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Carly Drake and Allison Grady: Is 'girl dinner' a feminist movement? Not yet.

By Carly Drake and Allison Grady
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Expand



Girl dinner can be a simple plate of small bites or leftovers. (Enn Li Photograph/Getty Images)

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Since the term “girl dinner” [started circulating in May](#), it has become embedded in our online vocabularies. This term is persistent, potent and political, with some rallying for its place in feminist history. However, as body image researchers, we argue girl dinner is not emblematic of social progress. Rather, in many ways, girl dinner has exposed how only certain women, and certain ideas, are invited to the table.

To recap five months' worth of memes: Girl dinner is what women eat when they're home alone. A scroll through the hashtag on TikTok reveals easy-to-make, often nutritionally dubious meals. They're infinitely shareable precisely because they're relatable. Who wants to cook a full meal for one person? On a hot summer day? After a full day of work? In this context, an assortment of cheese, crackers and hummus holds a certain appeal.

While the tone of girl dinner discourse has been humorous since the start, that humor got darker once women began publicizing meals that featured childlike portion sizes and "diet" foods. Such dinners were paired with the now-iconic girl dinner song, framing them as "funny" and "normal." They blended into the conversation. Then, just as some started [calling out girl dinner as a cover for disordered eating](#), others maintained that [the point is joy, not deprivation](#).

Adopting a wider lens, TikTok creator [Madison Wild](#) observes that as we continue to "girl" things like [dinner](#), [math](#), [walks](#) and [jobs](#), the word is redefining feminine as "messy and disheveled and a little out of sorts" rather than the familiar polished-to-perfection standard. In this way, Wild says, the "girl-ing" phenomenon belongs to a long history of women rejecting patriarchal products such as the corset, domestic labor and nuclear family. Girl is an identity. Girl is feminine connection.

Yet, research shows women's online connection is complicated and not as liberating as we'd hope. Girl dinners and the women who share them are bound by what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls "feeling rules," or implicit guidelines for conversations with others. Feeling rules are gendered, which means they take on certain qualities in women-dominated spaces, [including digital ones](#).

Online "girlfriendships" feature emotions, yes, [but only the upbeat, self-deprecating or "relatable" ones](#). These connections can be refreshing, but only if you're conforming to a particular vision of femininity: white, young, slim, able-bodied and conventionally attractive. Girlfriendship can be empowering, but only on an individual, rather than collective, level. If girl dinner is logged in feminist history, we can't forget these nuances.



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Social media's girl-dinner girlfriendship provides a clear demonstration of how women should think and behave. The goal is to blend in, not stand out, so in this environment, eating disorders are on full display as a humorous "feminine" experience. However, child-size or "diet" girl dinners can be a triggering experience that stirs uncomfortable emotions in some viewers. For women battling chronic illness, women struggling with body image disturbances and many other groups, they may feel a sense of alienation or loneliness. Since these are not socially acceptable (read: shareable) experiences, they may go unacknowledged and unexamined.

We know that social media usage is [linked to poor body image](#) and disordered eating. We know that, without community moderation, virtually anyone can [create and post mental health content](#) on social media that makes even [spaces that support recovery from eating disorders dangerous](#). We also know that young people with eating disorder symptoms may be more likely to engage with content that [will adversely affect their mental health](#).

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This is why it's concerning that what started as women bonding over their meals of cold pizza has morphed into what we interpret as a glorification of the feminine nature of disordered eating and food restriction. While, in this context, [humor may be a coping mechanism](#) women are using to bond over the shared stress of maintaining a healthy relationship with food, there's nothing "funny," "normal," or feminist about disordered eating.

For girl dinner to stand a chance at dismantling the patriarchy, it needs to push beyond girlfriendship to solidarity. This is the task of individual women and allies at local, national and international scales. Women need access to mental health care, including eating disorder treatment. They need comprehensive nutrition education and affordable food. They need social media policies that will protect them from harmful content. They need the kind of connection that goes beyond momentary laughs to ongoing, tangible support with daily ups and downs. They need a vision of womanhood that includes all bodies.

Girl dinner isn't inherently "good" or "bad," but it's not (yet) a feminist movement. What we know for certain is this: We're going to keep a seat at our table open for all women and encourage dinnertime discussion that challenges the patriarchal pressures that discipline our bodies and minds.

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