

‘Can’t we have a funny joke?’ Why #girlmath is dividing TikTok

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📺 According to girl math, you’re saving money if you spend extra to get free shipping.

The lighthearted trend – using questionable numbers to justify indulgent purchases – has been accused of fueling sexism

Anyone who watched 2000s episodes of What Not to Wear or read Cosmopolitan in the 90s knows girl math well. Back in the day, we used to call it fashion math. Let’s say a designer bag costs \$800. That’s out of budget – until you remember you’ll use it every day. That’s, like, less than \$1 per wear.

Congratulations: you’ve just completed girl math 101. Women on TikTok say the trend, which began with a video made by the user Samantha James, pokes fun at the lengths we will go to justify life’s indulgences. Maybe everything you want to buy on Sephora.com costs \$38, but \$40 will get you free shipping, so you’re actually saving money if you go ahead and add a \$15 mascara to your cart. Makes sense, right?

In August, Daniela Soto posted a girl math video to TikTok sharing some of her wisdom, such as “if something is on sale and I don’t buy it, I’m losing money” and “anything in my Venmo or Apple Wallet is free money”.

“Women are equally capable of making fun of themselves, society’s expectations, and gender norms,” said Soto, who is 24 and works at a mental health startup in Los Angeles.

Malaysia Michelle, a 29-year-old beauty content creator, said: “When I first heard the trend ‘girl math’, I actually thought to myself, ‘Wow, finally a phrase I can use to validate my delusions of being a girl who loves to treat herself whenever and however she can.’”

TikToks with the hashtag #girlmath have been viewed over 488m times. (Just think of the price per view.) Many include comments that say the fad legitimizes sexist stereotypes about spendthrift women.

Girl math is one of a number of TikTok trends attributed to women recently, including the “hot girl walk” – one of the site’s most famous rituals, in which one takes daily jaunts to stave off the ennui of modern life. Then came the “lazy girl job”, the aspirational hope for an easy, 9-to-5 gig that doesn’t require much of one’s soul. After that was “girl dinner”, throwing a meal together out of a bunch of snacks after a tiring day.

Maddy Mitchell, a 25-year-old content creator who lives outside Boston, credits the Barbie movie, with all of its pink frothiness, with popularizing these trends. “Women are celebrating things that bring them together, which is so cool, but of course it’s going to be devalued by many other people out there,” she said. “That’s what it means to be a woman, unfortunately.”

Users clapped back at criticism of #girlmath with “boy math”, making light of men’s financial irresponsibility – or just making fun of men. Example: “Boy math is knowing 75% of your head is balding and still getting haircuts on the last 25%.” Or: “Boy math is not wanting to spend \$10 on flowers because they’ll die.”

“These gendered differences reflect longstanding assumptions about the propensity of women towards smaller-scale, perhaps frivolous consumption, and men towards more planned, functional consumption,” said Eve Ng, an associate professor of women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Ohio University.

In Mitchell’s eyes, “honestly, girl math is really funny and I think people are blowing it out of proportion. They’re flipping the narrative to make it seem like girls are dumb, which is upsetting, because can’t we live and have a funny joke that doesn’t equate to our intelligence? I think that all too frequently, when women talk men do not have the nuance to understand if we’re being ironic.”