

Over two years ago in 2021, a clip of Kendall Jenner from the final season of ‘Keeping Up with the Kardashians’ was circulating throughout the internet. “Every blood test I’ve ever done has said that I’m over the normal limit of athleticness.” she quips to her sister Kourtney Kardashian. The clip which did not garner much attention when it first came into the public, soon became the evidence that comment sections and subreddits could bring up to show that Kendall was indeed that dreaded type of girl - the ‘pick-me’ girl.

Urban Dictionary defines a pick-me girl as a ‘girl who seeks male validation by indirectly or directly insinuating that she is not like the other girls’. The millennials and GenZ would need no introduction to the term. What started as a trope to critique the internalised misogyny of girls who put down other girls, has morphed into a fit-all for any woman who likes anything remotely masculine. Social media is flooded with skit after skit of creators and influencers parodying every aspect of teenage girls’ lives and interests as pick-me behaviour - from not wearing make-up to simply wanting to hang out with men. A lot of this content was made in good faith - to address problematic behaviour from women and to call out their hypocrisy. Then how did it turn so toxic?

The Origin of the Pick-Me Girl

In season 2 of Shonda Rhimes’ iconic show ‘Grey’s Anatomy’, the protagonist Meredith Grey begs the man she loves to choose her over another woman.

“Pick me, choose me, love me.” she tells him in tears. Over eighteen years later, those lines have become the catchphrase of the pick-me girl. Ellen Pompeo, the actor who played Meredith Grey, recalls how she despised acting out that scene.

“When I read that scene, I was horrified,” Ellen confessed. “I’m going to beg a man?”

There is something so aggravating about people choosing the other sex over their own. The simp, a trope of men who bend over themselves to make women happy at the expense of their self-respect, has been a similarly derided persona. For the longest time, the word simp was used as an insult, especially in men’s rights content and forums. However, more recently, the word has started to lose the status of an insult to become more of a neutral term. If you say you simp over your favourite artist or your girlfriend, it is seen more as a joke of a self-deprecating nature rather than a misplaced insult. Unfortunately, the same could not be said about the pick-me girl. Even after over two years since she first came to the mainstream, the pick-me girl remains an object of hate.

The History

The second wave of feminism in the 60s and 70s brought with it the rejection of traditional femininity. Liking pink and all things girly was fundamentally against the feminist cause as it reinforced the patriarchal values that women were trying desperately to undo. It became okay to let go of femininity. But the dark side of this thinking was an inclination to shame all things feminine. The aftermath of this is best reflected in the rom-coms of the 90s and the 2000s. Regina George was girly, glamorous and a villain. Meanwhile, the down-to-earth, jungle-nerd Katie Heron was the protagonist who got the boy. The heroines of these movies were quirky,

tom-boyish and unaware of their femininity, which was what made them attractive for their romantic interests who were almost invariably popular and hot. In 2009, when burgeoning pop star Taylor Swift's 'You Belong With Me' was released, it featured all the tropes that had already been familiarised to young girls by the scores of rom-coms that came before it - the quirky, different girl gets the boy. Although a counter-movement was already set into motion, for most young girls who grew up exposed to this value system, it was essential to make it known that they were 'not like the other girls'.

The other girls wear makeup, but she doesn't. Other girls go out and party while she sits at home and reads. Other girls are basic, while she is unique and individualistic in her tastes and preferences. Hence, she is more attractive and admirable than the other girls.

The hate for the 'pick-me' girl comes from the fact that she stands for everything that the feminist movement had sought to undo over the years. She is compliant to men and their whimsies, putting down other women in the process. She is more concerned over male validation and romantic attention than sisterhood, the concept of women sticking up for one another in the face of collective oppression. Especially with the heralding of the new 'girls' girl', a woman who is unconditionally supportive of other women, the 'pick-me' girl began to lose her shine. She is the perpetrator of misogyny, the accomplice who doesn't realise she is the victim, unabashedly choosing patriarchy over her sisters. The female simp.

While calling out the toxic behaviour of the 'pick-me' girl was heralded as self-aware feminism, it was inadvertently creating a new label to crucify women with. A case in point is the 'Karen'-

old white women with a vigilante mindset that is used to justify blatant racism. Video after video emerged of ‘Karens’ demanding to ‘talk to the manager’ and call the cops on mostly black people, until it became a name with which to shame, often without a cause. While it originated as a way for people of colour to call out their mistreatment, it has become a toxic trait for the internet to label any woman with a blonde bob, a ‘Karen’.

The mental health implication

The teenage years are when one’s personality, sense of self and identity get moulded. Years of subtle shaming of girly girls caused an entire generation of women to grow up feeling like their femininity was something to be quashed. The new generation of young girls, however, would be shamed by the taboo of the ‘pick-me’ girl. It creates the sense of fear of being labelled something so undesirable as a ‘pick-me’ that prevents them from meaningfully expressing their true self. Young people need to discover themselves. They need to make mistakes. Fear of judgment for liking certain things must never stop them from enjoying them. Often certain ‘pick-me’ behaviour arises from deep-rooted trauma. In her article ‘Lessons from a former pick-me girl’, therapist, artist and blogger Janet Chui talks about how growing up in the ‘1990s straight jacketed Singapore’ where women were dragged through the dirt for their perceived ‘flaws’, it was important to her as a child to distance herself from that traditional femininity. “On the inside, my dulled, numbed heart didn’t even know it was taking damage. It got afraid of taking chances. It got afraid of making mistakes...Amid the impossible standards and double binds, it was just better to be not like other girls.”

Janet's 'pick-me' tendencies masked deep insecurities perpetuated by the environment she was raised. Shame had gotten her there; shame would not have gotten her out.

While the 'pick-me' girl trend has made us more aware of these behavioural patterns, it has also gone over to actively humiliate those girls, not just their behaviour.

In the wake of this kind of relentless shame, a new kind of 'pick-me' girl has risen - the 'anti-pick-me' girl. Girls who are *so* not like those other 'pick-me' girls that they are reflecting the same misogynistic mindset that got us here in the first place. This is a pattern difficult to break - a vicious cycle of blame that perpetuates the alienation between women.

The awareness

After the torrent of hate unleashed on her for her 'pick-me' ways, Kendall recently posted a TikTok of her falling flat on her face while snowboarding with her own words on her athleticism echoing in the background. While some heralded her as a self-aware icon, others were quick to judge.

"Just cause you called yourself pick me doesn't make you less of a pick me."

But isn't awareness the first step? The 'pick-me' girl has accomplished what she had sought to accomplish - to build awareness on internalised misogyny and to show how harmful her behaviour is. She has run her course and it is time for her to put down her demeaning badge and join all the other girls. And it is time for us to forgive her and to give her a place among ourselves. It is time to move on.