

'Girl math' was a fun social media joke. Then 'boy math' came along

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"Girl math" has been making the rounds on social media, but the discourse around it has gotten increasingly complex.

The problem with social media in-jokes is they don't stay funny for long. Someone takes them too seriously, then they become overblown commentaries on society as a whole, and then a media outlet goes and writes about them and drives it all into the ground.

The concept of "girl math" is currently coasting through this process. The trend features women trading jokes about the internal calculations they make to explain their silly-but-sometimes-not-so-silly behavior. It's less "math" and more, say, an internal feminine logic, often opaque but always amusing. Some examples of "girl math" include:

- Timing your hair washing so it lines up with weekend plans.
- Spending enough to get free shipping, because otherwise you're kind of losing money, right?
- Recognizing that if you wear a cute outfit, but no one important saw it and you didn't get a picture, you didn't really wear that cute outfit.
- Planning an evening around a reservation, and walking back through every step of your routine so you can figure out when you have to start getting ready. (The answer to this equation is always earlier than one would think.)

"Girl math is essentially the recognition that time, convenience, and money are interchangeable currencies," disability rights influencer Imani Barbarin wrote on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter.

It's supposed to be a joke, and like all jokes, it's not for everyone. You either understand the concept of girl math or you don't, and it's not worth getting too upset about if you're in the latter camp. You don't necessarily need to know its heritage; that it comes during the 2023 Barbie-tinted Season of Girlhood, or on the heels of the "girl dinner" trend, or that it echoes a 2021 social media motto that posits, simply, "The girls that get it, get it."

Enter 'boy math'

Unfortunately, the relatable axioms of girl math found their way onto parts of the internet that, well, didn't get it. Groups of people started criticizing these innocent jokes, as if a single quip about the mysterious desire for free shipping indicates deep financial illiteracy or that the

circuitous logic women admit to very occasionally using affects every serious decision of their lives.

“‘Girl math’ is simply ignoring our responsibilities momentarily,” one commenter wrote on X. “And everyone has to make it a civil rights issue.”

Naturally, “girl math” also entered the lexicon of brands and big names jumping on the latest trend. (“Girl dinner,” a term for essentially a personal charcuterie board or random bite-sized snacks from the fridge, attracted similar hype over the summer.)

“You call it Girl Math, we call it the Labor Day sale,” a recent promotion from clothing brand Lane Bryant read.

From this tangle of overly serious criticism and brand interference, the idea of “girl math” stretched far past its original intent. Finally, the social media peanut gallery turned the trend on its head. After all, if “girl math” exists, what is “boy math”?

“I think the great equivalent to girl math for boy math is the fact that all of us dudes think we could land a plane,” a man in one popular TikTok posited. (This could also be an interesting extension of the Roman Empire discourse, which began when many men admitted they think about the Roman Empire on a shockingly regular basis.)

Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York is one of the big names to wade into the “girl math” trend.

Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

Some boy math examples were a bit less, shall we say, lighthearted

“Boy math is wanting a traditional wife but calling you a gold digger cause he has to provide.”

“Boy math is how 5’10 measures 6”

When 51-year-old comedian Dane Cook married his 24-year-old longtime girlfriend Kelsi Taylor,” the social media response was filled with jeers of “boy math.”

New York Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez used this permutation in late September to call out Republican Rep. Kevin McCarthy before he was ousted from his position as House speaker.

“Boy math is needing 15 attempts to count the votes correctly to become Speaker and then shutting down the government 9 months later,” she wrote on X, much to the consternation of some male commenters who called it sexism.

“Girls were just being silly and making fun of themselves with girl math jokes but y’all wanted to be rude for no reason now look at you, the boy math drag is endless,” one commenter wrote on X.

All of a sudden, a lighthearted joke became so much more: A commentary on gender and stereotypes, an obscure reference through which even serious political conversations could be observed.

The deeper meanings of boy and girl math

Once a trend is mutilated and reanimated into discourse, it’s time to bring in an expert. Mary Louise Adams, a sociology expert and associate professor of kinesiology and health studies at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, gamely offered her take on what “girl math” and “boy math” may mean — if we want it to mean anything.

“What I read through this trend is that people still do feel like they live in a profoundly gendered world,” she told CNN via email. “They assume, and their experience confirms for them, that women and men approach the world from quite different positions.”

Some of the discomfort around the whole “girl math” joke has stemmed from the use of the term “girl,” which some people find belittling when used to describe grown women, and its apparent riff on the false stereotype that women are less mathematically capable than men.

“Some women are trying to make jokes that rely on the fact that differences between men and women are still seen as fundamental to how people live,” Adams said. “In the 1970s feminists definitely would have thought we would be getting over this by now!”

However, she said jokes about “girl math” could be a humorous reclamation of these stereotypes. Such humor, she says, is a form of natural bonding, and can produce a shared identity. Through this lens, jokes about spending money to save it, or how to manage time while trying to fulfill different social roles, serve as a subversion of these “girl”-coded expectations rather than a reiteration.

“The desire for identity is not just about the ‘math,’ of course, but maybe about resisting a bigger cultural belittling of women’s consumption habits, and persistent assumptions that women can’t be as good as men at math and other technical things,” Adams said.

“It could be women thumbing their noses at people who try to devalue them.”

At that point, it’s less “girl math” and more girl calculus, or girl game theory. It makes sense to those who need it. For everyone else, it’s an equation they shouldn’t trouble themselves to solve.

