

# Is the 'Girl Boss' Really Just an Anti-Feminist Commodification?

Leone Robinson- *Sociology*

Social media today has been flooded with the increasing portrayal of the 'Girl Boss'. Instagram and TikTok particularly have millions of posts captioned '#GirlBoss', showing women living an aestheticized life of success, appearing to be the perfect stress-free life that any girl can achieve. From first look, this seems to be a feminist success where women are breaking into the business world, achieving the same business success as men whilst maintaining and promoting femininity. However, looking to theorise the rise of the Girl Boss in contemporary society raises questions on whether this is more of an anti-feminist capitalist commodity than a liberating goal to aim for.

The notion of the Girl Boss rose to popularity from Sophia Amoruso's Book '#Girlboss' (2014), which characterises a successful businesswoman in a male dominated industry, based on Amoruso's success in setting up fast fashion giant Nasty Gal. She states how becoming a '#Girlboss' is not an easy thing to do, as it 'takes a lot of hard work to get there, and then once you arrive it takes even more hard work to stay there' (Amoruso, 2014). However, she also makes it clear that this is possible for anyone to achieve if you are not 'scared of hard work' (Amoruso, 2014). The meritocratic mantra of 'she gets what she wants because she works for it' (Amoruso, 2014) is the clear idea of how to become a girl boss. Initially looking at this emergence of the Girl Boss, it seems like an aspiration that lifts women up and encourages a feminist movement in breaking through patriarchal boundaries.

The girl boss aesthetic has since taken over spaces like social media, advertising, podcasts and books. With celebrities promoting the idea that, if you can work hard, you can be as successful as them, constant social media posts flaunting this lifestyle, self-help books, and adverts featuring these women, it is hard for girls and women in contemporary society to escape it. It can be argued that the Girl Boss is a thing that is advertised and sold to young women as a capitalist commodity or a neoliberal meritocratic myth through these outlets, rather than a feminist movement.



The girl boss can be seen as a neoliberal concept in contemporary society, which explains how it has become the opposite of the original meaning. Neoliberalism is largely understood as a political and economic system which is 'characterized by privatization, deregulation and rolling back and withdrawal of the state'. It can be argued that this system is a particular form of capitalism, aiming to make people more responsible for themselves. Neoliberal society comes with a culture of 'meritocracy', where there is constant promotion of the idea that 'if we try hard enough we can make it' and that we must 'market ourselves in the right way to achieve success' (Littler, 2018: 2).

The way the girl boss is shown to us online, makes it a desirable lifestyle to achieve. This meritocratic theory of success is reiterated to young women through the girl boss, encouraging them to buy in to

the aesthetic and work hard to get the lifestyle advertised to them. Girl bosses can thus be seen as a neoliberal anti-feminist concept, as women are encouraged to work for the capitalist system, diminishing the breaking of boundaries for female success.

Rottenberg (2019: 5) explains how a neoliberal form of feminism has been created which benefits the system by creating a 'new feminist subject ... who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care'. Neoliberal in the way it makes women responsible for themselves and their own empowerment, this feminism creates an 'ideal' of a woman who has it all. The girl boss can be seen as a portrayal of this ideal, where women have a perfect balance of work, life and family and success. This is feminist in the way it is encouraging female victories in having it all, finally suggesting women can have successful careers as well as a family and social life.

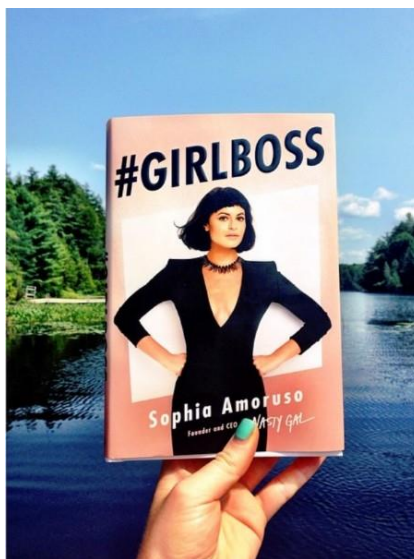
This is the perfect balanced lifestyle, which is seen as being a successful girl boss. However, Rottenberg (2019) has suggested that the new feminist ideal, which we can see as the girl boss, that is created by neoliberalism, may actually also be needed by neoliberalism. In neoliberal society, individuals are valued as 'human capital' (Rottenberg, 2019: 6), and the neoliberal system is reliant on 'reproduction and care work' for the reproduction and maintenance of the 'so-called human capital' (Rottenberg, 2019: 6).

It can be seen that this new feminist ideal, which can also be known as the girl boss, is maintaining reproduction and care work through 'so-called aspirational women' (Rottenberg, 2019: 6). Where these women think they are being empowered through becoming a girl boss who succeeds in a balanced life, the neoliberal capitalist system is also

benefiting from their role, making it questionable whether this is really feminist empowerment.

McRobbie (2004: 255) similarly discusses the emergence of 'post-feminism', which she argues has created a 'double entanglement', involving the 'co-existence of neo-conservative values' and 'processes of liberalisation' (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Or, as Gill (2011) puts it, the 'doing and undoing of feminism'. The rise of the girl boss can be described perfectly as a 'double entanglement' (McRobbie, 2004). Moments of empowerment seem to be given to women 'as a kind of substitute for' (McRobbie, as quoted by Gill, 2011) real feminist movement and progression in the neoliberal era.

Thus, where women are feeling empowered by the rise of the girl boss, a seemingly feminist movement, this is also facilitating the 'undoing of feminism' (Gill, 2011), by limiting their freedom to this. The girl boss is given to women in place of political feminist progression, making us feel that we are living post feminism.



Contemporary society has also seen a shift to what can be described as a 'consumer society' (Baudrillard, 2017), where the collective culture of society is now massively built on consumption rather than production, like previous.

As Lury (2011) explains, the transformation to a 'consumer culture' includes the 'tendency for more and more aspects of human life to be made available through the market', 'the expansion of shopping as a leisure pursuit', 'the pervasiveness of advertising in everyday life', and the 'promotion of lifestyle as a way of life'.

Considering these aspects, the girl boss can be seen as a product that is sold in this culture. In a society that is dominated by consumption, an individual's identity and lifestyle is something that can be created and formed through their consumption. As Featherstone (1987: 59) explains, lifestyle is no longer something that is naturally inhabited, but has become something that individuals curate and display through 'the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions.'

Thus, the girl boss can be seen as nothing but a deliberate lifestyle creation based on the consumption of particular goods that are then displayed. For example, on social media, posts with the caption '#girlboss' (Amoruso, 2014) are often simply displays of commodities, such as designer clothing, luxury home furnishings, or expensive makeup.

This aesthetic is then promoted to other women as something they can also buy, showing how this is not feminism but in fact capitalism at work.

This shift has also been explained as a move to an 'information society' (Webster, 2006), where there is 'more and more information, and less and less meaning' (Baudrillard as quoted by Webster, 2006: 20). In contemporary society, we are bombarded with signs and symbols so much so that their meanings and importance have become lost in the abundance of information. Mass media, in the form of social media, television and adverts, have arguably caused the loss of meaning in the 'information society' (Webster, 2006), as the truth and reality is reproduced and interpreted so much so that we have created a 'hyper-reality' (Baudrillard, as quoted by Webster, 2006: 20), where symbols are now used as

a replacement for 'actual objects or experiences' (Cazan-Tufescu, 2014).

The girl boss is arguably another symbol that has lost its meaning in the information society. The mass reproduction of the lifestyle and the mass presentation of it online has resulted in the original

feminist meaning of girl boss losing its salience. It is now a superficial symbol that is used in place of the actual experience, and therefore actually not being anything more than an expression.

There is no longer truth or meaning behind the girl boss, making it inherently anti-feminist. This was a real movement in recognizing female success and is now dismissed as an expression without a real truth. Social media posts that fit the '#girlboss' (Amoruso, 2014) aesthetic but have no meaning behind them are not a feminist success.

From looking critically at the girl boss it can be seen that it is not the feminist movement that it seems to be. Ultimately, it can be argued that the girl boss has become a neoliberal anti-feminist commodity in contemporary society, largely due to it losing its meaning in an 'information society' (Webster, 2006) that has become so infiltrated with signs and symbols. The rise of consumerism and commodification of lifestyle has equally impacted feminist movements, such as the rise of the girl boss, making it something for girls to just buy into. Essentially, the girl boss has become a something of a substitute for real feminist progress for women that benefits neoliberal capitalism.







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