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Abstract

In this thesis, I study the feminine culture of self-care on TikTok as it exists in prominent digital genres: skincare and soft living. These two genres represent the aspiration toward a soft perfection of both the physical self and the space around it. Situated within the theories of the female complaint (Berlant, 2008) and the paradigm of perfection (McRobbie, 2015), I argue that feminine culture on TikTok reframes the demanding and unending labor required to approximate standards of feminine perfection as a pleasing and satisfying experience of self-care. Self-care rhetoric on TikTok disguises the discipline required to pursue cultural definitions of feminine perfection as a tender, even romantic, way for women to care for themselves. By creating only one viable path to self-care, the soft feminine intimate public has turned a concept that used to be about radical love and acceptance into discipline, self-control, and the pursuit of perfecting what should never be perfected: the human body and its emotions. This rhetoric asserts that one is not doing a good enough job of taking care of themselves if their routine does not consist of expensive skincare and a manicured, luxury apartment. Self-care, once understood as a radical and beautiful act of resistance, is now marketed as a technique to look more feminine and act more feminine, turning pleasure into discipline and peace into isolation.

Keywords: self-care, intimate public, femininity, perfection, TikTok

Theaters of the Intimate:
The Feminine Culture of Self-Care on TikTok

By

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Thesis

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Introduction

Femininity is thriving on TikTok. #femininity has 568.3 million views¹ and counting. If you search the term, myriad options appears in the “Others searched for” category: “embracing femininity,” “femininity aesthetic,” “romanticizing femininity,” “delicate femininity,” “traditional femininity,” “siren femininity,” “femininity tips,” “enhancing femininity,” and so on. Feminine TikTok videos present prescriptions for women to model their lives after a certain lifestyle fantasy. Perhaps you’d like a rustic lifestyle as if you lived in a cozy cottage and made all your food from scratch with vegetables from the garden: cottagecore. Or maybe you are an academic who enjoys reading old leather-bound copies of classic literature by candlelight in a room with black walls and golden picture frames: dark academia. Are you inspired by dainty bows, flowers on your bed sheets, pastel pink, and pearls on your nightstand? Try the coquette aesthetic. If you are a romantic, you can run into a meadow, gathering the layers of fabric in your long dress and wrapping a shawl closely around your body: princesscore. The options are endless on TikTok, with some videos going beyond a performance of an aesthetic code to offer advice on how the user can look and act like the []-core of her dreams. TikTok creates a perfect environment for these niche spaces; once you view one feminine-core video, the algorithm will take you to others and soon, the curated “For You Page” will become a steppingstone path from aesthetic to aesthetic. From coquettecore, to balletcore, to princesscore, these videos allow the viewer to imagine and curate their life in accordance with the aesthetic code.

In this thesis, I argue that feminine culture on TikTok presents the demanding and impossible labor required to approximate standards of feminine perfection as a pleasing and satisfying experience of self-care. I focus on two prominent categories in the digital feminine

¹ As of April 18, 2023.

public: skincare and soft living. These two genres represent the aspiration toward a soft perfection of both the physical self and the space around it. Self-care rhetoric on TikTok disguises the discipline and self-regulation required to pursue cultural definitions of feminine perfection as a tender, even romantic, way for women to care for themselves. This rhetorical shift positions self-care as a soft and tender perfection in place of the tough-love, disciplinary perfection that circulated in feminine culture before it. The disciplined control over one's appearance and surroundings is still the center of the feminine public, but now goes by a different name: self-care. Building upon Lauren Berlant's (2008) work on women's intimate publics and Angela McRobbie's (2015) conceptualization of the paradigm of perfection, I contend that self-care—first defined by Audre Lorde (1988) as a radical act of survival for Black women—is now rhetorically constructed as a process of self-perfection that funnels young women on TikTok into a narrow ideal of femininity.

In an era that radically challenges Western society's understanding of gender norms, the resurgence of traditional ways of doing gender may be a reactionary retreat into the comfort of the familiar. Feminine culture sentimentalizes tradition, endorsing practices like skincare and self-care as ways to access and preserve one's femininity while maintaining strict control over what that femininity should look like. This culture encourages a turning away from society and into the self and into peer networks based on self-stylization and self-tending. It promotes traditional understandings of femininity such as concern over one's beauty and living a life based in the home. In TikTok's feminine culture, to be feminine is to be graceful, gentle, quiet, and unproblematic. In the videos I analyze, neotraditional femininity is performed and perfected, revitalizing an ultra-feminine aesthetic (what TikTok calls *soft feminine*) that consists of characteristics such as: tenderness, a pastel color palette (white, pink, gold, and light blue), a

romanticization of the everyday, calmness, seeking pleasure, and being agreeable. Some members in this public consider soft femininity to be a movement; for example, Black blogger Felicia Stiles argues that soft feminine Black women are activists that challenge racial stereotypes such as the “strong Black woman” (Stiles, 2021). Writer Caroline Reilly views soft femininity as a sign that young women can be ultra-feminine (wear pink clothes and use strawberry lip gloss) without feeling shameful: “There’s a profound joy in watching women 10 or so years younger than me embracing all the fun and feminine indulgences of my youth without the toxic baggage that led to so much self-loathing and harm” (Reilly, 2022). The gender revolution, which at its core advocates for people to be able to express themselves how they want without fear of backlash, has perhaps paved the way for soft femininity to flourish, especially amongst Gen Z women and younger millennials.

TikToks that promote soft femininity are unapologetic, leaning into this archetype full heartedly. The soft feminine aesthetic is cultivated through owning the right pretty products and *loving* being a pretty woman. Perfecting the soft feminine appearance is its own reward, delivering satisfaction and fulfillment to both the creator and those who watch it. In a TikTok captioned “Getting ready makes me feel so in touch with my femininity 🤍 #selfcare #gettingready #selfcareroutine #femininity #voguebeautysecrets #vanity #vanitymakeup #ilovebeingawoman #routine,” creator @shirinribini displays her collection of skincare products: lotions, serums, and makeup. All the products fall into a pleasant color scheme of light pinks, pastel greens and purples, soft whites, and shiny silvers, fitting together like a collage made from fashion magazine cut outs. The audio that plays while the video zooms in on the scene is a woman saying, “What’s wrong? What is it?” to which another woman replies, “How I love being a woman!” (Ribini, 2023). The audio, paired with the matching skincare products, suggests that

feminine women *love* to do their skincare and find satisfaction in that aspect of their femininity. In this TikTok, @shirinribini constructs a scene, defining what “loving being a woman” means to her with skincare products and a dark silver MacBook laptop in the corner playing a video of celebrity model and founder of the skincare brand Rhode, Hailey Bieber doing her skincare routine. This *mis en scène*, complete with two pink hair pins and a pink plumeria flower hair clip placed on the laptop, conveys the importance of both the skincare and the ambiance in the soft feminine public. The atmosphere of pleasurable femininity is perfectly staged. Though the products featured in @shirinribini’s video are all for the purpose of perfecting the skin, they are arranged in a way that conveys pleasure instead of discipline. Through the joyous audio, the pretty aesthetic, and the caption, @shirinribini communicates that her skincare routine—which is ultimately a practice of self-regulation and self-control—is an enjoyable and pleasing act of self-care.

From the Female Complaint to the Paradigm of Perfection

The practice of sharing personal information between women to create a collective understanding of femininity has existed in many forms, through narratives constructed by literature, film, music, and other media. Lauren Berlant (2008) calls the community constructed by this rhetoric an intimate public. Composed of strangers who experience a similar worldview from shared emotional knowledge and historical background, intimate publics shape convention and belonging through commodity culture and imaginative ways of living (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). Intimate publics communicate commonality, and the participants share their hopes, fears, desires, and discontents thereby creating a space of commiseration and joy. In short, intimate publics offer utopias of recognition. Women’s culture, as Berlant argues, was the first mass intimate

public in the United States (2008, p. 5). Produced by the writings of wealthy, bourgeois white women, women's culture was created as a space for such women to engage in their emotional sameness and commonalities. This space was, of course, only accessible to those who already fit the white, middle-class standard and thus created a "fantasy of generality" (Berlant, 2008, p. 6) to which others could only aspire. Yet, Berlant suggests, the intimate public of women's culture feels "ethical" in its acceptance of "emotional continuity" and proposed relief from a "hard, cold world" (2008, p. 6). Intimate women's culture is thus scaffolded as a "compassionate liberalism," forgiving and inviting (white) women's despairs and affections, and "exoticizing and diminishing" what does not fit into the standard (Berlant, 2008, p. 6).

At the heart of women's culture—what I understand as feminine culture in this project²—is what Berlant (2008) calls "the female complaint," encapsulated by the "tender fantasies of a better good life" (p. 1). The good life is ripe with romantic love, intimate satisfaction, and everyday pleasures. It is a traditional life in which women are cared for and tended to in a manner that fulfills their desires. On one end of this complaint is disappointment and on the other is sentimentality. This disappointment, felt by all in this public, stems from the "tenuous relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). Women's fantasies for their romantic heterosexual relationships are, as Berlant (2008) claims, frequently unmet and cause women to rely on each other for the hope that their romantic life will get better, that it *must* get better. The disappointment in heterosexual romance is the key to the female complaint (perhaps why Berlant called it a "complaint" rather than "fantasy"). Sentimentality exists to mitigate some of the pain felt by the disappointment and motivate the woman to keep going because "tomorrow is another day" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). In the intimate public of feminine culture in the United

² Because of the gender revolution, the term "woman" has many meanings, expectations, and definitions. I shift to "feminine" to be more specific and to describe *one* way of performing gender.

States, sentimentality is a “love affair with conventionality” (Berlant, 2008, p. 2) and is unfinished, meaning that there will always be an opportunity to try again for that better good life. Conventionality is not just the normative aesthetics associated with the term but also the kinship that mass mediation of conventionality constructs between women. The participants in feminine culture want “permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire” (Berlant, 2008, p. 3). Feminine culture in an intimate public thus creates a fantastical and alluring blueprint of femininity, an invitation to be acutely understood by other women within the public. In this intimate public, consumers feel that their ordinary emotional lives are significant in that they belong to something *more*, even if that belonging is limited, commodified, and fleeting.

Berlant (2008) theorized this intimate public before the age of social media, when literature, magazines, and film were the only available sources of feminine aspiration. Their work pertains to the intimate public built by novels and television in the 20th century. It was a public of emotional compassion and consolation, an enlightening realization that a good life could exist and the relief that their conventional desires were normal. The introduction of social media has changed the structure of the feminine intimate public. Berlant’s conception of an intimate public comes from a time of *mass culture*, when a small set of media determined dominant narratives. Social media creates a *niche culture* in which each user sees something entirely different from the next. Personal preference and algorithms funnel the user into their own rabbit hole which caters specifically to them. Berlant writes about women *discovering* the possibility of a good life and the community of emotional sameness constructed by mass culture. Young women today, having grown up under a niche interest culture, establish smaller, more

specialized publics that fit their needs. These women do not have to *re*-discover the possibility of a good life; now, their focus is how to live one. The soft feminine intimate public is an example of this. In the feminine intimate public I analyze, these women are more interested in perfecting and prolonging an autonomous femininity than in bonding over their shared disappointments in the heterosexual script. Whereas Berlant's intimate public is focused on emotional camaraderie, the soft feminine intimate public on TikTok is centered around daily rituals and ways of staging one's home life to be optimally pleasing to oneself and virtual girlfriends. These TikToks do not need to explain why these tender rituals and romantic interiors are appealing (women are presumed to already know). Instead, self-care TikToks model perfecting practices against an unacknowledged premise that feminine pleasure lives in the elaborateness of productions of perfected femininity. The considerable investment and labor required to produce feminine perfection index a tender care of the self because the production is not for a male heterosexual partner. It is for oneself and virtual girlfriends. Self-care videos are projections of the perfect single life. The intimate public allows women share their routines for such a life, with content creators sharing their self-care routines, from skincare to how they spend time alone, for anyone to see and copy. These videos show women how to practice self-care and how this practice can allow them to feel in touch with their femininity in the absence of a man, which is presented as its own reward.

Due to the performative and selective nature of social media, these TikToks only include an ultra-curated and a heavily edited, spliced back together take on the creator's lifestyle, though it may seem like this is their everyday #nighttimeroutine. The videos are staged, creating beautiful color coordination, cleanliness, and an overwhelming sense of general put togetherness. Examples of women "achieving" perfect self-care routines are ubiquitous, appearing every day

in TikTok's feminine intimate public. Femininity is defined by the individual routine and self-care, rather than the companionship described by Berlant (2008). In the TikTok public, self-care is the way out of the female complaint but only if you can take care of yourself in an exact, flawless way. Self-care thus becomes a pink, ribboned Trojan Horse for a disciplinary ethic of individualized gendered perfection.

Angela McRobbie (2015) theorized this paradigm as the Perfect, an unachievable expectation that allures young women with the promise of self-definition, rather than consolation within the heteronormative family context (as with Berlant). McRobbie situates the Perfect within the historical context of postfeminism. Dosekun (2015) defines postfeminism as “a contemporary cultural sensibility proclaiming that women are ‘now empowered,’ and celebrating and encouraging their consequent ‘freedom’ to return to normatively feminine pursuits and to disavow feminism as no longer needed or desirable” (p. 960). The postfeminist sensibility (Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Gill, 2007, 2016, 2017; McRobbie, 2009, 2015; and Tasker and Negra, 2001) rejects the feminist agenda of revolution and gender equality, instead favoring personal achievement, happiness, and choice. In the intimate public described by Berlant (2008), women were defined by their situatedness within traditional family norms and relationships. However, in TikTok's intimate public, women are addressed as individuals who manage their own time and their relationship with themselves and virtual sisters. With the independence from the familial role, young women must now discipline themselves and manage their personal disappointments beyond just the scope of the app. Rather than blame a culture of traditional heterosexual roles, the individual is now responsible for the female complaint in this newfound independence. In a postfeminist context, young women are encouraged to engage with practices like self-care that are “consummately and reassuringly feminine” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 57) to

control their emotional well-being. This feminine self-regulation acts as a “new horizon of self-imposed feminine cultural norms” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 63) which women use to judge themselves and their peers, measure personal successes and failures, and create future goals. In the process, feminine disappointment shifts from the heteronormative family to feeling inadequate by comparison to the other women in the videos.

Whereas Berlant’s (2008) work focuses on feminine publics bonded by sentimentality and shared difficulties, McRobbie (2015) argues that in postfeminist cultures, femininity is built by hyper-individualized competition that considers imperfection a sign of failure. McRobbie argues that self-regulation leads to the “good life” (2015, p. 9), not wistful romance and satisfaction. In the female complaint, disappointment with the failure to attain a cultural ideal serves as grounds for commiseration and longing and a space for sustained, life-long cycles of hope, love, and disappointment. On the other hand, the paradigm of perfection sees disappointment as a personal failing and a signal to immediately start working towards perfecting the self and one’s environment again. The temporality of these two cycles, the female complaint and the paradigm of perfection, is entirely different and reflects the speed of the culture they were theorized in: mass culture and niche culture. Increased visibility due to social media has magnified the Perfect by inviting comparison and intensifying the need for perfection; girls and young women on social media are susceptible to comparing themselves to everyone on their screen and judging their own appearance against images of other women that are often posed, altered, filtered, or edited to look perfect. The feminine intimate public on TikTok, a continuously renewing source of how to achieve perfect femininity, creates an ideal community for this rhetoric to thrive.

For McRobbie (2015) and Camacho-Miñano and Gray (2021), failure is a key aspect of the Perfect. When one is “imperfect,” they fail. Berlant (2008) also acknowledges that failure is important in the conventionality of feminine culture: failures “make conventionality interesting and rich, even,” (p. 4). Since no one can truly achieve perfection, everyone has failed. But within the postfeminist paradigm, failure, as Camacho-Miñano and Gray argue, is caused by a “lack of personal responsibility” (2021, p. 733) and is connected to a past self that could not or did not accomplish perfection. As McRobbie puts it in her analysis of the show *Girls*, “failure is presented and performed as a part of the process of ‘growing up’” (2015, p. 14). The present self, however, has the potential to be successful in the pursuit of individual perfection and can redeem the failures of the past. If perfection is somehow achieved, the burden is then to maintain it. This cycle highlights the inescapability of the perfection paradigm and how one is always in an aspirational phase vis-a-vis cultural definitions of feminine perfection: failure, potential, or maintenance. For the young women who consume this rhetoric through social media, their lives are always precariously linked to one stage, and they must cultivate disciplined routines through which they can potentially, hopefully, reach perfection. As a paradigm, the perfect holds women hostage in the present, using a future ideal self as the metaphorical carrot dangling in front of the woman to keep her moving forward to reach. Failure is the past, the stick that prods her present self to stay in the paradigm and try again.

Digitally, feminine culture is constructed through relatability (Kanai, 2019) and regulated by self-monitoring and girlfriend culture (Elias and Gill, 2017; Winch 2013). The desire to belong and the “premise/promise of normative sameness with certain feminine others” (Kanai, 2019, p. 6) reinforces the power of the intimate public, creating an influential and authoritative force. Relatability is established by confessions of “acceptable feminine deviations” from middle

class white norms (Kanai, 2019, p. 17), participation in the form of digital engagement and circulation, and effective self-branding: balancing between achieving normalcy and being an “every girl” who is “proximate but not quite achieving white, middle-class standards of femininity” (p.19). Girlfriend culture, the affective social relationships between women (Winch, 2013), is the authority in the relatability of feminine culture. Participants in this intimate public are both followers and watchers, simultaneously policing the culture and being surveilled by it. Spectatorial girlfriendship (Kanai, 2019) provides both the pleasure and pain of measuring oneself against others and scrutinizing femininity both on and offline (Gill, 2021). Elias and Gill (2018) call this scrutiny by other women “surveillant sisterhood.” Girlfriend culture plays a crucial role in femininity on TikTok, creating an aspirational space for women to judge their life against a perfected 30 second clip of someone else’s. In an intimate public in which skincare is an established part of a feminine self-care routine, it is nearly impossible to watch idealized feminine TikToks without yearning for the constructed life and criticizing your own. Surveillant sisterhood perpetuates the intoxicating need to optimize.

My project aims to unpack the relationship between the two feminine intimate publics: the sentimental female complaint and the paradigm of perfection. How did the feminine intimate public, built by the female complaint and disappointment with heteronormative scripts, become a space of endless self-regulation and unachievable standards of perfection? I argue that the insidious rhetoric of feminine self-care, that tells women they deserve to pamper themselves while at the same time dictating that this self-care must uphold feminine perfection, creates the bridge between the two publics. Chapter 1 studies the processes of physical perfection performed through skincare routines. This chapter argues that skincare, though rhetorically presented as indulgent self-care rituals that soothe the aches of the female complaint, is a mechanism of

perfection that teaches women to regulate their appearance through strict expectations of femininity. These aspirational TikToks tell women how to control their femininity through their disciplined beauty routines yet reframe this harmful rhetoric as pleasant self-care. Chapter 2 looks at self-care beyond the body, analyzing how women construct the perfect in their everyday lives. In this chapter, I argue that the soft feminine intimate public constructs aloneness as a solution to the feelings of disappointment from the female complaint, effectively isolating the woman from the care and complications of interpersonal relationships. This rhetoric also celebrates solitude as self-care and a way for the woman to “protect her peace” and focus on herself. Like skincare, alone time can only be performed in a disciplined, perfectionist manner for it to be considered self-care. Tying these two chapters together is the ribbon of self-disciplined perfection cloaked in a narrative of soft self-care.

Feminine Self-Care

The videos I analyze in this project highlight a very specific type of self-care that reinforces and enhances the creator’s femininity. Postfeminist self-care rhetoric—hyper-individualized and commodified self-care—surged after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Google searches for “self-care” spiked in the weeks after the election (Kisner, 2017) and major publications like the Atlantic (Beck, 2015), The Times (Meltzer, 2016), and The New Yorker (Tolentino, 2017) published articles and guides explaining the term and urging everyone to take care of themselves in times of such distress. The post-election self-care movement of 2016 was “powered by straight, affluent white women, who, although apparently feeling a new vulnerability in the wake of the election, are not traditionally the segment of American society in the greatest need of affirmation” (Kisner 2017). The new self-care movement presented a

consumption-based way to “care” for oneself (that became almost indistinguishable from simply pampering oneself) to escape the anxiety related to the political climate in the U.S.

This popular, consumerist iteration of self-care—consisting of self-care planners, temporary tattoos and cheesy slogans like “I am Enough” on Band-Aids (Kisner, 2017)—is vastly different from the radical self-care movement first articulated by Audre Lorde. In the epilogue of her collection of essays that she wrote while living with cancer titled *A Burst of Light* (1988), Lorde writes: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131). For Lorde, and for the many Black women, queer people, disabled people, and people of color that have contributed to a radical conceptualization of self-care, the act of caring for oneself represents an act of resistance against oppressive systems and institutions in the U.S. like racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. Caring for the self is a radical political act when one is living in a society that would readily abandon you for dead. In their article “Reclaiming the Radical Politics of Self-Care: A Crip-of-Color Critique,” (2021) Kim and Schalk also argue that self-care is “deeply grounded in experiences of disability,” (p. 326) and remind us that Lorde wrote her acclaimed essay collection while sick with cancer. They argue that “radical politics of self-care is inextricably tied to the lived experiences and temporalities of multiply marginalized people, especially disabled queer people, disabled people of color, and disabled queer people of color” (Kim & Schalk, 2021, p. 327). The authors point out that Lorde makes a case for self-care as something to be “integrated into living life, not separate from it and that self-care is not exclusively oriented toward a cure” (Kim & Schalk, 2021, p. 330). In these theories and sentiments, self-care is not a simple Band-Aid that can be bought and sold. It is a way of life that

nourishes, protects, and sustains marginalized people who must care for themselves in a culture that is structured for their downfall.

TikTok self-care is individualized, capitalist, and postfeminist in the way it encourages superficial care that consists of buying things and remaining focused on personal wellness and appearance. In the erasure and ignorance of its Black feminist roots and alignment with the commitments of disability studies, feminine self-care serves people who have access to the wealth, time, and privilege needed to sustain this type of “self-care.” For my thesis I focus on feminine self-care as it is rhetorically utilized in discourses about skincare and lifestyle. There is a productivity hidden in this feminine self-care. Women can work towards the perfect while also taking ten minutes out of their day for “me-time.” In this version, self-care is about multi-tasking, not about relief. It is not self-care to rest like Lorde theorized, it is self-care so the future self can be rejuvenated into a more productive (beautiful) state. In 2016, postfeminist self-care developed to cope with crisis and thus resurged, according to Google Trends (n.d.), in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic lockdown began. Feminine self-care has continued to permeate through society, firmly settling into the self-care rhetoric that populates social media sites like TikTok. What is couched in this self-care idealism, however, is the inescapable pull towards perfection and optimization, that a woman’s worth is reflected in her control over her beauty and her surroundings.

Focusing on two components in TikTok’s feminine intimate public, skincare and soft living, I argue that self-care rhetoric is the paradigm of perfection disguised. These videos, which appear to be aesthetically pleasing, calming, and inspirational, are insidiously promoting the harmful notion that femininity is perfection and can only be accessed through sculpting the self to a perfect state, smoothing over the intricate complications of human life and visible indicators

of the passage of time and endurance of experience. This impossible standard is costly, in both time and money, and utilizes a postfeminist version of self-care rhetoric to lure young women into its trap. However, this type of self-care is seductive and reliant on visibility and praise. Wanting to be seen as perfect, women continuously bolster this public with more and more TikToks that perpetuate the standard and signal to others that it is possible. The feminine intimate public is sustained by its own members, who have the most to gain and to lose from such narratives of pleasurable self-regulation.

Personal & Rhetorical Location

I started watching skincare and soft life TikToks long before I began writing this thesis. TikToks like @shirinribini's that feature aesthetically pleasing depictions of skincare as an essential part of femininity have regularly appeared on my TikTok "For You Page" since I downloaded the app in 2020. That spring, amid the COVID-19 lockdown that cancelled my final semester of undergrad, I became obsessed with watching women wash their faces. There was something about these TikToks that made me feel at once soothed and inspired, like I wanted to pamper myself in the most productive way possible. I wanted to buy the "life-changing" eye cream and face sculpting jade tool I had seen in the videos. I wanted my skin to be luminous in that impossible way that can only be achieved with the right light hitting your face just so. I wanted to have a perfect skincare routine with color coordinated products and pretty bottles of glistening serums. Skincare became a way for me to practice self-care, just like the videos told me. Every night, I gazed into the mirror and methodically massaged products into my face. The simple pleasure this routine brought me was intoxicating. As a single young woman who just had all responsibilities dissolved by an unexpected nationwide shut-down, I had nothing else to do

but try to find contentment in my daily activities that had quickly gone from vibrant college parties to, as some influencers call it now, “grandma-core”: reading, baking, knitting, neighborhood walks, and porch sunsets. It was the first time in my young life that I had to slow down and do nothing. It was peaceful.

This project started out solely about skincare but, after my copious consumption of lifestyle self-care content, I knew the scope had to shift. I must admit my bias towards this type of content. I love it. I find skincare videos soothing and interesting, and I love watching women make their beds and pretty breakfasts. When I was a child, I adored princesses, playing with my older cousin’s makeup kits, and wearing pink plastic sandals. I find the “girly girl” era on TikTok nostalgic and a reclamation of what my friends used to make fun of me for liking. As a white passing, young, childless, educated, cisgender woman with some disposable income, I can easily see myself in these videos. I am located at the perfect intersection of aspiration, having enough money to buy candles and face serums but not wealthy enough, in time or money, to copy a whole lifestyle of indulgent self-care that demands a constantly clean home and time to make matcha (the traditional Japanese way!) in the morning. Feminine self-care ideals dangle just beyond my fingertips, and I enjoy occasionally being able to fulfill them even when that simply means buying a face mask at Target.

As an Asian woman, however, I find myself hyper-conscious of the racial implications of this rhetoric, specifically around skincare. This thesis began as a critique of the skincare industry in the U.S.’s orientalist fascination with East Asian wellness practices. The American obsession with skincare rituals would likely not exist without the appropriation of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese skincare knowledge, tools, products, and routines. Though race is not the focus of this paper, it is the foundation of it. Both skincare and self-care discourse are rooted in non-white

practices, and this must be acknowledged to understand how much it has been twisted in the feminine intimate public. Rhetoric scholar Jennifer LeMesurier urges rhetorical critics to “intervene on the level of bodily feeling” (2022, p. 265) to understand racial embodiment. She argues that the rhetorical investigation of “bodily habituation” and “everyday aesthetic” (2022, p. 265) is essential when studying race and sensory legibility. In this project, I aim to respond to this call by studying the emotional and intimate aspects of the experience of self-care on TikTok. What may seem merely frilly and superfluous in these self-care videos, such as the ritual of cleaning the face, is exactly what should be studied to understand the state of femininity and feminine culture today. My interest in rhetoric has always stemmed from the everyday experience with pop culture and racial/ethnic politics of pop culture, and this thesis is no different.

Methodology

All the videos I analyze in this thesis are from the social media app, TikTok. An app exclusively dedicated to video media, TikTok’s popularity exploded during the early pandemic. It was the most downloaded app at the beginning of 2020 (Unni & Zoya, 2021) and saw a 75% increase in weekly users from the start of 2020 to the end of the year (Koetsier, 2020). With its video-only platform, constant cycling of content, and artificial sense of connectivity, TikTok was the obvious choice for work focused on pop culture trends. It is well known in the “Gen Z” age group as the only relevant social media site, as many people under the age of 25 have abandoned other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. TikTok is perhaps almost too user-friendly in the sense that all you must do is create an account and content will immediately appear in an endless stream catered to your interests. As I have mentioned before, I was ushered into the

feminine intimate public on TikTok by the algorithm itself. At some point, I must have watched a video of a skincare routine all the way through, which confirmed my interest in the topic, and thus skincare content began to regularly appear in my feed. Skincare and soft-life content are closely related, often overlapping, which made it easy for me to find my way to self-care videos that included either or both. My personal engagement with the topic was like a snowball effect and soon, my feed was almost entirely comprised of self-care content that I saved to study.

Algorithms play a crucial role in constructing publics by generating content related to the user's assumed interests. However, algorithms also perform a regulatory and surveillant role in these intimate publics by *deciding* what the user sees and which content creators can be seen. Algorithms perpetuate racism (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2016; Noble, 2018; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022) by promoting content made by white and light-skinned creators and hiding or suppressing work by Black and dark-skinned creators. In her work, “‘Pose’: Examining moments of ‘digital’ dark sousveillance on TikTok,” (2022) Peterson-Salahuddin studies the ways in which TikTok’s “underlying algorithms and content moderation policies remove and suppress explicitly anti-racist content, as well as content that features fat, queer, and disabled creators” (p. 2). Digital algorithms use “coded patterns of inclusion, classification, prioritization, and association” (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022, p. 4) to reproduce racist epistemologies on social media platforms, thus preserving such beliefs in the digital world and beyond. Peterson-Salahuddin argues that “in our contemporary digital environment, through algorithmically encoded biases that differentially sort and surveil users, social media algorithms have become a modern apparatus of racializing surveillance that reify racial boundaries and further marginalize Black and brown users” (2022, p. 4). Algorithms, largely produced and written in white male dominated spaces and “by people who possess worldviews that take for granted specific societal inequalities,” often perpetuate

whiteness and white-supremacist logics and can thus result in “technological redlining” (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022, p. 4). Influencers uphold these inequalities as well, often taking for granted their position of privilege (visibility, work flexibility, above average incomes, etc.). In my project specifically, inequality, in terms of race and class, is abundant and almost expected given that feminine content works to be aspirational. Understanding the experiences of Black and brown creators on social media platforms is crucial to understanding the platforms as a user and especially as a researcher. Skincare and self-care content skews heavily toward favoring white creators and whiteness—most of the people that appear in the videos on my “For You Page” are white, cisgender, able-bodied, thin, and conventionally (Eurocentrically) attractive.

Because of algorithmic racism, I had to be more intentional when choosing videos to analyze for this project. Finding skincare and soft-life content from light skinned creators was effortless, since those creators were not hidden from me by the algorithm. Content from white and Asian creators was abundant on my “For You Page” (the endless TikTok feed that generates content based on the user’s interaction with the app). To work around algorithmic racism, I utilized specific hashtags when gathering data from Black creators. Frequently used hashtags include: #softblackgirl, #blackprincesscore, #blackgirltiktok, #blackgirlluxury, #blackgirlskincare, and #blackskincare. Many creators will identify their race and ethnicity in their profile, and I used this information and the hashtags to reference their race in my thesis. I cite each creator’s race or ethnicity when discussing their content because it situates their performance of gender within a social media context that simultaneously marks race (in hashtags) and carefully brackets racial politics out of performances of gendered perfection. Because I work around the algorithm, some videos may have less views than others. That does not impact the way I analyze the content or judge it as relevant. A key aspect of this study is the

ubiquity of these videos, exemplifying how popular they are, and how many creators make self-care content. Though some videos may have millions of likes, others that are in the thousands are still considered part of this genre and nourish the intimate public with constant content.

While some TikToks that I analyze are from my own For You Page, most are from curated searches. For Chapter 1, I searched the hashtags #skincare, #selfcare #skincareroutine, #grwm, #selfcareday, #skintok, #nightroutine, and #grwmforbed in addition to the ones from Black creators. For Chapter 2, I utilized #selfcare, #selflove, #nightroutine, #selfcareroutine, #softlife, #softlifestyle, #romanticizeyourlife, #cleangirl, #girlygirl, #solotime, and #girlyaesthetic. From these searches, I was able to collect over 200 self-care videos. For the purposes of this project, I whittled that down to 30. I refer to the creator of the video by their username instead of their profile name, for clarity purposes. In the analysis, I examine the video itself including visuals and audio, the captions, the hashtags, the comments, and occasionally when relevant, the creator's profile. From this, I hope to give the reader a well-rounded understanding of the content and its interactions with the intimate public.

Because this project exclusively focuses on data collected through social media, I rely on Postill and Pink's (2012) outlines of social media ethnography and digital socialities. From an ethnographic standpoint, social media sites are complex spaces that create digital communities that influence both online and offline interactions. In this project, I contend exactly this: skincare and self-care online rhetorics inform the practice of skincare and self-care offline. Social media ethnography, according to Postill and Pink, generates ethnographic locations "that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public" (2012, p. 124). These ethnographic localities weave "a digital ethnographic place that is inextricable from both the materiality of being online and the offline encounters that are intertwined in its narratives"

(Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 127) and are traceable through the ethnographers “social media engagements and online archiving practices” (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 127). Long before I started intentionally gathering content to analyze, I consistently interacted with—by viewing, saving, and favoriting—skincare and makeup videos on social media platforms. My ethnographic location for this project was indeed informed by a web of my engagement on social media and by the continuation of this engagement offline by, for example, buying the products I saw in TikTok skincare content and repeating language used online skincare tutorials in my everyday conversations. Thus, I began a continuous and cyclical participation in offline/online self-care and skincare content. I will build on Postill & Pink’s work by studying how skincare and self-care videos play with online/offline dynamics as *theaters of the intimate* (the bathroom and bedroom in which self-care videos are often filmed) that appear publicly online.

Self-care discourse does not just exist in the digital world of TikTok. After watching videos featuring women that edit their lives to look perfect, the pressure to achieve this perfection manifests when a young woman looks in the mirror before bed and sees a pimple. It sneaks into the mind when she does not have the money to buy the newest moisturizer, trending bedsheet set, or bottle of wine for her night alone. By creating only one viable path to self-care, the soft feminine intimate public has turned a concept that used to be about radical love and acceptance into discipline, self-control, and the pursuit of perfecting what should never be perfected: the human body and its emotions. This rhetoric asserts that one is not doing a good enough job of taking care of themselves if their routine does not consist of expensive skincare and a manicured luxury apartment. Self-care, once understood as a radical and beautiful act of resistance, is now marketed as a technique to look more feminine and act more feminine, turning pleasure into discipline and peace into isolation.

Chapter 1: Skincare as Self-Care

“Episode 10 | Listen to your favorite playlist, relax, and show your skin some love 💕.”

This is the caption of Dominican lifestyle influencer @stephaniecaraballo on TikTok “Selfcare Sunday” TikTok video. A slightly sped-up version of R&B song 2AM by SZA plays in as @stephaniecaraballo, dressed in a fluffy white robe, gold hoops, and a black headband to hold back her curly dark hair, moves through the steps of her self-care routine. @stephaniecaraballo begins by massaging her face with two tools (at least one of which is electric) as a steamer blows pillowy clouds of mist towards her skin. She then uses a second tool to put on three different face masks: a Salicylic Acid mask from The Ordinary, an Instant Detox mask from Caudalie, and a purifying clay mask from Youth to the People.³ After each mask, she uses a towel to gently remove the substance from her face. @stephaniecaraballo proceeds to apply three different types of lotion, three different serum-looking products, and one more mask as she continues to steam her face. She occasionally closes her eyes, patting the creams into her face carefully, her long manicured nails gliding over her skin with practiced ease. She often gazes into the distance, likely at a mirror next to her. After applying the products, @stephaniecaraballo moves away from the steamer to stroke her cheeks and jaw line with a curved pink stone tool, emulating the traditional Chinese medicine method of gua sha. She then uses a similar stone roller to massage beneath her eyes. At the end of the routine, she looks into the camera with a placid smile, framing her face with her hands and showing off her skin which appears dewy and flushed. After displaying her face from multiple angles, the video ends.

In total, @stephaniecaraballo’s Selfcare Sunday skincare routine was 15 steps long. The video is sped up and edited to be about 30 seconds long, however one can assume that a 15-step

³ None of these masks cost less than \$25.

skincare routine would likely take no less than 30 minutes to complete (her masks alone probably took 30 minutes considering most masks are supposed to be on the face for ten to fifteen minutes). When watching skincare TikToks, we are seeing these three temporalities interact: the creator's time, the edited time, and the assumed time. The creator, @stephaniecaraballo in this case, must go through their entire routine and spend time editing the video to their preference. The edited time is the length of the published TikTok, which tends to be under a minute. The creator speeds up and cuts the video to suit a social media platform that caters to short, attention-grabbing content. The assumed time represents what someone clued into skincare might estimate as the actual length of the full routine. Shorter TikToks that allow the viewer to see as many skincare steps as possible in a short amount of time, are likely to be more popular on the platform. Women already familiar with skincare content on TikTok can fill in the gaps that are edited out of the video, and those who are not familiar can get a taste of the content and perhaps get further drawn in. @stephaniecaraballo's video is also satisfying to watch, the aesthetic of it embodying the gratification that one supposedly gets from doing their skincare. At the time I am writing this,⁴ the video has 519 comments, 879 shares, 21,300 saves, 125,300 likes, and 1,800,000 views. The most popular comment, with 270 likes, comes from @kiloveee, "I love me a good skin care day 😊" to which Caraballo replied "Same! It's my favorite – I feel so relaxed after 💕."

Though the length and cost of Caraballo's routine is likely considered either inaccessible or superfluous (or both) by many viewers, there is no denying that there is an audience for what she does. By the end of the fifteen steps, Caraballo's skin appears youthful, glowing, and plump. In this moment, Caraballo embodies perfection—or at least the status of being enviably close to

⁴ As of April 16, 2023.

the current feminine skincare ideal. She has the type of skin that any woman should want, that drives people to spend countless dollars and hours trying to achieve, that looks so healthy and delicious and beautiful you almost hate her for it. Caraballo visually communicates the possibility of perfected skin, and what a gentle and soothing way to reach it! If you only take the time, every Sunday, to love and care for yourself and *invest* considerable emotional, financial, and temporal resources, then this beautiful skin can be yours as well. It is as simple as making time for yourself. This is the argument behind each skincare video in this chapter: achieving the cultural ideal of feminine (facial) perfection is up to individual women and whether or not they are willing to spend time tending to themselves. Successful performances of femininity require not only perfected skin but also the perfection of a feminine person who meets her own needs and desires in a closed circuit with the self and her virtual girlfriends on TikTok.

In this chapter, I track the rhetorical moves by which skincare videos present feminine self-regulation and perfectibility as forms of self-care: 1) labeling self-care through hashtags and captions; 2) performing self-care through gestures, expressions, and routines; 3) illustrating self-care through visually pleasing aesthetics and *mis en scène*. Elaborate skincare routines are consistently framed as therapeutic and satisfying through creators' performances, aesthetic choices, and labeling practices. The performance of intimacy is key to the rhetorical work of framing self-regulation and adherence to cultural ideals as a form of self-care. In the skincare videos I analyze, this is accomplished through the intimacy of sharing one's most private spaces and routines, rather than through emotional closeness and sharing between women. I will show how these videos usher in a new version of the perfect paradigm, from discipline to tenderness, from the tough love of the personal trainer to the tender caress of mothering oneself. This new paradigm exists in a new arena: the private. I argue that skincare TikToks expand the paradigm

of perfection into the private, making women feel like they must be perfect even when they are in their private spaces. By private, I do not mean literally hidden given that these TikToks are posted for anyone to see. I utilize this term to describe spaces in which one might not feel the need to perform beauty, such as in the bathroom before bed or in a bedroom after just waking up. Skincare discourse has inscribed these moments as opportunities for perfection, infiltrating perhaps the last realm of a woman's life unscathed by the pressures of the paradigm. First, I outline a brief history of skincare in the United States and discuss its role in the feminine intimate public on TikTok. I then argue that skincare TikToks value a specific type of feminine beauty: soft beauty. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of skincare as self-care, exploring how the TikToks successfully frame feminine perfection as pleasurable and soothing.

The Cultural and Racial Implications of East Asian Skincare in the U.S.

Skincare has long been a part of a woman's hygiene routine. The Smithsonian Museum has a collection of skincare products—complete with lotions, cleansers, powders, ointments, and bleaches—dating back to the 1800s (Smithsonian, n.d.). However, in recent years, the global skincare market has exploded, steadily growing from a 99.6 billion dollar industry in 2012 to 163.5 in 2022 (Petruzzi, 2022). In 2018, skincare sales grew by 13 percent, whereas makeup's only grew by one (The NPD Group, n.d.). Google Trends shows a dramatic increase in searches for the term “skincare” in May 2020, with interest peaking in January of 2023 (Google, n.d.). As exemplified by my opening anecdotes, I do not mean “skincare” as a simple task like washing your face before bed. The skincare regimen that has swept through social media presumes an excess of time and money. Routines went from a mere face wash and lotion to an elaborate process consisting of serums, creams, oils, face masks, jade tools, and red-light therapy.

Skincare's expansion in both product options and targeted age group—research (Gale Business Insights, 2022) shows the demographic of consumers is becoming younger—exemplifies the broadening of beauty routines. The introduction of Korean beauty products to U.S. markets were likely a factor, with exports to the U.S. doubling from 2014 to 2016 (Hong, 2017). K-beauty helped to popularize the multiple (ideally ten) step skincare routines and introduced Americans to products like sheet masks and bottled snail mucin essence. With the introduction of the Korean ten step routine, expanding access to an unimaginable amount of skincare products, and the internet as a distributor of skincare knowledge and products that were otherwise only available through dermatologists, skincare as a routine has become a staple in the lives of women and has created an established content genre on social media.

The prominence of East Asian skincare practices—from ten-step K-beauty routines to the Chinese tradition of gua sha (massaging and contouring the face with stone tools)—is crucial context for understanding the state of skincare on TikTok today. Many of the trending and viral TikTok skincare products are from Korean companies such as CORSEX, Dr. Jart, Glow Recipe, Peach & Lily, Laneige, Sulwhasoo, and innisfree. Popular beauty publications such as *Cosmopolitan* (Gagliano, 2022), *Allure* (Han, 2023), *Vogue* (Murden, 2023), and others have published their lists of the Best Korean Skincare Products of X year. K-beauty sets the standard for perfect skin, calling it “glass skin”: the goal of having smooth, glossy, flawless skin like a glass surface. The face must look at once supple and soft, bouncing back from every touch, and luminous, reflecting the light like a mirror. Because Korean beauty sets the skincare standard, Korean products are considered to be the best of the best, the holy grail of skincare. Asian creator @stephaniesshin portrays the excellence of Korean skincare in her TikTok by showing her skin before and after switching from “western” skincare to Korean (Shin, 2023). In the

“before” video, her skin is peppered with red pimples and scars. The “after” video shows @stephaniesshin with completely flawless skin that is plump and gleaming, providing a visual argument for why “kbeauty is truly superior” (Shin, 2023).

The reverence for K-beauty challenges who decides what the beauty standards are in the U.S., placing East Asian skincare practices at the center of the ideal. Aspiration comes from Korean women, who are seen to have access to a fountain of youth and beauty. The U.S. skincare market covets this perfection and admires it with the desire to *possess* it, consistent with a fetishistic yearning for the Orient. LeMesurier (2022) writes extensively about the implications of Asian skin becoming an “aesthetically covetable surface” (p. 255) and argues that Western fascination with Asian skincare focuses on “bodily transformation” without the acknowledgment of racial embodiment. This fixation perpetuates Orientalist appetite for pieces of a desired aesthetic, disregarding the whole. K-beauty, though it changes who sets the beauty ideal, does not challenge the fundamental values of the American beauty standard: whiteness and youthfulness. East Asian skincare revolves around preserving both youthful and light skin by using products such as skin “brightening” creams to lighten the face and sunscreen to prevent ageing and tanning. While the contemporary skincare craze is indebted to K-Beauty and by extension an East Asian ideal of feminine beauty, those who generate content for the genre do so in a largely “colorblind” fashion. Race and ethnicity may be part of a creator’s profile, but do not influence the format the videos take, which are largely consistent across racially and ethnically diverse creators. Intersectional feminist analysis would assume that the race and ethnicity of content creators constrains or enables their access to the neotraditional femininity celebrated by the genre. But creators model equal access to a purportedly universal femininity through shared consumption of skincare products, as well as shared aesthetics.

Members of the skincare public that do not have light skin find ways around the mainstream content that does not work for their skin tone. By using hashtags like #blackgirlskincare, #blackgirlskincareproducts, #blackgirlselfcare, and #blackgirltiktok, Black women construct a genre within a genre. These TikToks still offer pleasing skincare content yet do so with racial specifications. The “Black girl skincare” public provides a space for Black women to suggest skincare products for darker skin. Sunscreen is an example of a product that requires different suggestions for different skin tones. Many skinfluencers (social media influencers who focus on skincare content) promote specific sunscreen products that do not work on darker skin; sunscreen is prone to leaving a “white cast” that leaves darker skin appearing grey or dull looking. Black creator @jodieglowz—whose bio claims “The goal is healthy skin”—exemplified this issue in a TikTok titled “Black Girl and Sunscreen Chronicles” (jodieglowz | Skincare, 2023). In the video, the creator attempts to rub in the white sunscreen on her face as audio saying “I try not to kill myself” plays in the background. The text of the video says: “POV: you have to be out the house in 5 mins and you decide to try a new ‘No White Cast’ sunscreen after doing an elaborate 10 step expensive skincare routine 😊 😊 🙄.” The TikTok is made with humor (the caption includes #joke), making fun of the many sunscreens that claim they leave no white residue. However, this lighthearted TikTok reveals that the skincare industry, both products and prominent light-skinned influencers, does not cater to dark skin. @jodieglowz tags the video with #blackgirlsunscreens and #sunscreennowwhitecast, indicating that it is part of the Black skincare genre but also includes #skincaretiktok and #skintok tags to reach an audience beyond the niche. The comments reveal how @jodieglowz’s video belongs in both publics with the top two comments⁵ representing skincare broadly and Black skincare: “do you have a tutorial

⁵ As of April 14, 2023.

for your skin routine?? you're [*sic*] skin is so pretty” (from @kalliopee, jodieglowz | Skincare, 2023) and “black girl sunscreen has saved me” (from @katysowavyy, jodieglowz | Skincare, 2023). The skincare TikTok model, including performing the steps and recommending products, creates a public that can adapt to racially and ethnically specific skincare concerns. @jodieglow acknowledges this model by referencing the “elaborate 10 step expensive skincare routine” (jodieglowz | Skincare, 2023), proving how much time and effort she puts into her skin and thus why she cannot ruin it with a white cast sunscreen.

Given the number of products in the new suggested multi-step skincare routine, someone who participates in this style of care must have money to spend on skincare. Skincare regimens cater to the affluent and solidly middle class, and are thus exclusionary, with products that can cost hundreds of dollars for mere ounces of cream. The cost of skincare can make it inaccessible to people who do not have extra money to spend on a nonessential routine. Due to its creation of expensive desire, aspiration not only to look a certain way but to be able to participate is a key element of skincare. “Dupes,” cheaper products that are like their expensive counterparts, have become a staple of online skincare discourse and some creators will post about drugstore alternatives to luxury brands. Search “skincare dupes” on TikTok and hundreds of videos will appear with captions like “5 ALDI SKINCARE DUPES” (Laura | skincare must haves, 2022) or “Affordable skin care dupes” (daijia | esti, 2021). Considering that skincare content, especially on TikTok, is made for younger audiences who have limited spending money, the dupe market and drugstore skincare is a popular substitute for aspirational luxury skincare. Because of this, skincare is still accessible to many people and thus interpellates a wide audience.

The TikToks in this chapter subscribe to this new, time-consuming, multi-step skincare routine that was popularized by the introduction of K-beauty to the U.S. Though the relationship

and racial implications of American adoption of East Asian skincare is not the focal point of this project, I felt it necessary to acknowledge the dynamic before writing a chapter dedicated to skincare because these practices restructured the American skincare routine. Now, instead of washing their face and putting on some lotion, many young women are double cleansing (using an oil-based cleanser to remove their makeup and then a gentle one to remove pollutants and debris), putting on face masks, serums, and eye cream, and then applying moisturizer. This change has allowed the skincare public on TikTok (which would not be nearly as interesting if the influencer did only two steps) to flourish and grow with the options for content as endless as there are combinations of skincare steps and types of products. K-beauty expanded what is expected from a skincare routine and in turn, expanded the discipline required to execute it. To be feminine is to have a skincare routine, and to have a skincare routine is to be exceedingly diligent, executing multiple steps every single night and morning. The positioning of skincare as self-care sanctions such discipline as a pleasurable, even necessary, way to access femininity. As Black creator @k14nn4 captions a TikTok of her performing a multi-step skincare routine, “nurturing my skin helps me connect with my femininity, & taking the extra time to massage it in allows me to focus on being present and grounded” (kianna, 2023). She explicitly connects femininity, skincare, and self-care (being present and grounded) and by doing so, writes off her disciplined actions as care of her emotional and physical self.

Soft Beauty

Skincare TikToks are all centered around one thing: the face. Though it is never explicitly stated by any of the skinfluencers, beauty is the forefront of this genre. Skincare’s ultimate function is to achieve flawlessness, making it an ideal arena for the paradigm of

perfection to thrive. In TikTok's feminine public, the idea of perfect skin goes by many names: glassy, glowing, dewy, luminous, bright, healthy, plump, smooth, and so on. Hailey Bieber, celebrity founder of Rhode Skin, recently coined the term "glazed donut skin" (Turner, n.d.) to describe her goal of having so much moisture on her skin that she gets into bed every night "looking like a glazed donut" (Turner, n.d.). Under all these adjectives is the underlying idea of perfection: that one's skin must reach the impossible standard of looking at once plump, bright, glassy, and smooth. This rhetoric clearly outlines what is considered beautiful by this online community: perfect bare (natural) skin. Different from public-facing standards of feminine beauty that involve layering makeup on the skin to construct an ideal image, this beauty represents a private, intimate beauty ideal revealed at the end or beginning of the day when the woman has no makeup on her face. I call this new beauty ideal "soft beauty" to describe a beauty defined by its mellowness and achieved by the calming act of skincare. This beauty is subdued, not enhanced by makeup and appearing in the quiet moments of a woman's evening/morning routine. The "natural" aspect of these moments connects skincare to emotional care in a sense that both the soft beauty and emotional self are authentic, unadorned. Tending to each can happen simultaneously in the skincare public and are conflated because of this. In this section, I argue that the soft beauty ideal is desexualized and youthful and creates a new category in the paradigm of perfection that demands perfection in private as well as in public. Soft beauty is rhetorically constructed through the *mise en scène* of the video (the private space) and the visual performance of tenderness in the actual skincare routine by the creator (mannerisms and expressions).

The setting of skincare TikToks immediately pulls the viewer into the privacy of the creator's home. Most, if not all, skincare videos are filmed in a bathroom or a bedroom, and the

camera is positioned either as the mirror or right next to it. The intimate setting and point of view makes the viewer feel like they are watching something private, like a behind the scenes perspective into their life. Because skincare is usually an evening activity in which the woman takes off her daily makeup (her public face, if you will), soft beauty seems personal, like the woman is revealing her true self. Dressed in a light blue pajama top, White skinfluencer @sofiagrindelandd goes through her skincare routine with calm precision (Grindeland, 2022). Faint guitar plays in the background of the TikTok as @sofiagrindelandd pulls her blonde hair back with a fuzzy pink headband and removes her makeup with a cotton round and micellar water. She then washes her face, pats it dry with a white towel, applies a face serum, moisturizer, eyelash serum, lip balm, and uses a green gua sha tool to massage her face. @sofiagrindelandd proceeds to take her hair out of the headband and roll it into what looks like small pool noodle covered in pink satin. She concludes with brushing her teeth, showing off the sides of her clean face, and blowing a kiss to the camera before the TikTok ends. For the entirety of the video, @sofiagrindelandd looks into the camera with a focused concentration. Her face is almost expressionless, save for an occasional soft smile. This move, staring into the camera and showing little emotion, gives the viewer a sense that she is not trying to perform anything. The video is affectively calm, @sofiagrindelandd's soft expression pacifying it.

In @sofiagrindelandd's TikTok, the viewer is positioned as the mirror, watching with wonder like a silent queen from *Snow White* asking who is the fairest of them all. This voyeuristic positioning coupled with the usually private setting of the bathroom, makes the TikTok feel intimate and personal as if we are witnessing @sofiagrindelandd in a quiet moment. Skincare regimes have brought the perfect standard into the private sphere, creating an expectation of beauty that penetrates the entirety of feminine life. In this video we see

@sofiagrindelandd taking off her makeup, going from her public face to her private one. Though we do not know her exact age, she is clearly younger than 25, maybe even younger than 20. Many of the comments highlight her prettiness, the top liked⁶ of which from @ebonycxx says “god i would die to look this pretty omg” (Grindeland, 2022). In this feminine intimate public, perfection is not only accomplished through having a flawless complexion but fitting into the “soft beauty” image as well. @sofiagrindelandd takes off her makeup to reveal a face just as “perfect” as the one with mascara and foundation. She looks youthful, her skin untouched by age or scars, and has no more than two visible blemishes. Her expression is docile, her youth and gentle smile creating an air of innocence. The dim lighting of the bathroom and the nighttime setting make the TikTok feel intimate. These rhetorical movies: the intimate setting and the delicateness of @sofiagrindelandd’s mannerisms and expressions, lull the viewer into a peaceful state and shape her bare beauty as soft and tender. We can see the same ideal play out in @stephaniecaraballo’s skincare routine as well; her skincare routine highlights her natural, youthful beauty and the relaxed atmosphere of her TikTok adds to the overall affect. This mild, natural beauty is the goal. The skincare routine is the key to soft beauty, convincing the viewer that this woman has achieved such a glow with the right products.

Just because this beauty is seen as natural or soft, does not mean that it does not require work. These “gentle” nighttime skincare routines are multi-step processes, demanding the woman’s diligence every night and morning. Black creator @thaarealbabyd uses editing to speed up her skincare routine and her video still ends up one minute and 30 seconds long. Her caption, “...my everyday skincare routine ✨ (in the AM I wear sunscreen)” (d 🦋, 2022), states that this process of perfecting her skin occurs twice a day, meaning she likely spends about an hour

⁶ As of April 16, 2023.

achieving the soft beauty look. Like @sofiagrindelandd, @thaarealbabyd shows off her glowing, makeup free skin at the end of the video as proof that this excessive routine creates soft beauty. @thaarealbabyd does this entire process just to get in bed and do it all again in the morning.

Like any other hegemonic beauty ideal in the U.S., soft beauty is rooted in whiteness. The soft, gentle, and innocent look is much easier for white women to achieve than women of color who have been historically sexualized, fetishized, and excluded from the beauty industry. Darker skin, curvier bodies, wider noses, and kinky/curly hair—features associated with Black women—are considered less feminine (Avery et. al, 2021) under hegemonic beauty and feminine standards. Soft beauty, in its innocence, is constructed as not sexual. The intimacy in the videos comes from the private setting (bedroom/bathroom) and viewer positioning, not from a sexualized sentiment. The women in these skincare TikToks are undoing their appearance, but for themselves, not for any partner (more analysis on the solitude component of these videos in the next chapter). The non-sexual component of soft beauty further impedes access to this ideal. Black and Asian women, who are hyper-sexualized by white society due to their race, may not have the opportunity to be seen as non-sexual beings. The Orientalist appropriation of East Asian skincare practices reinforces this argument, divorcing the skin ideal from the actual Asian woman. The adoption of some Korean beauty practices is not enough to erase the years of sexualizing Asian women. This is not to say that women of color do not participate in skincare practices or are not visible in the genre. Their access to soft beauty is still possible, but not automatically granted like it is for white women.

Soft beauty's non-sexual goal sets it apart from a heteronormative and patriarchal beauty ideal that caters to the male gaze. On the one hand, soft beauty moves the feminine intimate

public away from the desire to fulfill a “conventional” heterosexual role like the public Berlant (2008) discusses. Soft beauty is cultivated to be legible only to the other women in the feminine intimate public who can understand the entire skincare process and recognize beautiful, glass skin. By using hashtags and labeling, skincare videos are placed in a *feminine* public and likely do not appear in the algorithms of heterosexual men. Skincare hashtags, in all their various iterations, are often accompanied by feminine/girl hashtags such as #feelingfeminine, #cleangirl, #thatgirl, #cleangirlaesthetic, #blackgirlskincare, and #skincareforblackwomen. Because these TikToks will be seen only by women, and probably only women in the feminine intimate public, they are scrutinized under what Winch (2013) calls the “girlfriend gaze.” This gaze, which evokes “homosocial forms of control where women bond through the bodies of other women” (Winch, 2013, p. 5), creates a more nuanced understanding of feminine beauty and attracts only the women who are aware of it. Once one becomes aware that glass skin is the standard, they may work hard to have skin that shines and glows. To someone outside this public, like heterosexual men, this would likely go unnoticed or even be perceived as oily skin.

The girlfriend gaze slots skincare neatly into the paradigm of perfection which, McRobbie (2015) argues, is directed to “girls and women only” (p. 17). Competition within the paradigm is only viable between women who can recognize the subtleties of soft beauty. The hyper-visibility of skincare content on TikTok creates a “self-conscious, self-benchmarking young woman” (McRobbie, 2015, p. 17) that believes she must be perfect at all hours of the day, even after removing the makeup used to conform to other beauty expectations. By publicizing the once private act of skincare, women are now subjected to perfect femininity all the time: at the very end of the night and right as they wake up in the morning. There is no freedom to be “ugly”—or just *not* perfect—if the paradigm of perfection follows you into the privacy of your

home and your bathroom. Skincare pierces the paradigm, expanding it deeper into the private self. The pressure to be perfect now exists beyond just appearing so, but cultivating perfection at all hours of the day, even when the only company is the reflection in the mirror. Theaters of the intimate offer backstage access to a woman's skincare regime in place of the shared sentimentality of the female complaint. Feminine sameness moves from the reassuring recognition of feelings like mine to the pressurized aspiration to have a skincare routine (and products) like hers.

The Routine is the Reward

The paradigm of perfection is defined by two stages, failure and maintenance. McRobbie (2015) defines the perfect as a “horizon of expectation” (p. 3), constructing it not as a fixed destination but a continuous process in which the perfect is just beyond reach. Imperfection is actually endorsed by the paradigm as an essential motivator to work harder to achieve perfection. It is extremely easy to fail at having good skin. Any blemish, pimple, dark spot, wrinkle, and scar is an imperfection. These imperfections only drive the person to seek perfection with more determination. Even if someone manages to achieve perfect skin, the burden thus becomes the maintenance of it. With skin being so finicky, the arrival of an imperfection (pimple, wrinkle, etc.) is almost inevitable. Camacho-Miñano and Gray (2021) argue that this continuous cycle—failure to maintenance to failure—is the key to the paradigm of perfection and why it interpellates “all women...including flawed and in-process individuals” (p. 728). In this section, I propose that skincare rhetoric reinterprets this process as an enjoyable and soothing method of self-care. Instead of a grueling practice of perfection, skincare is discussed as a pleasant way to connect with one's femininity and inner self. I analyze how these videos cultivate skincare as a

self-care experience both explicitly and implicitly on TikTok through captions, hashtags, emojis, and voice-over narration.

Maintenance of perfection, which requires a shocking number of steps for these women, is rhetorically configured as enjoyable activities of self-care. Baker (2016) discusses the presence of glamour in feminine identity as a quality that “attempts to transcend the everyday by achieving perfection: the smoothest surface, the sparkliest material, the icon least affected by the ravages of time” (p. 55). Glamour is elusive and seductive in that it is at once “accessible and exclusive, democratic and elite” (Baker, 2016, p. 57) and can act as a powerful imaginative and pleasurable resource under capitalism. Skincare as self-care, when practiced with all the products and tools, is very glamorous in its provocation of idealized version of the self and future perfection. Glamour, as a daydream of “the good life,” is enacted through a belief that “the consumption of things can supposedly make life more pleasurable and attractive” (Baker, 2016, 58). It acts in associations; using a jade roller or a popular product used by TikTok skinfluencers makes you feel like you are living their “good” life. That romantic and self-caring world can be bottled into a serum and sewn into a headband that, when used, creates a sense that you too can exist in the glamourized self-care world, if only for those precious minutes in front of your steamer.

Asian creator @yasmin.topacio declares her skincare as self-care at the beginning of her video in a caption: “saturday self care night [dark skin heart hands emoji]” (YASMINE, 2023). The TikTok, which has 25,100 views,⁷ begins with @yasmine.topacio wrapping a white headband around her head and tenderly touching her face. She then sits in front of a steamer before using a microdermabrasion tool (an electric tool that has an abrasive surface to exfoliate

⁷ As of April 16, 2023.

away the outer layer of skin). Her next step is applying facial oil and then using a small blade to shave the “peach fuzz” off her entire face. She then proceeds to do a skincare wash routine of cleanser, toner, serums, moisturizers, and lip balm. In total, @yasmine.topacio's Saturday skin/self-care routine is ten steps (not including the headband application!). Throughout the video, “Snooze” by SZA, a slow R&B song, plays creating a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere for skincare routine viewing. The elaborate routine, which probably took @yasmine.topacio at least half an hour to complete, glamorizes the intense labor that goes into the whole process by adding captions like “feels so good & is so satisfying” as she sands off her skin with the microdermabrasion tool. @yasmine.topacio’s skincare is intense and demanding, including various tools and products to achieve complete it. Without the labels of “satisfying” and “self care night,” @yasmine.topacio’s routine, with the shaving and needling, would seem alarmingly excessive and unpleasant. However, by declaring her skincare routine as self-care, @yasmine.topacio turns the meticulous control of her appearance into an experience of tenderness.

Despite this time-consuming labor, or perhaps because of it, @yasmine.topacio views her skin upkeep as self-care. She demonstrates this through her mannerisms: treating her skin gently by slowly rubbing in the products and showing the camera the extractions of hair/dead skin, appearing to find satisfaction in removal. @yasmine.topacio’s caption specifies what she, and likely everyone else in the skincare community, means by self-care, “skin care is so therapeutic to me” (YASMINE, 2023). “Therapeutic” usually describes processes that have a healing effect or make a person healthier. @yasmine.topacio’s use of the term implies that skincare has soothing effects that go beyond the skin and into the emotional state. This sentiment echoes the soft beauty argument that skincare tends both the natural, authentic face and soul simultaneously.

@yasmine.topacio, through her captions and actions, suggests that skincare holds meaning beyond simply cleaning the skin; skincare carries emotional value. Emotional tending is thus conflated with self-control and perfecting one's appearance. Perhaps the number of steps in one's skincare routine correlates with how much "therapy" they receive. The longer the routine, the more time there is for care. With the amount of time it must take to execute all these steps, which go above and beyond what would be required to clean the skin, the opportunities for self-care work must be abundant.

White TikTok creator @miyaevarenae illustrates this excessive style in her own video captioned "Me 🤍 self care hehehe" (Renae, 2022). This minute-long video, with 10.2 million views and 1.8 million likes⁸, clearly equates this elaborate routine with self-care with the text "POV: ur the girl that LOVES self care ☁️ [bubbles emoji] 🧖🏻💧" (Renae, 2022) that stays on the video for its entirety. @miyaevarenae's self-care routine begins with her sliding on a headband, posing for half a second with her eyes closed, and dunking her face into a bowl of ice water. The video then pans to multiple bookcase-like shelves crowded with products presumably included in her routine. @miyaevarenae's routine goes beyond just skincare when she shows herself putting castor oil and a hair mask in her hair, massaging her scalp with a circular tool, and cleaning her eyelash extensions with a foaming substance. @miyaevarenae then whitens her teeth, shows the multiple products she uses in the shower (including putting a scented bath bomb at the base of the shower), and then finally begins the full skincare process. Her skincare routine (on this self-care night), is ten steps including washing her face with a disposable heart-shaped sponge, using a tool that suctions to her skin, applying sheet eye masks, using a gua sha and red-light therapy tool, and of course patting her face with serums, toners, and lotions. She concludes

⁸ As of April 16, 2023.

the video with some body skincare, applying lotion on her legs. @miyaevarenae's TikTok demonstrates the genre assumption that a longer routine means better self-care. The time you dedicate to your skincare routine represents the amount of care ("therapy") you can receive from it. In other words, the more steps and control you perform, the better you are at caring for yourself. Skincare routines thus become not only a superficial of who looks the prettiest, but a moral competition of who dedicates the most time to themselves and their care.

These creators also reinforce the message of self-care throughout the videos, implicitly, by performing it. Self-care lies in the gentle actions of the creators, the way they diligently yet delicately tend to their faces, the way they take the time to do such elaborate albeit unnecessary routines. It is not hard to see the care in these videos and feel the allure of it, the beckoning to spend *your* time and money on *yourself*. This tradition has been followed by countless other creators who share their relaxing, peaceful, inspiring skincare routines on the app. @__briaa, a Black beauty creator, describes herself as being in her "self care era" in her skincare video (2022). Her routine is only four steps, yet still includes a fluffy headband and two face tools. Similarly, Black creator @barbiekayy_ invites the viewer to "unwind with me ☺" as she walks through her "night time skincare routine" (karathebarb 🤍, 2022). @__briaa and @barbiekayy_'s videos show that self-care rhetoric is not just applied to the special-occasion-once-a-week skincare routines. Self-care can be practiced every night and that glamorized self can be accessed daily, even if it is just for 10 minutes before bed. This rhetoric continuously reinforces the notion that women should treat their perfection techniques as self-care rituals, that washing your face at the end of the day is an act of care rather than an annoying responsibility. These videos are pedagogical. The creators teach us how to treat skincare—which used to be

either nonexistent or treated as an anti-aging, acne-fighting chore in one's daily routine—as an act of deep and intimate emotional care of the self.

Modeling the Ideal Routine

Perfect skin is elusive and necessitates an instruction manual for how to achieve it. The feminine intimate public constructs the ideal space for information sharing between women and on TikTok, already consists of other blueprints for femininity (#coquettecore, etc.). In the skincare genre, this pedagogy thrives. Many skinfluencers⁹ appear to have accomplished perfection and therefore create content in the maintenance stage of the paradigm. Their perfection could be, of course, in part due to lighting, video filters that smooth the skin, the camera angle, or editing. Many of them create TikToks as a job, meaning they are paid to dedicated time and resources to their skin videos. Though this is not within the scope of my analysis, social media creates an optimal space for the paradigm of perfection to flourish with how easy it is to *seem* perfect using these techniques. Skinfluencers use their own skin perfection as a persuasive tool for others within the paradigm working towards this goal. Their content is pedagogical in that it teaches other women that skincare can lead to perfection and outlines specific steps to follow for such flawlessness. By presenting their skincare as success stories, skinfluencers reinforce the desirability of perfection by making it seem attainable using the right products and tools. In this section, I analyze the “success” stories of skincare and examine how this rhetoric not only upholds but invigorates the paradigm of perfection in skincare.

⁹ There is a growing community of skinfluencers who do not have perfect skin and dedicate their platforms to normalizing acne, scars, and other imperfections. See the accounts from @courtneyjones5252, @aleksacedro, and @ericanic0le for examples.

The first video comes from @fabulousvia, self-proclaimed “Queen of Self-Care ✨” (Via, n.d.). In the video, @fabulousvia is replying to a comment from @natallyamishin who asked @fabulousvia to share her skincare routine. @fabulousvia begins close to the camera where the viewer can see her flawless skin and says, “Every single girl dreams of getting this question” (Via, 2022). @fabulousvia expresses the sentiment likely held by anyone in the skincare community (and under the paradigm of perfection at large): the ideal is to be seen, by others in invested in perfection, as perfect. There is no better affirmation of success than being thought of as perfect by those who are trying to achieve that. Once this is accomplished, the possessor of perfection becomes the expert, the teacher. @fabulousvia proceeds to narrate her nighttime skincare routine by bringing the camera into the bathroom and explaining each product she uses and why. Instead of the aesthetic, soothing self-care rhetoric from the earlier videos, @fabulousvia uses authoritative and pedagogical discourse:

So I’ve washed my hands and I’ve laid out a separate towel just for my face.

That’s very important. Our cleanser: I use this Youth To The People one clearly and, um, it’s great. It’s got a lot of antioxidants and you only need a tiny bit... My face is pat dry and we’re going to go in with this goop Malachite toner. Clearly the best. We need to give Ms. Gwyneth Paltrow her money ‘cus she deserves it...

Next up I’m a big believer in essence. It’s a treatment. It’s not a toner... (Via, 2022).

@fabulousvia’s tone is definitive as she discusses the routine. She recommends products and gives reasons for why she uses each one. Her routine is lengthy, eight steps in total, but her skin looks luminescent—almost wet—at the end of it all. She concludes by showing off her skin and saying, “And there you have it besties. The proof is in the pudding. It works. Let me know if you

want my daytime one” (Via, 2022). By sharing her routine @fabulousvia writes a blueprint for perfection and lays out a step-by-step recipe for others to follow to accomplish what she has. At first glance, this recipe is easy and straightforward: just copy these simple steps. However, the products in her routine (not including the dermatologist appointment often needed to get her prescription product Tretinoin or the other products she showed and mentioned but did not use) cost upwards of \$250 altogether. The goop toner alone is \$75. For @fabulousvia, perfection comes at a high price, one that she is recommending others pay.

For @indiamonaae, Black beauty creator, skincare success comes from “prioritizing” her routine (india □, 2023). In a video captioned “we love clear skin ✨,” @indiamonaae washes her face while the text “pov you started prioritizing skin care and your skin has never looked better” hovers in the center of the frame (india □, 2023). The nine second video is made up entirely of her lightly rubbing the white suds on her face and dancing. Near the end of the video, the video zooms in on her face and she slowly massages her cheeks, closing her eyes and appearing in a state of pleasant contentment and pleasure. @indiamonaae is clearly enjoying this process, reveling in her skincare as a self-care practice. Like many other skinfluencers, @indiamonaae’s hair is pulled away from her face with a fuzzy brown headband. However, unlike most skinfluencers (from what I can tell just by looking at their videos), @indiamonaae is wearing makeup as she washes her face. Her lips appear shiny with gloss, her eyelashes look curled and darkened with mascara, and her eyelids shimmer with what looks like gold and copper eye shadow. This video is clearly not a full routine, and the makeup creates a perfected appearance of the parts of her face that the soap is not touching. This is a key characteristic of these skinfluencer’s videos: their routine looks as perfect as their outcome. The headband is in the right place, girly yet functional; the nails are manicured and clean; there is no mess, no drip

of the water down the arms or soap getting in the eyes or fumbling around for a towel. These filmed routines are nothing short of perfect. The subject of the video is always content and peaceful, engaging with their skincare and skin lovingly and almost affectionately. Not only is the paradigm of perfection dictating that the skin must look perfect, but skinfluencers have shown that the steps to get there must be pleasing and perfect as well. Does your perfect skin even count if you did not achieve it by using products in pink bottles? Yes, the process is glamorized as self-care, but it is also perfected down to a tee. It is a disciplined and purposeful process leading to a specific outcome. It is a performance.

“Skincare addict” (Dani, n.d.) @daninicholls makes it clear that she will never give up her excessive routine, as it is the only thing to bring her skin perfection. Once again, we see that elaborateness is considered optimal; the more steps in the routine, the better the skin and emotional care. In her TikTok, @daninicholls poses in front of the camera, showing off her glowing dark skin as triumphant horn music plays in the background. The text in the video reads “reasons you should adopt the minimal skincare movement” (Dani, 2023) and @daninicholls proceeds to list no items as she gazes into the camera and displays her flawless looking skin from all angles. In the caption, @daninicholls writes “It’ll never be me. It’s the foundation to great skin and makeup – unless you’re blessed with amazing skin genes, you lucky thing” (Dani, 2023). @daninicholls is embracing the maximal skincare routine as the secret to her skin success. Though @daninicholls is wearing makeup in the video, her skin appears hydrated and glowing, exactly as she says in the caption. This video encourages multi-step skincare routines and @daninicholls asserts that this is important not only for skin but for makeup. Once understood as essential to femininity, makeup has seemingly been dethroned as the most critical step to beauty. In its place is skincare, the idea that skin must already be perfect before applying

something else to it. The commenters on @daninicholls's video agree with her skincare-first approach. @glow_with_ola commented "I will never cut back on excessive steps PERIODTTTTT" to which @daninicholls responds "Never ever ever ever ever!!!!" One commenter, @niathelight, wrote "Ok but I'm overwhelmed." @daninicholls, certain of the multi-step method, replied "Sis no!! Send questions 🤔." The excessive routine encourages the woman to expand her skincare, thus constructing a sustained and disciplined practice of perfection.

Acknowledging failure can be an important part of pedagogy as well. Skin is fussy. Blemishes appear. Wrinkles start to form. Black creator @themyraaakn shows how imperfections become part of the process, and do not result in giving up on skincare. She captions her video "glazed donut vibes, always ☐" and titles it "POV: you've finally found the skincare routine that works for you" (Myra K. 🧡, 2022). Dressed in the usual attire of a robe and headband, @themyraaakn shows off her bare skin and points to a blemish above her eyebrow with a look of dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, she sticks to her five-step routine, still massaging her face with gentle care and seemingly not deterred by the imperfection. At the end of the routine, @themyraaakn does indeed have a glow on her face the shine of a glazed donut and she looks satisfied and happy with the results. Skincare is an ideal genre for the paradigm of perfection because of this. Those little flaws keep the cycle going and the flawlessness of the influencer creates the determined hope of a solution. A skincare routine can always be improved and optimized, and the next miracle ingredient can be just around the corner. Already, the trendy website Who What Wear has created a list of skincare trends that "will be huge in 2023" including LED facials, skincare-make up combination products, treating skincare "inside out"

and taking skin-focused supplements, and full body skincare (Day, 2023). The possibilities are endless, keeping the perfect relevant and desirable into the future.

Controlling is Caring

In this chapter, I have discussed how the rhetoric of self-care in the intimate feminine public on TikTok constructs the disciplined, arduous routine of perfection into a soothing and pleasant experience of care. Through captions and hashtags, skinfluencers label their skincare routines as self-care, encouraging excessive and elaborate routines as the better form of care. The expectation for perfection, not only in the routine itself but in the way the woman looks, expands the paradigm of perfection's influence into the private sphere of the home. The paradigm becomes inescapable, even in the intimate moments before bed. The outpouring of perfect content made by skinfluencers makes the horizon of perfection appear reachable, if only the woman bought the right products and spent the right amount of time taking care of her face.

Because I have been critical of skincare TikToks, it is only fair to acknowledge the potential good that they may generate. These skinfluencers are always excited to share their stories, successes, and secrets. Much like the intimate public that Berlant (2009) writes about, there is real community and alliance within this feminine intimate public on TikTok. To gently read these videos is to see the exchange of knowledge between women, who are all caught up in the crushing pressure of perfection, as harmonious and generous. The superficial element of caring for one's skin for aesthetic purposes exists, however it is not the only driving force in these videos. As displayed by the women in these videos, skincare has meaning that goes deeper than just the face; it is now tied to self-care as an act of self-love that has perhaps been denied or out of reach for some of them in the past. Beyond the cynical, it is easy to see the value in this

sort of skincare and want to treat yourself with the same careful devotion. In the following chapter, I analyze how the desire for perfection, and its self-care disguise, goes beyond skincare and into a woman's daily life. Self-care becomes a lifestyle, demanding aesthetic perfection from the matcha in your teacup to the way you spend time alone.

Chapter 2: Self-Care Beyond the Mirror

In Asian creator @olafflee's nighttime routine, the opening scene is a bedside table. On it sits a vase with white lilies, a dim white lamp, a silk eye mask, a pink open container of lip balm, and a silver dish with a candle, a string of pearls, and a Chanel skin product. A soft voice with a transatlantic accent says quietly, "It's late at night, and someone across the way is playing La Vie En Rose. It is the French way of saying, 'I'm looking at the world through rose colored glass'" (olivia ♡, 2022a). Tranquil music plays in the background, muddled, as if it was coming from across the River Seine. A hand comes into the frame and lights the candle with a match as a curtain ripples behind it. The next scene is a shelf with color coordinated skincare products, all varying shades of pink, white, light periwinkle, and gold, and a hand picks a tube of Glossier lip balm off the shelf. @olafflee herself then appears, looking into the mirror as she applies the balm to pursed lips. Dressed in a pink satin robe with white lace bows in her hair, she stands in front of more skincare products neatly placed on a white tray. These products are also gold, pink, and white. We see that she has even color coordinated the Q-tips, the silver gua sha tool, and the pink comb to match her skincare. Next to the tray is a box of flowers, pink and yellow petals peeking out from the top. She then gets in bed and fluffs her white and pink pillows, the bows in her hair now replaced with a white clip with lace tied to it. The penultimate scene shows her bed from her point of view, and on it rests a white mug, a heart shaped bowl filled with dark cherries, the pink lip balm and Chanel product from the nightstand, a laptop, and a gold and pink package opened to reveal what looks like green, orange, red, and purple Turkish Delight. A ribbon sits beside the box, as if it has just been opened. Her hand reaches down to pick up the delicate candy. The last scene shows @olafflee in bed, the white eye mask now on her head like a headband, reading a

magazine with an artsy, black and white cover. She turns off the light, puts the magazine away, pulls the mask over her eyes, and lays down to sleep.

One of the things that makes @olafflee’s skincare practice so luxurious is the routine around it. The routine itself is perfect, creating a whole lifestyle of indulgent self-care achieved through control over one’s environment. @olafflee’s complete routine: lighting a candle next to a string of pearls, applying skincare, setting up the bed with Turkish Delight, and reading in pink satin pajamas, is aspirational, generating comments such as “This is perfect” from @oliviasalzman, “This is simply a dream” from @lanad3lr3y_bae, and “One day” from @kimparkerkat. The audio, which is from the 1954 film *Sabrina* starring Audrey Hepburn, makes the video feel even more glamorous with the romantic music, timeless accent, and evocation of American ideals of a nostalgic 20th century Paris. In the TikTok, @olafflee is alone for the entirety of the video. No one else enters the frame, and there is not a hint of a partner, roommate, or family member in the bathroom or the bedroom. Aloneness, a common theme in all the self-care videos in this chapter, is a key factor in my analysis. These TikToks, @olafflee’s included, sentimentalize being alone. The women celebrate and revere their alone time, often proclaiming it as the time they feel most like themselves and use their videos to encourage others to do the same.

Whereas Chapter 1 analyzed TikToks solely focused on the skincare routine, this chapter studies TikToks that show the perfect life beyond the skincare routine. This chapter goes beyond the bathroom mirror to understand how skincare as self-care fits into the broader digital rhetorics of feminine culture on TikTok today. I argue that feminine self-care is continuously enforced through its use in mitigating “the female complaint”: the disappointments, sentimentalities, pleasures, and burdens that women encounter from their entanglement with “the tender fantasies

of a better good life” (Berlant, 2008, p. 1). The female complaint, according to Berlant (2008), is based on fact that “women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking” (p. 1) and centered around heterosexual relationships as the end goal. However, in the TikToks I analyze, the better good life defined by pampering, stillness, and continuously satisfying one’s individual needs rather than romantic heterosexual relationships. The soft life, what this public considers a path to the “good life” is achieved through constructing a *mise en scène* of self-care, an entire environment of pleasure and ease. These women appear to completely alleviate themselves from disappointment by constructing a safe bubble in their homes, away from partners, family, and even friends. By vlogging their lives in a montage style, the creators model what looks like an aesthetically beautiful, perfectly curated life. I focus on how these TikToks delineate feminine self-care as achievable through tight control and discipline of the surrounding environment. This chapter focuses on a key aspect of the soft life: being alone. In these videos, alone time offers women an alternate route to the good life. I begin by outlining the turn from the postfeminist “Top Girl” to the feminine “Soft Girl,” a new ideal femininity being constructed on TikTok. I then analyze the soft life promotion of alone time and study TikToks that portray what I call successful solitude: a woman’s ability to be alone and *enjoy* it. I argue that the rhetoric of successful solitude diverges from both the female complaint and the paradigm of perfection by creating a model of femininity that commends single women, perhaps even preferring it, in the name of self-care and self-preservation. These creators aim to construct a utopic alternative to the female complaint, shunning it completely by giving the romantic life to themselves and not to anyone else.

From ‘Top Girl’ to ‘Soft Girl’

In this chapter, I focus my analysis on the digital intimate public known as “soft life.” I chose this category of videos because of its explicit connection with self-care (hashtags and captions that include “self-care”), a crucial rhetorical device in skincare rhetorics. Loosely defined, the soft life is dedicated to following one’s feminine intuition and finding, as Asian creator @christtxo puts it, “the least resistant path □” (Wei, 2022). The soft life goes farther than the female complaint, which stops at the commiseration over disappointments related to romantic heterosexual partners, by avoiding the possibility of disappointment in a romantic partner completely. Becoming a soft girl seems to be something a woman must find, like an addict achieving sobriety. Of course, in this case, the addiction was with the cycles of hope and disappointment that characterize the female complaint. The recovery is a journey of feminine self-care. Indonesian and Dutch creator, @gjuanita chronicles entering her “soft girl era ☁ □” by lighting a candle on a white bedside table decorated with a light pink rose in a white box, a clear vase with dried grass, a pink quartz crystal, and a round white alarm clock. Much like @olaffee’s video, this nightstand sets the color scheme and feminine tone for the rest of the video. @gjuanita then lays out an all-white outfit on her white bed sheets and grabs a leopard print headband from its place alongside an array of skincare products: a pink and orange Kosas bottle, two white and pink L’Occitane containers, and two clear pink wands filled with water that, when frozen, are used on the face as sculpting tools. We then see half of @gjuanita’s face as she puts on the headband and scoops out the L’Occitane cream with manicured French nails and slowly swipes it across her cheeks. The video ends with her making a glass of iced coffee and swirling the milk with a silver straw. @gjuanita’s soft girl routine is perfectly color coordinated and soothing, mimicking the goal of the routine which cultivates a perfect environment. The

montage style of this video gives the sense that @gjuanita's entire life is like this 20 second clip. Every part of her life looks perfect, down to the dried grass in the vase.

Soft girls stylize their domestic routines, such as getting ready for bed, keeping clean spaces, and making coffee. A trait of traditional femininity, successful domesticity is a key aspect of the Perfect. Within the paradigm, feminine competition is based on "specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity," which is also known as "having it all" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 8). Based in heteronormativity and inscribed with white, middle-class ideals of success, the perfect depicts a (white) woman who can do it all: keep a house, husband, and career. McRobbie notes that the perfect transforms what was boring and monotonous, such as housework, into aspirational benchmarks. By self-regulating and digitally performing perfection for the surveillant sisterhood, soft girls continuously renew this perfect domestic standard with videos like @olaffee and @gjuanita's that render the mundane inspirational and productive; instead of just washing your face, why don't you light a candle and make a pretty cup of coffee too? Perfection extends beyond the skincare routine. These videos seem to suggest that to complete the fantasy, the rest of your life must be perfect as well. The TikToks showing a creator's "whole life" (what they allow us to see) creates the illusion that this perfect day in the perfect life is possible.

Differing from the postfeminist images of "top girl" or "girl boss," the soft life experience is about "denouncing hustle culture" (👩, 2022b) and living a slow, peaceful life. This intimate public is no longer interested in promoting tactics to climb the corporate ladder or fight the patriarchy. Soft living is postfeminist, emerging in a feminine culture that is unconcerned with forwarding a feminist agenda and instead focuses on the positivity, success, and happiness of individual women (Dosekun, 2015; Kanai, 2019). Soft girls promote soft living

as accessible even without the luxurious elements, suggesting that it is achievable for all women regardless of race or class. Black creator @theembodiedgoddess explicitly claims that “SOFT LIVING IS NOT LUXURY LIVING”: “Soft living, point blank period, is about living in a state of ease and doing it with grace... So many people who are out here living in a soft life do not have luxury items. It’s not about buying; capitalism is not soft living, it’s actually anti soft living” (👩, 2022b). She suggests “free” activities like gardening, walking on the beach, or meditation for soft life living. In her video, @theembodiedgoddess contradicts her own denouncement of capitalism by telling us that she owns her own business that she’s “passionate about,” yet she doesn’t “hustle...preach...market like that. That’s hustle, I don’t hustle. Everything comes to me with ease and grace, okay. Everything I do flows easily” (👩, 2022b). By mystifying her labor, @theembodiedgoddess makes her success appear effortless. In another video, @theembodiedgoddess suggests that soft living is an escape from white capitalism and predominantly white institutions (👩, 2022a). In a different TikTok, Black creator @morggst2much faintly echoes Audre Lorde when she describes her soft girl era as “Heavy on the self-preservation ☐” (MorggsT2MUCH, 2022). As she applies Dior face wash, Sunday Riley serum, and Laneige moisturizer, a voice over says, “I read a quote today that said ‘caring for myself is not self indulgence, it’s self preservation... This is in fact my soft girl era. Main character energy. Anyone or anything trying to take away from my happiness will have to kindly exit stage left” (MorggsT2MUCH, 2022). At the end of the TikTok, she takes off the white fuzzy headband and shows off her flawless skin to the camera. For Black soft girls like @morggst2much and @theembodiedgoddess, the soft life may provide a pathway to Lorde’s notion of self-care in that it has the potential to escape white-supremacist institutions like

capitalism. However, their skincare and personal businesses still operate within the capitalist feminine self-care model.

The soft girl intimate public represents a continuation of the Perfect beyond the skincare routine and into the young women's surrounding environment. In the soft girl public, feminine culture is defined by soft femininity, ease, prioritizing one's own happiness, and the calm beautification of everyday life. McRobbie (2015) names "suffering" as a principle of the perfect (p. 4), and soft living responds as an escape from that which can cause suffering, such as work stress or busy lives. The struggle for perfection remains and, like skincare routines, reframes discipline as enjoyable or, as Kanai (2019) calls it, "pleasurable hypervigilance" (p. 55). Soft living acts as a framework for feminine culture on TikTok, offering a lifestyle for self-care to flourish as a fundamental apparatus of femininity within the paradigm of perfection. By creating a powerfully enticing visual fantasy of the "good life," soft living gives women permission to indulge in their "girly" desires and identities. Emboldened by this public, women claim femininity in ways that may have been taboo before: "I love being a feminine girl. I love makeup, picking out an outfit the day before, getting ready for hours, lots of perfume and smelling good, having a skin care routine and taking long showers. I love shopping and getting my nails done. I hate getting my hair wet when I swim. I am literally the opposite of a tomboy and I live for it. I love it" (Dimova, 2022). This quote is from the text in @jmdimov's TikTok, pasted on top of a video of her wearing pink sunglasses and applying pink lip gloss.

Conventional femininity is celebrated, normalized, and idealized, acting out the "unfinished business of sentimentality" (Berlant, 2008, p. 2) and constructing a love affair with the mundane and the possibility of a better good life (Berlant, 2008). This construction, however, does not include the need/desire for heterosexual love.

In the following sections, I analyze a major theme that emerges from the feminine intimate public on TikTok: successful solitude. Solitude is successful when the woman can find pleasure in being alone, the “success” referring to the accomplishment of that enjoyment. Successful solitude advocates for the good life lived alone. In this respect, it presents women with an alternative to the female complaint, while remaining grounded to the complaint’s generalization of individual feelings and experiences, and the constant desire to believe that you are not alone in your struggles. The desired “love plot” (Berlant, 2008, p. 7) at the center of the female complaint becomes a love affair with oneself in the soft life fantasy. In an increasingly individualized society, mediated by online social interactions with friends and strangers, sharing the intimate details of one’s domestic sphere and idealizing solitude provides tenuous points of connection across the digital public. All the soft-life videos analyzed in this chapter include skincare as a part of the routine or as the main focal point of it. Skincare is thus further established as a practice of self-care, reiterating that soft, feminine living is still about perfection and control.

I Know Alone¹⁰

In the paradigm of perfection, like in the female complaint, boyfriends, husbands, and romantic partners have traditionally represented a woman’s success. Inscribed with traditional femininity, perfection is achieved through both “successful domesticity and successful sexuality” (McRobbie, 2015, p. 7) meaning a woman could not be considered perfect without one or the other. However, in the TikTok videos I analyze in this section, I find that value is placed on the success of being *alone* and enjoying/finding pleasure in that alone time. In other words, a

¹⁰ Haim, 2020.

woman's solitude is romanticized. I say "romanticized" because these creators rely on the tropes and conventional signifiers of a romantic occasion as they carefully dress the domestic settings in which they perform alone time as pleasurable and rewarding. Perhaps reeling from the disappointment of a breakup or refusing to buy into romantic love as an end goal, young women are performing self-care by giving the special attention they would have lavished on a romantic partner to themselves instead. Solitude is an antidote, saving the woman from the perils of the female complaint. The women in these videos do their entire daily routines alone and even discuss how important it is to be comfortable in solitude. There is no discussion of loneliness and no hint of a desire to be with anyone else. I argue that this falling in love with one's "peace," represents a significant departure from McRobbie's (2015) theorization of what perfect means and Berlant's (2008) conception of the "good life" leading to a man. What I am calling "successful solitude" has multiple, contradictory aspects. The genre is feminist in its insistence that women don't need a man to be fulfilled and postfeminist in its turning away from societal injustices to focus exclusively on caring for oneself. By analyzing three trends in successful solitude: romanticization, intentionality, and self-preservation, I demonstrate that a willingness to be alone and a confidence in one's single status is enabled in these videos by perfecting the mise-en-scene. The goal is to align one's environments and daily routines to one's "personal tastes," where personalization is a matter of choosing from a grab bag of conventional styles that are legible to one's audience of virtual girlfriends. The most prized romantic relationship is now one with yourself, your space, and your attention to detail.

In the soft life, successful solitude can be achieved through doing romantic things for yourself, as if you were continuously taking yourself on dates. Afrolatina creator @enashaolivia captions her TikTok, "build the life that you crave 🏡" and has titled it "living a slow & romantic

life” (Ena, 2023). The word “life” indicates that this video represents more than just one night of self-care, but a full lifestyle of slow, soft, and romantic living (taking yourself on dates, making a nice meal for yourself, bubble baths, etc.). The TikTok begins with @enashaolivia sitting on a kitchen counter looking away from the camera and touching her hair. Then, like in many other videos I analyze, she lights a candle as if to set the mood. @enashaolivia gets in a shower—a spacious shower, with glass doors, two shower heads, and eucalyptus branches hanging off one of the shower heads—and films herself lathering soap on her arms. After the shower, she lays out a matching black pajama set (presumably the satin one she was wearing in the first shot), prepares a pizza, washes some dishes, and records her skincare routine. Differing from the skincare videos in the first chapter that detailed the creator’s entire routine, @enashaolivia only shows the products she uses and her fingers scooping cleansing balm out of its lilac-colored container. The products shown are recognizable “viral” TikTok products that active participants in feminine intimate public would likely know. For example, the Natrium Purple Ginseng Cleansing Balm is known as an affordable “dupe” for expensive cleansers since the brand is sold at Target. Cleansing balm or other oil cleansers are relatively new to American skincare, becoming popular alongside the rise of the Korean 10-step skincare routine (cleansing oil is the first step, used as a gentle and hydrating alternative to makeup wipes to remove makeup, sunscreen, and other daily contaminants). The one second clip of @enashaolivia’s cleansing balm conveys all this information to anyone familiar with TikTok’s skincare content. Viewers can assume that @enashaolivia has a multi-step skincare routine and, based on the other viral products present in the lineup, clearly dedicates time and money to this aspect of her soft life. The video ends with her placing a crystal glass of water on her bedside table, beside a sunrise alarm clock and glass vase, and reading in bed.

Though @enashaolivia does not explicitly state that she is alone, we can assume that she is based on her single serving of pizza, the reading in bed with no one next to her, and the opening shot that shows her sitting on the counter by herself. All the activities that she does in this version of her slow and romantic life are done in peaceful solitude. To romanticize her routine and set it apart from any other nighttime routine, @enashaolivia performs each activity with perfected care. The shower is clean, her pajamas match, her skincare routine is up to date on the latest trends, and she makes time to read before sleeping. The video is of course edited to only show the best parts of the routine. The messiness of everyday life is not included; there is no water dripping on the floor after the shower, no burned pan from the pizza, no cluttered bedside table. The “mess” we see is @enashaolivia placing her used plates in the sink and rinsing them. Even that looks perfect somehow, with the black dishes stacked neatly on top of each other in an otherwise empty sink. I am not saying that this routine does not look delightful; who doesn’t want a night alone to eat pizza in satin pajamas and read a romance novel before bed? However, selective editing erases the imperfections in a slow and romantic life, keeping it aspirational and upholding a standard of perfection. Successful solitude is made to look easy, like it really is the “least resistant path.”

For solitude to be successful in the feminine intimate public, it must look intentional, yet effortless. This is how loneliness is avoided. If you are alone on purpose, it is harder to inscribe traditional connotations of sadness. In a TikTok with 5.4 million views and 1.1 million likes¹¹ @olafflee demonstrates intentional solitude in a video of her #selfcareroutine. A voice over of someone saying, “I can’t go out [fake cough] [fake cough] I’m sick” (olivia ♡, 2022b) plays at the beginning of the video, followed by what sounds like a school bell and upbeat music. This

¹¹ As of April 19, 2023.

audio, with the fake coughing followed by cheery music, conveys joy in being able to stay home. The video begins with a cityscape bathed in sunset lighting and an image of a color coordinated white desk with a silver laptop open to a pink screen, white mouse and mousepad, white chic-looking mug, silver and white keyboard, pink desktop monitor propped on a clear stand, a planner open to mostly blank pages, pink make up bag, pink and white water bottle, pink vase with pink tulips, and a white candle (the same brand as the candle in @enashaolivia's TikTok). What follows is a masterfully curated and coordinated self-care routine complete with a shower, pink satin robe with a matching lacey slip and hair bows, a shelf with several candlesticks in glass holders and vases full of baby's breath flowers, strawberries in a heart-shaped bowl, even more candles, fuzzy white slippers, and the show *Gossip Girl*. Each scene is timed to change at the end of each beat of the music, creating a montage of pink and white aesthetics. Like the skincare in @enashaolivia's video, @olafflee's routine is performed through product placement and we do not ever see her (except for her feet in the fuzzy slippers at the end). The skincare scene is afforded the most time in the TikTok and is of course immaculately color coordinated. Products from popular and expensive brands like Gisou, La Mer, Fresh, Drunk Elephant, and Glossier—all recognizable as high quality skincare in the feminine intimate public—stack up with each musical note like stop motion. The products are all white and light pink, apart from the glass Gisou bottle which contains a honey-like substance that reflects a golden light over everything. Again, the products indicate that @olafflee has a perfected skincare routine even though she does not walk us through it.

The audio @olafflee uses clearly marks her solitude as intentional, conveying that she would rather stay in and do her self-care routine than go out (presumably with other people). Her solitude is undeniably pleasing, not only looking perfect but also gaining approval from over a

million viewers. The most liked comment¹² says, “this is very very aesthetically pleasing” (@olafflee, 2022b). Another commentor writes “she’s who i aspire to be on a ‘sick day’ off school” to which @olafflee responds, “Self care day 🖋️” (@olafflee, 2022b). @olafflee’s intentional alone time is inspiring, making others want to replicate it and take days off for self-care. Staying home seems to be a common theme in TikTok self-care narratives. In a video captioned, “In my grandma era 🧑🏻👉📺📺📺” (Nguyen, 2023), @daniellenguyen_ shows her nighttime routine as a voiceover plays: “I don’t have no friends ‘cause I like to be in the bed. I’m for the sheets, not the streets baby.” @daniellenguyen’s alone time, complete with pink and red heart pajamas, pink face serums, and a bed with white linens, is *her* choice. In another self-care video from @neginmirsalehi titled “POV: You cancelled your dinner plans [heart hands emoji],” she rejoices in the cancellation by making tea and doing both a haircare and skincare routine in an oversized light pink sweater to the sound of a sped-up version of “Girls Just Want To Have Fun” (Mirsalehi, 2022). @daniellenguyen_, @olafflee, and @neginmirsalehi all convey their solitude as a choice that makes them happy, celebrating the fact they are not going out to see anyone, friends or lovers. By framing their alone time as a joyous and preferred occasion, the creators demonstrate that they are *good* at being alone, happy in their solitude.

The final trait of successful solitude is self-preservation. Alone time is presented as self-reliant tactic to recuperate or self-soothe, creating a protected space away from the rest of the world. In her TikTok, white creator @danielaziatikova represents the function of solitude—in this case meaning self-reliance—with an audio playing over her video: “Whatever you want from someone else, give it to yourself first. If you want compliments from someone else, give them to yourself first. If you want validation from someone else, give it to yourself first. Because

¹² As of April 19, 2023.

no matter how many of them they give you, if you never gave it to yourself in the first place, it will never be enough” (Daniela, 2023). This advice plays over a dimly lit video of @danielaziatikova’s “self love” routine, the shadowy hues making the TikTok at once intimate and serious. After lighting an orange candle in the dim room, @danielaziatikova opens the curtains and stands in front of a mirror fixing her hair. She then massages lotion onto her legs and stomach before applying a sheet mask to her face to complete her skincare routine. The rest of her routine includes making matcha with honey and milk and opening her computer in bed, alluding to watching something on it for self-care. @danielaziatikova’s TikTok includes only her, and this solitude is emphasized by the intimate, dark aesthetic and sermon-like audio. She seems to construct a metaphorical cave for herself to shelter in alone, giving herself everything before asking it from others, per the audio. This self-reliance is very individualized, encouraging a turn inwards for emotional support, rather than looking to others. This sort of solitude is more introspective than others, its success determined partially from emotional work. However, the tools for successful solitude are still the same as in the other videos: aesthetically pleasing candles, mirrors, outfits and skincare.

The self-preservation trait of successful solitude videos seems to imply that the creator is getting over, recovering from, or relearning something. In this sense, a romantic partner perhaps implicitly resides in the backdrop, yet is still never integrated into the soft life. In white creator @marleyjewel’s self-care TikTok, clips of a workout mat with weights, books in a bed with white sheets, and @marleyjewel doing her skincare in the mirror are paired with the audio: “The most important thing to me now is being in touch with myself and how I am actually, really feeling” (Jewel, 2023). This voiceover conveys her emotional state and need for alone time in a succinct way that appeals to the feminine intimate public. A similarly styled TikTok from white

creator @veneziamoe features one second clips of pleasing domestic scenes such as neatly folded clothes on a bed and an orderly breakfast plate of berries and an omelet. @veneziamoe explicitly describes and condones successful solitude with the title “I started to love being by myself” and captions it “There is nothing wrong with enjoying your own company 🤍” (Moe, 2023a). @veneziamoe and @marleyjewel frame their alone time as something they had to learn *after* going through something else. @marleyjewel’s use of the word “now” implies that there was a *before* in which she was not in touch with herself and her feelings. In @veneziamoe’s wording, the use of “started” tells us that there was a time when she did not love being by herself and had to learn that there is “nothing wrong with” being alone. These TikToks suggest that *intentional solitude requires work*. This struggle for successful alone time is legible to TikTok’s feminine intimate public, a space that values feelings and understands that there is an “intelligence” in a woman’s lived experience (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). The experiences conveyed by those little words, *now* and *started*, are fully understood by members of the feminine intimate public who, in their own lives, know what it is like to value others in their lives before themselves. These TikToks hint that the “better good life” is accomplished by learning how to love being alone and effectively bypassing the disappointment stage of the female complaint or at least efficiently moving through it.

There is nothing conventional about women communicating to other women that it is okay to be alone and forego the romantic heterosexual plot that leads invariably to the female complaint. These women decide that romantic fiction and fantasy are more rewarding than the real thing. They keep the romantic conventions and lose the guys. Feminine intimate publics represent an understanding that a woman’s life is made difficult by the trials of the world. The romanticization of alone time as a sanctuary from a world that devalues women suggests that

successful solitude offers women an alternative to the female compliant. Berlant argues that the feminine intimate public flourishes “in proximity to the political” (2008, p. 3) and it seems fitting that in a politically divisive time in the United States, a withdrawal into caring for the self is alluring. Although others are not present in these videos, the presence of femininity is alive in each gesture. The videos seem to say: women understand this urge to be alone, to be able to care for oneself better than anyone else could. The TikToks are also incredibly satisfying to watch, at once pacifying with their small pleasures and motivational with their perfected interiors. Kanai (2019) discusses how digital feminine intimate publics constructs a “pleasingly mild contestation of neoliberal standards of productivity” which in turn justifies an “inoffensive resistance” by enjoying doing nothing and being idle (p. 55). Some creators argue for a productive alone time, for example, @veneziamoe uses an audio clip of someone saying “Make your alone time useful because when you do that you kind of stop thinking about what anyone else is doing” over videos of her skincare, breakfast, and exercise routines (Moe, 2023b). This “useful” alone time still shows the same practices of self-care as the other videos. These performances of solitude and self-care still strive to be perfect, but frame that perfection as entirely constructed by the individual in isolation.

Instead of promoting successful relationships, this intimate public pursues an uncomplicated relationship with the self as the goal, perhaps reflecting Berlant’s (2008) claim that the central fantasy of a women’s intimate public is the “desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself” (p. 7). However, with the shift away from the heterosexual script, the soft life becomes a fantasy of *pleasurable* simplicity rather than a need to reduce oneself for a man. It becomes an invitation for a woman to design a life for herself that focuses on small comforts, finding satisfaction alone

instead of waiting for a romantic relationship to (potentially) bring it. Simple, which Berlant (2008) uses deprecatorily, is a beautiful, even profound, promise in the soft life. As a space for a woman to be effortlessly, pleurably alone and devoted to her own self-care, the soft life provides a peaceful route. The romantic, heterosexual love that looms at the end of the female complaint is not the end goal in this public. The soft life provides a different purpose: a romantic life with oneself.

Alone Together

Existing in an intimate public, TikToks encouraging alone time ends up creating a strong community of people who aspire to the envisioned lifestyle. Comments like “manifesting this life <3” on @enashaolivia’s video or “This entire video looks like a commercial for peace 🧘” from @daniellenguyen_’s video not only show a desire for the soft life, but also a connection across those within the public. Intimate publics are powerful because of their ability to create recognition between participants and in feminine culture, that the “fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any” (Berlant, 2008, p. x). The TikToks in the section above present just enough relatability for others to see themselves living similarly yet remain elusive in their glamor, built on “parameters that may require things like beauty, or white, middle class belonging in differing variations” (Kanai, 2019, p. 181). By performing the self as relatable, others see their experiences reflected mirror-like back to them (Kanai 2019), but also see a version of themselves as they might be with a little effort. This tension between recognition and aspiration knits the public together.

In this section, I analyze TikToks that represent the other side of the intimate public: community. Cultivated through secret sharing and commiseration, the girlfriendship community

of the feminine intimate public creates an interesting relationship between solitude and togetherness. The creators all film themselves alone yet are addressing an audience through talking to the camera. In the context of successful solitude, we can imagine that the videos in this section are a way to be alone *together*. Commiserating, sharing beauty and lifestyle tips and secrets, or gossiping about their own lives, these creators make content that strengthens the feminine intimate public on TikTok.

White creator @madisonsarah_ begins her video with a voice-over that says, “Spend a soft Friday with me. I woke up and decided I want to be pampered today. I want to just do things that make me feel happy” (Madison, 2022). Wearing a white waffle-fabric robe, @madisonsarah_ stands in her bathroom with her hair slicked back into a ponytail, brushing her teeth with a white toothbrush. The camera is positioned where the mirror is, giving the viewer a perspective as if they were on the other side of a two-way mirror. She proceeds to do her skincare, wiping a cotton round over her cheeks, applying eye cream under her eyes with a silver tool, and massaging cream onto her face. Though this is her morning routine, @madisonsarah_ already looks put together with her sleek hair, gold necklace and rings, and long manicured nails. After putting on makeup, she heads to the kitchen, sees some ripe bananas, and decides to make banana bread. The rest of the video shows @madisonsarah_ going to the grocery store to get baking ingredients, making banana bread in a cute pink apron, going to a mall to buy a present for a friend, and getting a massage.

Until the last three seconds of the two-minute video, @madisonsarah_ is alone. She goes through her “soft day” by herself: baking alone, shopping alone, and being home alone. However, by engaging with the camera—looking into it, smiling, and showing the viewer her perspective by carefully constructing the frame—@madisonsarah_ invites her audience into her

life. As a viewer, you get an intimate look into her life like a best friend would. We watch her as she does her skincare; we sit on the floor with her as she unpacks boxes; we see her try a banana bread muffin; we go into the grocery store with her and pick out flour. Kanai (2019) describes this pseudo-relationship as “spectatorial girlfriendship,” where others are “invited to *look*” (p. 6) at and thus create relation with mediated texts. Spectatorial girlfriendship “provides a pleasurable point of connection” (Kanai, 2019, p. 6) between the creator and their real and imagined audience. The fact that @madisonsarah_ spends the day alone amplifies this relationship. Her voice-over, which explains every step of her day, is informative and playful, drawing the viewer into her life and teaching them how to live “softly.” Watching it, we feel almost like voyeurs, put in this unusual position of intimate strangers that have almost unfettered access to this creator’s life. We are alone together, on different sides of the two-way mirror.

Spectatorial girlfriendship in which the viewer is positioned as a sympathetic listener rather than a passive observer is another common trope in self-care videos. In these TikToks, the creators perform their self-care routines while addressing an issue in their life, usually about a partner or friend. The viewer is addressed as if she were a commiserating friend, sympathetic to issues of the female complaint, having experienced or witnessed them in the feminine intimate public before. White creator @skylerreneee discusses a relationship concern with her viewers, positioning the camera close to her face like a mirror as she does her skincare and makeup. “Get ready with me. I’m supposed to go to brunch with my boyfriend but he’s acting so strange right now,” (Sky, 2023) she says as she rubs a dewy serum into her face. She continues, “So, he randomly texted me while I was out and sent me a restaurant and said, ‘meet me here tomorrow at 12:30 which is kinda strange’” (Sky, 2023). She then interrupts her story to promote the skincare product she is putting on her face: “Side note, this is my first time using the Laneige

glowy serum and this is like the perfect skin prep for dry skin” (Sky, 2023). Her story continues and she tells us that in the two years they have been dating, her boyfriend has never invited her to a restaurant. He is not answering her calls, only her texts, and he refuses to pick her up. “My boyfriend is either surprising me with something, breaking up with me, or I’m just crazy and he just wants to take me to a normal brunch” (Sky, 2023). While she goes back and forth on whether she is “crazy,” @skylerreneee diligently applies product after product to her skin. This TikTok follows the format of “get ready with me” (grwm) videos in which creators film themselves doing their skincare and makeup. At the end of the video, @skylerrenee says, “Alright I’m a little anxious right now but I will let you guys know how my brunch goes” (Sky, 2023a).¹³

Though @skylerreneee is alone for her skincare/self-care video, she references a boyfriend figure. Drawing on the collective knowledge of heterosexual relationships in the feminine intimate public, @skylerreneee constructs a relationship dilemma that causes the viewer to think, *yeah that is odd I would hate it if my boyfriend did that!* This relationship complaint, shared by @skylerrenee and a sympathetic viewer in the intimate public, brings the two together creating a girlfriendship. This also codes the viewer as a woman either in or familiar with heterosexual relationships. The comments on the video are supportive, some even making predictions on the outcome. @decayedwolfbones’ supportive comment, “girl you are not overthinking it,” (Sky, 2023) received 3,230¹⁴ likes. @julijamur123’s predictive comment, “Dumping or proposing,” (Sky, 2023) received 46,900⁶ likes. These comments are representative of the feminine intimate public rallying around @skylerreneee and telling her (and themselves)

¹³ In a follow up grwm video (Sky, 2023b), @skylerreneee tells us that they did not break up or get engaged. They decided to work on their relationship.

¹⁴ As of April 19, 2023.

that it is not “crazy” to overthink the interactions with boyfriends. Though @skylarrennee is alone in her room, the intimate public binds her with others so that she is alone in the presence of others. Her skincare, the backdrop of the TikTok, signals that self-care includes multi-tasking and can be a productive, and relatable, avenue for girlfriendship.

The feminine intimate public allows women to be alone, while also inviting others into their solitude to share in the ups and downs of feminine life. In a particularly melancholy TikTok, white creator @e.mxvii reveals the process of “getting over a friendship breakup” (em, 2023). A lengthy caption affirms @e.mxvii’s sorrow: “currently sobbing while posting this, no one really prepares you for your best friend of 7+ years to get up and leave out of the blue. but that’s life right?” (em, 2023) The caption includes advice for the readers to let go of the things they cannot control, to be grateful that they are the “one who got hurt as compared to the one who hurt someone else,” and that “time will heal all wounds” (em, 2023). The TikTok shows @e.mxvii holding her head in sadness in bed before she gets up, opens the curtains, deleting all the pictures of her friend on her laptop, and gathering Polaroid photos, a scarf, and a stuffed animal (the things that remind @e.mxvii of her friend) and putting them in a bag. She then showers, changes into cozy sweatpants, and finishes with her skincare routine. The angsty hit, “Deja Vu,” from the teenage pop star Olivia Rodrigo plays as @e.mxvii moves through her self-care. The TikTok is clearly popular, with over one million likes and six million views¹⁵. Commentors express their sympathies, relating to @e.mxvii’s situation: “I cried more through my friendship breakup than my romantic on tbh” user @abookishfaerie writes, gaining over 45,000 likes⁸ on the comment. The video discusses a struggle that is not often recognized but felt deeply, disclosing an intimate pain felt by many in this public. Watching this video and reading

¹⁵ As of April 19, 2023.

the comments, I could not help but think of my own painful breakup with my high school best friend, amazed that so many others had gone through what I had. @e.mxvii's solitude is both literal and emotional as she deals with the emptiness of a breakup alone in her room. However, in keeping with the aesthetics of the feminine intimate public, her sadness still *looks* good. Her aesthetically pleasing sadness requires work. The white sheets on her bed contrast with light pink plush pillows. Her windowsill is lined with funky-shaped white candles and a white teacup. Her laptop is rose gold and the bag she puts the mementos in is a similar color. Her shower is clean and organized with a vine hanging from the basket beneath the shower head. True to the feminine self-care routine, her grieving process is perfectly curated.

Solitude Perfected

Berlant (2008) writes that when a woman fails to build a good life through traditional modes of “building reciprocity” such as romantic relationships, she finds other ways to cultivate and remind herself of the “feeling of love” and “having been affectively recognized and emotionally important” (p. 7). These “astoundingly creative” (Berlant, 2008, p. 7) ways of managing love and emotion are represented in these TikToks as the women construct elaborately beautiful self-care routines. They have perfected their solitude, designing methods revolving around skincare, tidying, reading, and eating. These methods are perfected in their aesthetics—pleasing to look at and aspirational—but also in their outcomes. Whether or not these methods actually work, they are convincing and enviable enough to be desirable. Watching these TikToks, it is hard to stop yourself from imagining a self-care night just like @olafflee's or @enashaolivia's and thinking that this is what *you* need to feel better. The videos are just inviting and intimate enough that they include the members of the feminine intimate public, yet

stay at arm's length, picking and choosing what is included in their footage. Perfection is not vulnerable in its curated and edited existence.

This perfected performance of solitude will likely remain aspirational for most women. Perhaps you can access a day of this, but an entire “soft” lifestyle? Out of reach. These commodity-oriented routines, often set in immaculate and exquisite apartments, create a harsh class divide. The message of these TikToks is self-care requires wealth. It also requires time and the ability to be alone away from family or kids or partners. Heavily edited, many of these TikToks make it seem like these women do not have jobs or other pressing responsibilities that get in the way of their self-care. Claiming self-care as the most important part of their life thus looks like a privilege rather than a given, if care is defined through candles and skincare products. Professional influencers active in this intimate public are paid to make their skincare and self-care routines look pretty. They are paid to stay home and clean their apartment and make matcha from scratch. Though some creators, like @theembodiedgoddess quoted in a previous section, claim that the self-care/soft lifestyle does not have to be luxurious, it is hard to divorce the two when the aspiration relies so heavily on the products and glamour.

The romanticization of solitude, and the determination to be successful at being alone, adds a twist to McRobbie’s paradigm of perfection and Berlant’s female complaint. Instead of valuing romantic relationships above all else (though this is clearly still a part of the paradigm), TikTok’s intimate feminine public covets successful solitude as the ultimate feminine achievement. This rhetoric amplifies the classic notion that women need to love themselves before ever expecting someone else, the possibility of this love clogged by needing to fit into a certain aesthetic of white linens, expensive candles, overpriced face serums. A postfeminist, hyper-individualization of care is bittersweet, perhaps representing a move away from the

expectation for women to rely on and cater to a male partner, but, in the process, isolating her from the love of anyone else. When describing the burden of perfection, McRobbie (2015) writes, “in a much more individualised society, the body is taxed with the burden of acting as its own social structure as forms of social collectivity and communality fade” (p. 7). The soft life, though potentially offering an uncomplicated, disappointment-free existence, places the responsibility of care entirely on the woman as she must be her own partner, friend and family. Is the desire for relief from the female complaint, though it is deeply understandable, worth losing the love and support that can come from the complexity of relationships? The soft life, in its intentional solitude and fantasy of self-care, claims that it is.

Conclusion: Towards Self Love

Skincare and soft life TikToks produce aesthetically beautiful, satisfying, and soothing depictions of self-care. The women in the videos are enviable: gorgeous, young, and appearing to have the all the time, money, and candles necessary for luxuriously simple lives. At first glance, feminine self-care TikToks seem to create charming fantasies of how to take care of oneself and invest in personal well-being. However, as I argue throughout the thesis, this care is a disguise for the meticulous control, over one's appearance and environment, that is required for femininity in this intimate public. Femininity is not actually defined by being good at *self-care*, it is defined by how much discipline and diligence a young woman dedicates to her routines of self-perfecting. In the feminine intimate public on TikTok, this control is expressed through excessive skincare routines that insist a woman's appearance must be perfect in the private hours before bed and in the morning, even if no one is around to see her. Her skincare routine should not only be functionally perfect (cleaning the face in 10 steps, as K-beauty teaches), but aesthetically perfect as well (lotions and serums color coordinated to match the pink headband on her head).

This control is also communicated through the perfection of her environment, which, in the soft life genre, looks like a clean-living space and a lifestyle routine that includes doing romantic activities for herself. Her solitude and her enjoyment and preference for this time alone ensures perfect control. The feminine self-care rhetoric on TikTok encourages women to be fully independent from the heterosexual script that dictates that happiness and satisfaction can only be found in a male partner. Instead, the feminine intimate public operates through a girlfriend gaze in which women relate to (and judge) other women's routines of self-care. Divorced from a heteronormative expectation of love, the feminine intimate public declares that women can take

care of (and are better at taking care of) themselves. This care, however, often functions as an apparatus of control.

What is suspended between the lines of this paper is the topic of love. I could not decide how I wanted to include an analysis of the delicate similarities and differences between “care” and “love” and whether this was even relevant to a practice rooted in hypervigilant perfection. The truth is, I could not define the relationship between these two concepts in the self-care videos I analyzed. The women in these videos seem to exist in the liminal space between love and care, on the precipice of both at different times. There is care (attention) in the skincare routines and the alone time, but is there love? Both Berlant (2008) and McRobbie (2015) discuss the presence of romantic love with a partner in their respective theories. The romantic partner is the foundation of the female complaint and a measure of success in the paradigm of perfection. In my project, however, I broach a much more complicated struggle: loving the self. Self-love is perhaps the ultimate goal of these routines, implied by the rhetoric of therapy and self-soothing and the desire for finding peace and happiness in being alone. Yet these women, held back by the demands of perfection, control, and a self-care structure based in capitalism and whiteness, do not appear to have reached this goal. Self-care may be a step towards love, but it is not the realization of it.

When I first started this program, I was so sure that I would study emotion. However, the further I waded into the modes of rhetorical criticism, the harder it was to find a way to study what exists beyond words. In future research, I would like to study how feminine self-care approaches love and perhaps redefines what love can mean for young women. Self-care, though a relatively recent awareness for white, heterosexual, cisgender women, has existed in Black and queer feminist communities for decades. TikTok’s popular feminine self-care discourse has a

long way to go before finding the radical self-acceptance described by Lorde (1988). If we are indeed moving away from a femininity defined by heterosexual romantic relationships, where does this romance reside now? Can this fantasy of love truly land on the self? I would like to hope that this is the future of romance: a feminist fantasy of not just superficially caring for but sincerely loving the self, and a path towards that love that is not done in isolation. Rather, it is found together.

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Vita

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