators entice people to buy into their project, then suddenly stop all trading and disappear with the investors’ money. While the Hawk Tuah fiasco undoubtedly falls on the toxic side of the *homo speculans*, it is an act of speculation grounded in a recognition that the certainties presupposed by entrepreneur of the self are no longer in place.<sup>2</sup>

Like Hawk Tuah, we claim that girl math can be also read as an oblique acknowledgement of the broken promises of neoliberalism. Unlike with Hawk Tuah’s speculative scam, girl math’s refusal of the neoliberal entrepreneurial-

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2 Here we also have to acknowledge that cryptocurrency is typically the domain of masculine rationality (see Glerlich, 2025), so it is likely Hawk Tuah girl, who was reportedly possibly tricked into doing a rug pull, was out of her element.

ism, and its increasingly pointless imperatives of productivity and measured accumulation, manifests itself in its allegedly irresponsible spending. Adopting the perspective of Georges Bataille (1988), we argue that the sillified financial carelessness of girl math corresponds to what he terms wasteful expenditure. Bataille developed this concept while inspired by the native American ritual of potlatch, which centres around practices of gift-giving and wealth destruction. He sees wasteful spending of resources without expectation of return or utilitarian gains as a transgression of the capitalist economic laws of scarcity, efficiency, and utility. It is a way of asserting one's autonomy and freedom from these laws, which demand the pragmatic and productive allocation of limited resources. We claim that girl math, with its disregard to the said logic, can be seen as a ritual of similar kind, though it becomes the ritual of a trickster who pretends to misunderstand the ethos of neoliberalism. Girl math is wasteful on the surface, but the cheerful miscalculations subversively expose its structural contradictions. This kind of expenditure associates luxury not with possessing material wealth but with the ability to disdain it, and is, as such, 'a silent insult to the laborious lie of the rich' (1988, 77). The lie here, of course, is our maxim of the right living, which sets hard work and wealth accumulation as the ultimate goals.

Admittedly, the splurges of girl math are typically not as grand or spectacular as the potlatch rituals of indigenous cultures of Northwest Pacific. Spending 5 euros as if they do not count is not a splendid ceremony of wealth destruction. The excesses of girl math are turned down, micro-dosed, and made cute, funny, and inoffensive. According to Kanai (2017), this humorous self-awareness and feigned incompetence is a way through which women navigate normative demands placed on femininity online, which require it to be approachable and pleasing. Researching the everyday content production of female college students on Tumblr, she observes how young women are required 'to invest emotional or affective labour in producing selves that are agreeable for others, converting their regulation into humorous, relatable struggles' (*ibid.*, 2). Similarly, Miekus and Medri see humour and silliness as a feminine means of circumventing the norms placed upon them. In their view (2024), her

online trolling and tomfoolery allow for disengagement of the outside world and the rules that dominate it; [...] instead of playing by the real-life-rulebook, she chooses to [...] play the fool, and as long as she's performing this role she cannot lose.

The silliness, self-depreciation or pretend ignorance thus serve as an armour that shields girls from being seen as a threat to men or hegemonic gender roles in general. While in the case of girl math this tongue-in-cheek attitude is lost

on some people, a female financial advisor nevertheless acknowledges that the trend is 'funny and satirical and it's almost sometimes relatable to be broke, even if you don't have to be' (Clark, 2023).

Yet, as suggested by Kanai, this unthreatening relatability performed by girls online serves one other purpose. Their humour and silliness lubricates the platforms' recommendation algorithms and optimizes the engagement with, and circulation of, their content. Girl math is, after all, a highly viral meme within the platform economy's visibility regime. Accordingly, Kanai (2017, 3) suggests that the 'ability to individually bear gendered struggles with good humour produces resilient, pleasing femininities that fit into the logic of digital attention economies where further circulation is equated with value'. By 'limiting their expression to upbeat, punchy quips' (*ibid.*) posted on Tumblr, college girls not only present themselves as palatable to men, but also ensure that their content is recognized and rewarded by the algorithmic recommendation system.

Like every other trend or meme, girl math, too, is subject to the incentive structures of platform economy. Its visibility and circulation depends on the algorithmically-assisted engagement that it is capable to elicit. From this perspective, the self-depreciation, humour, and silliness that ensure the success of girl math in the attention economy can also be seen as a form of visibility labour (Abidin, 2016). The interpretation of girl math as involving labour is somewhat at odds with Miekus and Medri (2024), who characterize silly girl as 'anyone or anything that exists in opposition to hegemonic structures', such as that of the entrepreneurial rationality or incentives of platform engagement. Their figure of the silly girl is indeed lazy, anti-hustle, and resistant to commodification. For them, the key to this resistance is 'to stay moving and never allow the system to enclose her within a stable identity category that can be reproduced for profit' (*ibid.*). While Miekus and Medri are attentive to the extractive circuits of the platform economy, Busta (2021) further emphasizes that even the most countercultural memes or trends still exist within the hegemonic structures of the Google/Apple/Facebook/Amazon (GATA) digital ecology, which has the capacity to transform them into 'profitable, high engagement content'. The computational architecture of this digital ecology does not function by enclosing users within stable identities, but aims to construct algorithmic identities that are constantly modified through feedback loops that take into account newly produced data (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Instead of limiting the user, platforms encourage them to scroll freely, thereby generating data that can be used to steer them in ways that maximize their engagement. Girl math's hyper-feminine engagement with algorithms can be read as a form of platform tricksterism: playing to be seen, yet seeking to remain ungovernable. As such, girl math finds some relief, though falls short of a foolproof escape

from hegemonic structures. Through a slippery loophole, girl mathematicians remain clickable enough as they coat the algorithm with surplus silliness and disarming girliness.

According to Alex Quicho, embedding oneself into this compromised digital environment in order to hack its attention economy is fundamentally girlified. For Quicho (2023), the girl is a 'symbolic category unfixed from biological sex or social gender', but also a 'consumer category that can't be delinked from capital'. As such, she sees the girl as an involuntary subject condition of *everyone* online: on the digital platforms, we all to a certain degree want 'to be perceived, desired, and rewarded for cultivating that desire' (*ibid.*). In Quicho's view, even the smallest act online, be sharing a meme or posting from an anonymous account, directs itself toward the other, whose approval it seeks, which is a tendency that is traditionally seen as feminine. Yet, she also sees the girl as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) guided by this desire: a set of practices directed at constituting oneself so as to most optimally navigate our precarious networked condition. According to her (2023), the girl is

the default condition of vulnerability that touches us all—creatures caught in a web of total exposure, vying for both privacy and visibility. Privacy, to retain some semblance of agency; visibility, to access money, respect, and basic rights. To be a good girl, you have to pass muster in the system of eyes. You have to feed cash into “feminization” to be both real—convincing, relatable—and not-real, alluringly ideal.

To survive and thrive in these digital environments, the girl optimizes its self-presentation so as to make oneself legible to algorithmic system of valuation and at the same time to evade total capture. Unlike Quicho's perspective, which sees online girlification as an ambivalent survival tactic that is willing to please both the algorithmic and the male gaze, girl math performs for the former but partially disregards the perspective of the latter.<sup>3</sup> While its silliness

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3 Quicho's prime example of such digital girlhood are anonymous chat-bot accounts (@lil-clearpill, @heartloketxo, @chloe21e8), which post footage of teenage Asian girls dubbed with AI-generated voice-over and uplifting futuristic music. The dubbed narration skips between post-ironic affirmations, brainrot philosophy, attempts at political provocation ('normies are just virtue signaling woketards'), quotations from niche reactionary thinkers, and even occasional promotion of cryptocurrency schemes (Quicho: 'A girl's gotta eat.'). The mildly sexualized imagery of Asian teenagers draw the eye of the algorithmic-assisted male gaze, while the AI voiceover and heavy dose of irony provide the surreal element.

Quicho's idea of a girl optimally navigating digital environments thus seems to consist of sexualized teenage bodies, engagement baiting political discourse, and crypto hustle. She

and incompetence reassure the male gaze by performing a non-threatening form of ‘pleasing femininity’, girl math refuses to make itself legible to the masculine ways of knowing, finding a loophole within the system, without opting out. Instead, it operates on common patterns of thoughts that are humorously rendered legible ‘in girl terms’. These feminine epistemologies are what we explore in the next section.

### **Girl Math, Feminine Epistemologies, Boy Math**

‘Girl math is just bad math, it’s not math, it’s anti-math’, explains the conservative political pundit Matt Walsh in his YouTube take on girl math. ‘Boy math is also known as math, it’s regular math, rooted in the basic principles of arithmetic and other fundamental mathematical concepts’, he continues. This short interpretation by Walsh offers us what can be seen as a predictable masculine dismissal of feminine logic and ways of knowing. Girl math does not add up to the fundamental laws of arithmetic, hence, it is false, untrue, irrational. Hoskin and Blair (2024) see this habitual dismissal of feminine epistemologies as intrinsic to the patriarchal social system. The latter is characterized by ‘femmephobic knowledge production’, which they see as a correlate to the masculinization of expertise. Femmephobia is here defined as ‘the devaluation, denigration, and regulation of femininity’ (2024, 3). It permeates all spheres of our society and is motivated by different vectors (hegemonic masculine ones, but also, as discussed above, feminist ones).

Within the domain of knowledge production in general, and academia in particular, Hoskin and Blair draw attention to the marginalization of feminine ways of knowing. ‘When masculinity is coded with the same traits expected of academia and knowledge production (i.e., as rational, stoic, objective, and thus garnering intellectual merit; Hoskin and Blair, 2022)’, they suggest (2024, 3), ‘femininity’s perceived “lack” of such traits places it outside the domain of serious scholarship’. Drawing on bell hooks, Hoskin and Blair suggest that the masculine epistemic position, with its air of neutrality, objectivity and dispassionate nature, is at the centre of our epistemic practices. Feminine perspectives, being constructed as irrational, emotional, and subjective, are, on the

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makes it clear that as ‘opposed to mainstream narratives of female empowerment and their sliding scale of access to power and resources, the girl is a far more politically ambivalent state’ (2023). While she admits that this ambivalence can be freeing, she also proposes that girl as a technology of the self is more a survival tactic—one that goes through, and not around, data capitalism—rather than a real political strategy.

other hand, pushed to the margins. Yet, the masculine epistemological position has a blind spot: it is ‘unaware of existing power structures or dynamics’, and, as a result, views these structures ‘as earned, natural and expected’ (2024, 5). The marginalized feminine epistemologies are, on the other hand, constantly reminded of their subjugated position, and need to learn to understand this power dynamic to be able to navigate our social world. Instead of disavowing the allegedly anti-intellectual and infantile feminine position and seeking to master the rules of masculine knowledge, the approach of critical femininities emphasizes the epistemic advantage of turning to the feminine perspectives. In this way, it aligns itself with Audre Lorde who suggests that ‘master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde, cited in Hoskin and Blair, 2024, 5).

An instructive instance of marginalized feminine epistemology is provided by Ellie Anderson’s concept of hermeneutic labour. For Anderson (2023, 1), hermeneutic labour ‘is the burdensome activity of: understanding and coherently expressing one’s own feelings, desires, intentions, and motivations; discerning those of others; and inventing solutions for relational issues arising from interpersonal tensions’. This straining activity of hermeneutic labour occurs mainly in intimate relationships, and does, within patriarchal societies, fall largely on women. Anderson’s now deleted retweet provides us with a useful example: ‘Was it a miscommunication or did someone expect me to read their mind while bombarding me with vague, nondescript sentence fragments riddled with subtext and/or innuendo?’. The gendered power dynamic forces women in a position where they are responsible for performing this interpretative work and thus forced to develop these skills, which are often framed as naturally feminine (in terms of ‘intuition’ or ‘emotional awareness’). This undertaking of this form of labour is largely neglected by, or even invisible to, the centre (the ‘rational’ stoic position of masculinity), which is also the main recipient of this kind of labour. While not legible from the perspective of masculine epistemologies, these ways of interpreting and knowing are nevertheless a significant form of feminine competency that makes heterosexual relationships in patriarchal societies possible.

Girl math discourse speaks from a marginalized epistemological position. In our societies, where girls have been legally allowed to open their own bank account only fairly recently, and which continue to frame women as financially irresponsible and dismiss their spendings as frivolous, femininity is used as a means to socialize children assigned female at birth so as to reproduce the marginalization of their epistemological position. Girls do not understand numbers, or so the story goes. According to Jones’s (2009) analysis of the gendered dynamics in the field of mathematics—the discipline that supposedly constitutes the central cornerstone of Western rationality—has indeed been

historically thoroughly femmephobic. Girl math does not seek to change this: it is not an attempt to demonstrate the mastery of algebra or set theory. Instead, it aims to embrace and develop ways of thinking and knowing from the margins.

This exchange of knowledge through a feminine lens is also reflected in the recurrent memetic phrase of explaining ideas ‘in girl terms.’ Much like girl math, this approach does not attempt to make femininity legible to the hegemonic masculine perspective but instead reframes interpretations and explanations of (often) financial/economic phenomena in its own terms. When girl math translates financial logic in girl terms, it does not attempt to clarify, it mischievously mistranslates. It exaggerates, bends, and misuses economic language in ways that are both playful and strategic. Through its loophole, it sidesteps the rules of neoliberalism with feminine charm. The phrase ‘for the girls’ has become an accompanying shorthand for this mode of address, signaling that certain explanations, narratives, or analogies centre feminine experiences rather than positioning them as secondary to a masculine perspective. For example, @lilianzhang\_\_ on TikTok (2025) posted a video titled ‘investing explained in girl terms’, where she employs a supermarket analogy animated with colourful fruit emojis to illustrate portfolio diversification. Rather than adhering to conventional financial discourse, she likens diversification to selecting a mix of groceries in a basket rather than buying a single item, rearticulating financial risk in a format embedded in familiar consumer practices.

Sports betting, a space typically dominated by men, has also been pulled into this framework. TikTok user @kenlashed (2024) explains a parlay bet ‘for the girls’, describing how she places small \$5 to \$10 wagers on NBA games while applying what she calls girl math logic: mostly reinvesting those small amounts of money from previous bets that did not go through due to technical issues and were refunded. She describes the concept of parlay bets, explaining to fellow girls how she minimizes perceived financial risk and attempts to maximize potential returns.<sup>4</sup> By recasting and demystifying male-dominated subjects, fields, and hobbies through analogies grounded in girls’ everyday lived experiences, these explanations do not only function as short-form tutorials. They also propose an alternative epistemology that foregrounds affectively resonant and experience-based ways of knowing over the detached, ostensibly neutral logics that dominate financial and economic discourse. These TikTok users are not employing girl terms for purposes of infantilization and self-minimization, but rather as a collective, relatable register that creates space for sharing and discussing feminine ways of knowing.

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4 In sports betting, the entire bet is sometimes refunded to all the bettor(s) in either cash or credit in case of i.e. technical issues or fraudulent activities.

However, feminine epistemologies have consistently been met with mockery or outright dismissal. As the meme gained popularity, reactions framing it as anti-mathematical or simply wrong quickly emerged in the comment sections of viral girl math posts. Yet, rather than internalizing this dismissal, girl math users doubled down. Not by seeking to justify their system within masculine frameworks, but by playfully exposing the flaws within ‘male rationality’ itself. In response to these critiques, girl users created a counter-meme through epistemic inversion: boy math. Danielle Cohen (2023) defines boy math as ‘everything and nothing, a term liberally employed to make men feel stupid for not letting us enjoy our own system of logic’.

While on the surface it mimics the format of girl math, boy math functions as a sharp critique of flawed masculine logic and its irrational blind spots. One viral example states, ‘Boy math is accusing women of being gold-diggers while you depend on their unpaid labor’ (@soberfemale, TikTok). Other examples from a 2023 Reddit thread further expose contradictions in patriarchal economic expectations: ‘Boy math is wanting a trad wife who will do everything a housewife “should” while also expecting to go 50/50 on finances’ (@Amelietheduck) and ‘Boy math is pretending marriage is a trap for men and only benefits women, even though married men make more money, have better health, and live longer lives—while the opposite is true for women’ (@uhhh206). Rather than defending or proving the logic behind girl math, boy math holds up a trick mirror and reveals the instability of hegemonic masculine logic by making it the butt of the joke.

This practice of sidestepping dominant logics—not by refuting them, but by highlighting their comically painful contradictions—evolved into another girl-aligned trend on TikTok and Instagram in 2024: #WomenInMaleFields. While the hashtag may initially evoke girl boss undertones and associations related to women working and succeeding in traditionally male professions, the affective resonance that drives this trend is actually rooted in sharing the frustrating reality of dealing with men, with dating culture re-emerging as a common topic. Much like girl math and boy math, #WomenInMaleFields operates outside of hegemonic validation, speaking directly to an audience of women who recognize the humour in the premise.

Rather than positioning women as outsiders striving for inclusion, the meme exposes gendered double standards and irrational thought processes by men. A viral post by @bymimsy (2024) plays with this notion by stating: ‘When he asked why I cheated, I told him it’s in my nature; I was ovulating and I’m a woman with needs.’ Here, the logic of biological determinism—often used to justify male behaviour—gets reversed and turned into an alibi for female transgression. Another example by @Jordan.Rand (2024) similarly repurposes

male entitlement, stating: 'I went on a date with a guy, he told me he's bi and asked if I'm accepting of that. I said "yeah, as long as I can watch"'. These memes carve out a space of discursive autonomy, where knowledge, logic, and humor operate on their terms, for a girl-identifying audience. What connects girl math, boy math, and #WomenInMaleFields is their relatability, operating in affective publics where girl-identifying users share inside-jokes about the absurdity of living in a world ruled by hegemonic masculine logic. Their deliberate disengagement from the need to be taken seriously by dominant masculine regime is based on tricks, not conflict. These memes do not ask for validation from external gatekeepers or resist dominant frameworks in a straightforward way, nor do they seek to reform them. Instead, they create epistemic loopholes: they are tactics that operate outside of tired, hegemonic systems of logic, creating a parallel system of meaning-making where girl logic can exist on its own terms while providing comedic relief. Talk about multitasking.

### Conclusion

In his introduction to Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, a book that he sees as an introduction to the non-fascist life, Michel Foucault cautions us that we should not 'think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable' (xiii, 1983). Militant politics, for him, does not require us to be serious, overtly critical, and oppositional in the face of hostile socio-technical systems and their agents. Instead, our resistance can be joyful, tongue-in-cheek, and creative. This paper claims that the Le Guinian 'more tricks than conflicts' approach to feminist politics that we find with girl math is precisely this: it is non-patriarchal more than it is anti-patriarchal. We have explored the non-patriarchal feminism at stake here by suggesting that girl math does not combatively challenge the gendered power asymmetries that underlie our economic and epistemological structure, nor the form of femininity that these structures construct. Girl math rather performatively leans into the oppressive feminine identity to playfully lean out of our man-dominated interpersonal economies and epistemologies.

In doing so, girl mathematicians operate at the margins of these structures and discretely create new emancipatory spaces within them. Throughout this article, we have shown how girl math does this on multiple levels. We have argued that this new space can accommodate examinations of the typically disregarded feminine labour or costs that are expected to be invested into a date night; subtly twist the rules of masculine economic logic to reveal their absurdity; and draw attention to the dismissive masculine attitudes to feminine

forms of consumption. In our view, this space is also the site of questioning of neoliberal rationality and the promises of meritocracy that ground its legitimacy. In this regard, we have suggested that the financial carelessness of girl math be read as a sign of apprehension that the prudent entrepreneurialism, which seeks to optimise one's productivity, wisely invest and accumulate, can no longer likely lead to the promised good life. Another handbag bought with 'free money', splurging on a little joy, might sometimes be the only rational choice left. It is also a silent insult to the boomer who is too busy telling you to cut down on TikTok and fancy coffees if you ever want to buy a house—to notice that the economic parameters of their youth have utterly crumbled.

Girl math indeed often issues its insults and critiques in a discreet way. It coats them in humour and self-depreciation to perform its femininity in an inoffensive and agreeable way. This unthreatening relatability that informs the self-presentation of girl mathematicians is mobilized also to navigate the attentional vectors of platform visibility, a murky ecosystem compromised by circuits of datafication, surveillance, and extraction of surplus value. Girl math is indeed co-opted by data capitalism, but there is some consolation in the fact that the online default of seeking attention and approval is inherently feminine and indiscriminately feminizes everyone. Yet, we have also argued that the pleasing femininity of girl math deliberately resists compliance with masculine ways of knowing. When it comes to issues of epistemology, it instead seeks to affirm the feminine thinking patterns that exist at the margins and create new ones. We have shown how it translates masculine ideas by explaining them in girl terms. In the girl world, the allegedly misguided feminine calculations add up perfectly.

Finally, we have argued that girl mathematicians are at their most fierce and combative when confronted with the femmephobic responses to their calculations. Boy math exposes the gendered asymmetries embedded in financial and social reasoning. Meanwhile, #WomenInMaleFields reflects a parallel logic, wherein women repurpose dominant narratives to reveal the irrationality of male entitlement and double standards. Rather than defending its rationale, girl mathematicians flip the script, highlighting how so-called rational male financial and social behaviours are riddled with inconsistencies that go unchallenged. This refusal to play by the rules of dominant epistemologies is crucial: girl math does not seek to assimilate into masculinized ways of knowing. Instead, it opens a parallel space where feminine logic operates on its own terms, making visible the absurdities of patriarchal structures while revelling in its own subversive joy.

At the same time, we have shown that girl math's subversive affirmation coexists with more direct forms of critique. Within its affective publics, users

also express shared frustrations, structural analysis, and feminist refusals that do not hide behind irony or silliness. These discussions do not necessarily dilute this tactic of subversive affirmation, they often foreground the conditions that underlie the joke. To take the politics of girl math seriously, is also to acknowledge how its manoeuvre of the loophole leverages girliness: it is a tactic that critiques masculine epistemology and neoliberal rationality implicitly, remaining partially shielded by its performative, excessive femininity. It is also a tactic to remain relatable, non-threatening, and algorithmically visible, thereby circulating within platform logics while refusing to comply fully. This refusal of femmephobic masculine epistemology is what makes girl math so tricky to critique: as a form of trickster feminism, it stays ahead by being unserious on purpose. It neither plays an open offence nor a defence. Perhaps girl math is a miscalculation on some level, but it is also a trickster's tactic of resistance.

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