

Irony, Exclusion, and Community – Femcel Identities and Community Dynamics on Reddit

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The Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail provides a nuanced perspective on the construction and expression of femcel identity within a digital environment. Two coexisting identity models emerge: traditional femcelhood, rooted in perceived physical and social exclusion, and second-wave femcelhood, shaped by mental health narratives and the aesthetic of femcelcore. The community constructs belonging through irony, affect, and visual symbolism, while simultaneously enforcing boundaries through gatekeeping practices. Its ambivalent relationship with men is articulated via ironic misandry, reflecting the tensions of heteronormative expectations. Ultimately, femcelhood within this context emerges as a fluid, affective, and aestheticized identity shaped by digital culture.

Introduction

Online environments and social media platforms function as spaces where individuals can construct, modify, and challenge their identities. The femcel subculture emerged online, where women who identify as femcels share experiences of involuntary celibacy—namely romantic and sexual exclusion—as well as feelings of marginalization. Although the term originated in male-dominated incel communities, femcel spaces have evolved into their own subcultural domain, where irony, collective emotional processing, and distinctive digital aesthetics are closely interwoven.

In this review article, I explore the construction of identities and community dynamics within the Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail. The article is based on my master's thesis, *"I know I'm pretty, but I have the femcel mindset": The Construction of Identity and Dynamics in the Femcel Community* (Jussila 2025), in which I analyze how community members understand their own identities, what kind of dynamics shape the group, and how they express views about men.

Johanssen and Kay (2024) have divided the femcel subculture into two main currents: traditional femcels and second-wave femcels (femcel 2.0). Traditional femcel identity is rooted in experiences of exclusion based primarily on physical appearance, whereas second-wave femcels define themselves through mental health narratives, ironic self-expression, and aesthetic modes of communication. In my thesis, I demonstrate that both forms of femcel identity coexist and intersect within the r/femcelgrippysockjail community. The result is a unique space where diverse femcel identities and modes of expression converge.

The study material consists of comments and discussion posts published within the community. The research method follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis, supplemented by netnography, which served both as an inspiration and methodological approach.

Theoretical Background of the Femcel Discourse

The examination of the femcel discourse is grounded in the broader concept of "incel" (involuntary celibate), which refers to individuals who perceive themselves as living in involuntary celibacy. Although the term is gender-neutral, it has become primarily associated with men, and communities formed around it have garnered significant attention due to associations with violence, misogyny, and radicalization (Evans & Lankford 2024, 917). The term "femcel", on the other hand, refers to women who feel excluded from sexual and romantic relationships against their will. Compared to male incels, femcels have been studied far less extensively, as the femcel subculture has not been linked to similar societal threats as the male incel culture (Kay 2022).

Femcel identity is a relatively new digital subculture that emerged as a distinct community in 2018 with the creation of the Reddit community r/TruFemcels. This community explicitly distanced itself from male incel culture, particularly from its misogynistic and anti-feminist tendencies (Kay 2022). Within the femcel subculture, however, several divergent currents can be observed. Johanssen and Kay (2024) categorize femcels into two main groups: traditional femcels and second-wave femcels. Traditional femcel identity is rooted in experiences of romantic and sexual rejection, which are

perceived to result from one's perceived unattractiveness and the constraints of societal beauty hierarchies. In contrast, second-wave femcels define femcelhood through psychological struggles, personality traits, and the aesthetic and ironic expression known as femcelcore.

The femcelcore aesthetic is characterized by representations of alienation, toxic femininity, and dissociation, often communicated through memes and TikTok videos. What matters is not only the aesthetic itself, but the affective message it conveys—often serious, but visually playful. This resigned stance toward gendered disappointments is described by Johanssen and Kay (2024) with the concept of *heteronihilism*.

Interactions within femcel communities give rise to various dynamics that shape both internal relationships and attitudes toward men. One central concept is *ironic misandry*, which refers to exaggerated, satirical statements about men — often blending feminist critique with humor (Ging 2017, 640–641). Such memes and discussions provide ways to process frustration, while also fostering a sense of community. According to Vaahensalo (2021, 3), *othering* in online discourse functions as a tool through which internal differences within a community are structured into oppositional categories — for example, traditional and second-wave femcels may depict one another as outsiders in relation to what is considered “authentic” femcelhood. The community's internal dynamics can also be analyzed through Hunnicutt's (2009) *theory of patriarchy*. Hunnicutt emphasizes patriarchy as a mutable and context-dependent structure of power that shapes gender roles and defines feminine value through appearance, desirability, and relationship status. In femcel communities, these norms are frequently questioned—though often through resignation rather than resistance.

Research Material and Methods

The research material is drawn from the Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail, an active subreddit primarily focused on femcel-related topics. The community was established on May 25, 2023, and at the time of data collection, it had approximately 49,000 members. Reddit is a social media platform where content is organized into topic-specific discussion forums known as subreddits. Users operate through pseudonymous profiles, enabling the sharing of personal and sensitive experiences. The structure of Reddit has been shown to support the formation of subcultural identities (Massanari 2015).

The data was collected between November 11, 2024, and February 13, 2025. It consists of 395 comments and 17 discussion posts, which primarily include memes, images, and text-based thread starters. The subreddit's name, "grippy sock jail", is a humorous reference to psychiatric care or hospitalization (Urban Dictionary) and reflects the community's characteristic ironic approach to mental health struggles and femcel identity. The aesthetic of the posts is influenced by Japanese popular culture, particularly so-called yandere characters, which convey intense, even chaotic emotional expression ([Kotaku 20.8.2013](#)).

The study is qualitative and combines a netnographic approach with thematic analysis. Netnography serves in this research both as a source of inspiration and as a methodological framework, particularly in the context of fieldwork conducted on Reddit. While the analysis follows the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the research approach is also informed by Turtiainen and Östman's (2013) "researcher's roadmap," which frames the internet as simultaneously an object, source, tool, and environment of research. This highlights the researcher's responsibility and the need for ongoing reflection on the ethical sustainability of the study (Turtiainen & Östman 2013). The research was conducted through passive observation — without interaction with community members — following the example of Vainikka (2019) in her study on misogyny in the Finnish imageboard Ylilauta. This distant observer role helped preserve the authenticity of the material and supported the ethical integrity of the study.

The data was analyzed using the model of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In this method, recurring patterns of meaning are identified and coded into themes. A deductive analytical approach was used, where the analysis was partially guided by theoretical frameworks but remained open to data-driven insights. The thematic focus was placed on the construction of femcel identities, the community's internal dynamics, and gendered discourse. Throughout the analysis, the researcher actively reflected on their own positionality and its influence on the interpretive process (Braun & Clarke 2021).

Identities in the Community

Within the Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail, two distinct forms of femcel identity appear side by side: traditional femcels and second-wave femcels. These identities differ in how femcelhood is described, processed, and presented. Traditional femcels are characterized by

earnest and serious sharing of personal experiences, while second-wave femcels have adopted an ironic and aesthetic approach.

Traditional femcel identity is grounded in narratives of rejection linked to physical appearance and social failures. Text-based discussions frequently contain expressions of feeling unattractive, lacking social skills, and being trapped in an unchanging life. These posts convey a strong sense that one's exclusion from relationships and societal acceptance is permanent — that social marginalization is irreversible (Johanssen & Kay 2024, 13–14). This identity is underpinned by a belief in a rigid appearance-based hierarchy that excludes certain women entirely from romantic and sexual opportunities. A pervasive sense of failure is shared through confessional statements such as *“I would literally do anything to just have a man go on a date with me”* or *“boys’ standards for girls are incredibly high and barely any boys care about personality, they all just want pretty girls.”* Through this, a shared melancholic atmosphere is created, where feelings of rejection and exclusion are mutually reinforced (Kay 2022, 4–5).

Second-wave femcels represent a newer generation of femcel identity, where the focus is less on physical unattractiveness and more on expressing femcelhood through aesthetic, ironic, and humorous means. Johanssen and Kay (2024, 14–16) describe this orientation as femcelcore, which draws inspiration from sad girl culture, girlhood, the mentalcel narrative, and Japanese popular culture. Femcelcore posts are primarily visual in nature, including memes and TikTok videos, combining exaggerated emotional expression, vulnerability, and self-deprecating humor.

According to Bergeron-Stokes (2023), the style of femcelcore memes is built around a recognizable “quirky” aesthetic, sad girl symbolism, and affective experientiality. These visual representations explore themes of alienation, loneliness, and failed romantic experiences, often through a lens of aesthetic playfulness and irony. While the memes are often visually striking, their power lies in their emotional resonance and relatability. Johanssen and Kay (2024) describe femcelcore as a form of curated emptiness — an attempt to shape disappointment, nihilism, and affective alienation into a shareable experience through aesthetic means.

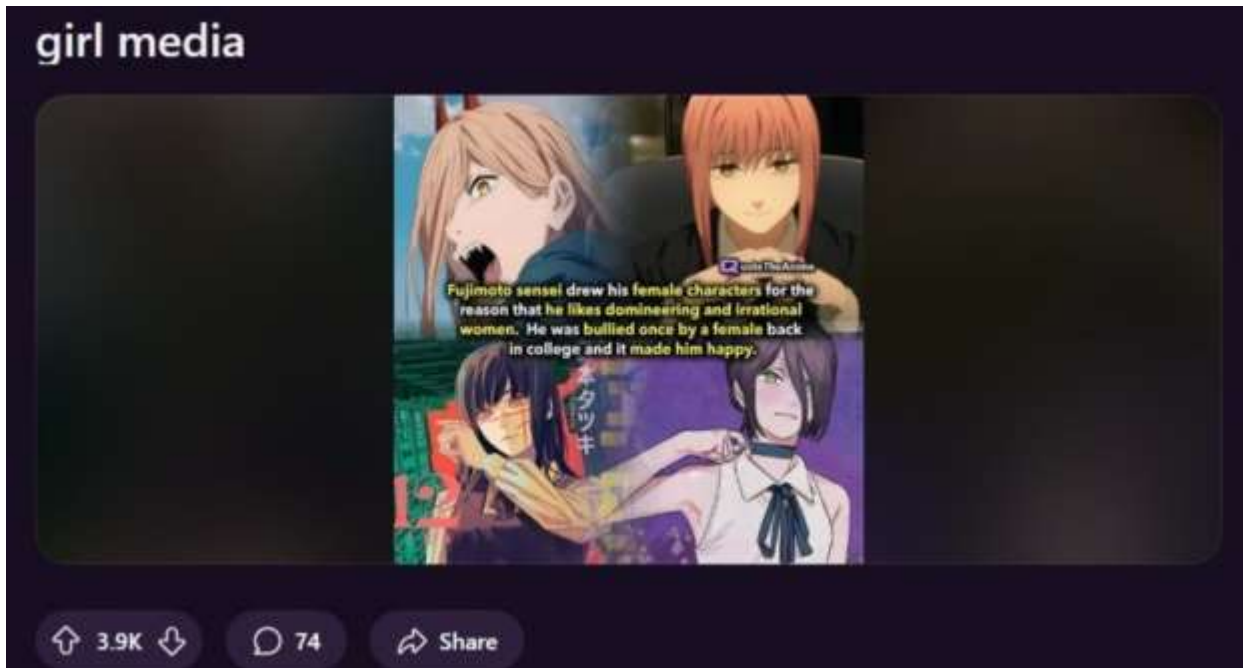


Figure 1. A meme referencing manga artist Tatsuki Fujimoto.

Memes and images frequently feature messy “vibes”, daily life spent in front of a computer, themes related to mental health struggles, and characters drawn from Japanese popular culture — particularly, in this community, the *yandere*-type female characters from Tatsuki Fujimoto’s *Chainsaw Man* series (see Figure 1). *Yandere* characters are loving but obsessive and even violent, and within the community they are admired as symbols of unstable, norm-defying femininity. The purpose of femcelcore representations is not to depict individuals’ realities literally, but rather to create a shared aesthetic language for expressing femcelhood — playfully, but with a serious undertone ([Glamour 1.3.2023](#); [Metro 20.3.2022](#)).



Figure 2. A meme combining pastel-toned girlhood aesthetics with a stark message.

Femcelcore content blends visual aesthetics with emotionally heavy themes, such as mental health and experiences of social exclusion. In Figure 2, a soft, pink aesthetic is juxtaposed with a stark phrase about hiding a body, creating an ironic and conflicting impression. These kinds of contrasts are characteristic of femcelcore: they combine pastel-toned, soft (girlhood-themed) visuals with text referencing violence, obsession, and vulnerability. Johanssen and Kay (2024), along with Bergeron-Stokes (2023), describe this approach as “vibes”, where visuality becomes a way to process emotions and challenge cultural norms of femininity.

Community Dynamics: Identification and Opposition

A sense of community within *r/femcelgrippysockjail* is primarily built through identification. Members share common experiences, values, and identity-related traits, which strengthens their sense of belonging. On social media platforms like Reddit, this identification manifests through the offering of peer support and the recognition of shared experiences, which in turn helps alleviate feelings of loneliness (Naslund et al. 2016, 113–122). Within the community, identification is especially evident through commenting and upvoting posts. Simple comments such as “*Literally*

me” express strong identification with the content of a post. This phrase frequently signals that members perceive the emotions and experiences described by others as reflections of their own.



Figure 3. An image shared by a community member depicting a messy bedroom.

Identification within the community is also reinforced visually, particularly through the replication of meme trends. For example, images of messy bedrooms became a trend, and sharing such images served as a symbolic expression of communal identification and shared experiences. Figure 3, depicting a messy room with the *r/femcelgrippysockjail* subreddit visible on the computer screen, creates a meta-level reference to the community and highlights the individual’s commitment to it. Humorous elements, such as the use of a body pillow as a boyfriend substitute, further communicate shared understandings of loneliness and the inaccessibility of romantic relationships.

According to Naslund et al. (2016, 113–122), the peer support offered by online communities is particularly valuable for individuals struggling with mental health issues or social exclusion. Online interaction removes the barriers of face-to-face communication and provides a safe and anonymous space for sharing sensitive experiences. Platforms like Reddit allow for both active participation and passive content consumption, thereby accommodating users’ individual needs and enhancing their sense of agency.

While community built through identification offers many benefits, such as empowerment and a reduction of stigma, it also carries risks. Echo chamber and filter bubble effects can reinforce one-

sided worldviews and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. These dynamics have been especially significant in male incel communities, where they have contributed to radicalization and extreme behavior (Bright 2018, 17–33; Pariser 2011, 215–217; Sugiura 2021, 13). In femcel communities, however, no signs of radicalization or violent action have been observed, even though expressions of frustration or hostility occasionally emerge (Evans & Lankford 2024, 923–929).



Figure 4. A meme questioning the legitimacy of the femcel identity.

Beyond shared identification, the community dynamic is also shaped by strong internal divisions, as members continuously negotiate the meaning and boundaries of femcel identity. Second-wave femcels broaden the concept of femcelhood beyond appearance-based definitions to include psychological and social difficulties, as well as the associated “vibes”. However, this perspective is met with criticism from more traditional femcels, who feel that the misuse of the femcel label threatens its original meaning. Through *gatekeeping*, they attempt to exclude those whose experiences do not align with the idea of involuntary celibacy caused by perceived unattractiveness. These debates revolve around who qualifies as a “real” femcel and who is entitled to use the term for themselves. For example, Figure 4 features a meme that comments on how “average” women, who fail to find a partner due to overly high standards, are co-opting the femcel label — while the truly marginalized members of the community are ignored.

This internal split can be understood as a form of *othering* within online discourse. According to Vaahensalo (2021), othering in online conversations refers to discursive practices that define

certain groups as outsiders in relation to an in-group identity. While othering typically targets those outside the community, in this case it occurs internally: traditional femcels position second-wave femcels as “others” who do not fully share the same experiences or interpretations of femcelhood. This “us versus them” dynamic is common in the discourse of marginalized groups and serves as a way to define internal group identity and belonging—even on anonymous platforms like Reddit (Vaahensalo 2021, 3).

How Femcels Express Views About Men

In the *r/femcelgrippysockjail* community, expressions of attitudes toward men are layered and emotionally complex, oscillating between desire, hostility, and obsessive intrigue. A recurring pattern is the performative contradiction inherent in heteronormative relationships — femcels often articulate both a yearning for romantic connection and deep-seated frustration with men. These tensions are most commonly expressed through memes and comments infused with irony, sarcasm, and absurdist humor. For instance, one widely shared meme shows a woman lying beside a man while typing on her phone: “*I hate men #misandrist.*” This captures the duality many femcels express — the ability to simultaneously resent and desire men, often wrapped in a tone of self-aware contradiction.

These expressions reflect the concept of *heteronihilism* as described by Johanssen and Kay (2024, 13–14), in which heterosexuality is seen as a (partially compulsory) system (see Rich 1980) that is difficult to detach from, even though it involves disappointment and inequality (Walby 1990, 87). Within the community’s discussions, this is evident in comments where users express a wish not to feel attracted to men, or voice frustration and even hatred toward men while simultaneously acknowledging persistent sexual desire. Statements like “*You can desire men without liking them or wanting to be around them*”, “*I would sacrifice my soul to never be attracted to men...*” and “*I mean, I can hate men and still like dicks, what’s the problem? Let us be silly*” illustrate this ambivalence, where longing and resistance exist side by side.

In this context, *ironic misandry* functions as a collective outlet for these contradictory emotions, providing the community with a safe way to express frustration and disappointment (Ging 2017, 640–641; Ringrose & Lawrence 2018, 687–688; Powell & Henry 2017, 24–43). These tensions can also be examined through Hunnicutt’s (2009, 558–565) theory of patriarchy, which defines patriarchy not as a fixed or clearly bounded system, but as an evolving process in which power

manifests in diverse ways — including through the active participation of women. This perspective helps explain why femcel communities may simultaneously express patriarchal thinking and feminist-tinged critique that challenges those very structures.

Hunnicutt's (2009, 558–565) theory of patriarchy, which emphasizes patriarchy as a dynamic and context-dependent system, helps to illuminate this interplay. Power in these communities is not static; it is negotiated, resisted, and sometimes even internalized. Femcel discourse reflects this tension: expressions of frustration with men can coexist with internalized patriarchal logics, even as the community articulates its own distinct language of dissent.

Disagreements within the subreddit also emerge around how to express views about men “correctly” or in a way that reflects “authentic” femcelhood. Some members express deep pain and longing for companionship, while others reject heteroromantic intimacy outright, citing distrust and past trauma. These differing expressive stances often lead to debates about whether seeking connection constitutes weakness or self-betrayal. In one long thread, users argued whether desiring a relationship is compatible with self-respect, or whether true femcels should embrace solitude as a protective choice.

A distinctive linguistic feature within these expressions is the term *moid* — a deliberately dehumanizing label for men, adapted from male incel communities' use of *foid* (female humanoid). It reduces men to base biological entities, stripping away emotional depth. Comments like *“I would never lay with a moid, women are for love, moids are for children and nothing else”* demonstrate a symbolic distancing of emotional intimacy from men, re-centering women as the true subjects of love. Yet even here, tone matters: such statements are often marked by intentional exaggeration, irony, or deadpan humor designed to provoke, unsettle, or amuse — rather than to incite.

Altogether, the ways femcels express views about men in this community are saturated with emotional complexity, stylistic play, and cultural critique. Irony, contradiction, and meme aesthetics allow users to externalize personal frustrations while building a collective affective vocabulary — one that comments on gendered expectations while remaining self-aware of its own contradictions.

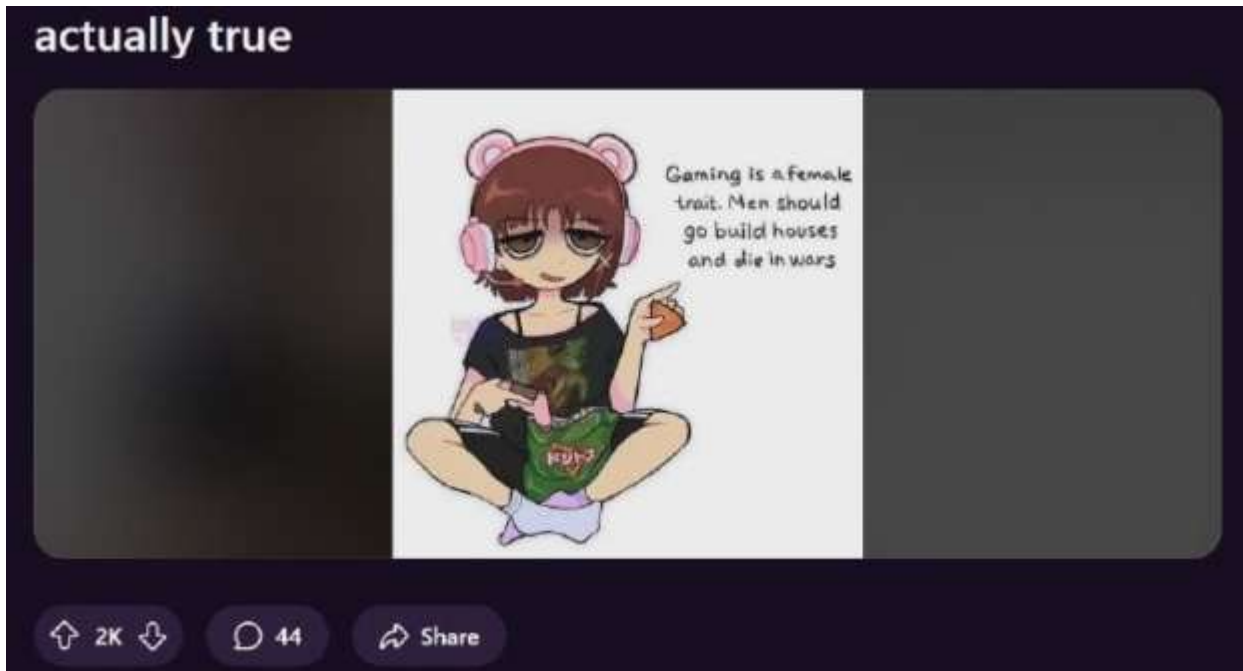


Figure 5. A meme playfully mocking masculinity through irony.

Criticism of men is also expressed through the community’s meme culture. In Figure 5, a meme suggests that playing video games is “female trait,” while encouraging men to build houses or go to war instead. This kind of content functions as a humorous counterimage to traditional masculine expectations, offering a playful critique of those norms. The irony and exaggeration present in such memes should not be interpreted as straightforward man-hating, but rather as a way of processing frustration with patriarchal power structures and their associated gender roles (Rivera & Scholar 2019, 1–9).

Nerd culture and video gaming — frequent subjects of this meme-based critique — are closely linked to second-wave femcels and the femcelcore aesthetic (Johanssen & Kay 2024, 9–11). These memes can also be read as critical reflections on gaming culture itself, especially its gendered structures and the marginalization, suspicion, and misogyny often directed toward women within those spaces (Massanari 2017, 334–337).

Overall, femcels’ expressions of attitudes toward men are not simple or uniform, but rather layered, emotionally charged, and stylistically diverse. Community discourse constantly navigates the tensions between personal desire, heteronormative expectations, and larger cultural power structures. In this context, ironic misandry serves both as a coping mechanism and as a form of feminist critique — enabling community members to process anxiety and frustration, while searching for meaning in their lived experiences.

Conclusions

The Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail offers a unique perspective on how femcel identity is constructed and experienced within a digital space. During the period of analysis, two distinct yet coexisting forms of femcelhood stood out: traditional femcel and second-wave femcel identities. These approaches reflect parallel — but at times conflicting — interpretations of what it means to be a femcel, visible both in visual representations and in member interactions.

Traditional femcel identity is rooted in the belief that rejection stems from physical appearance and social inadequacies, perceived as irreversible and fated. In contrast, second-wave femcels define their identity through mental health narratives, emotional expression, and the femcelcore aesthetic. Femcelcore draws from influences such as sad girl culture, the visual language of girlhood, Japanese popular culture, and the aesthetics of dissociation. As a result, femcelhood becomes not only a personal experience but also a shared emotional expression and visual language.

What unites the community is a strong sense of identification, built especially around memes, irony, and humor. Simple reactions or visual elements — such as messiness or distinctive “vibes” — convey affective communal belonging. At the same time, the community displays intense gatekeeping: traditional femcels seek to maintain strict boundaries around who can claim the identity, resisting broader interpretations that might include conventionally attractive women or those who voluntarily withdraw from romantic relationships. This internal opposition can be understood through the concept of othering in online discourse, where group boundaries are drawn and negotiated through interaction.

The community’s relationship to men is emotionally complex and marked by contradiction. Expressions range from longing and vulnerability to resentment and resignation. Ironic misandry serves as a coping mechanism to process this tension and navigate the pressures of heteronormative expectations. Johanssen and Kay’s (2024) concept of heteronihilism is particularly relevant here: romantic relationships are no longer fully believed in, yet not entirely abandoned either. Femcelcore enables the exploration of this emotional spectrum through aesthetics and humor, offering a space to challenge and reimagine cultural norms.

Ultimately, femcel identity and culture are not static, but in constant flux. Femcelhood cannot be reduced to a single dimension; rather, it is shaped by a fusion of lived experience, aesthetics, irony, and emotion—a new kind of female identity shaped by the digital age.

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Research Material

The primary research material consists of posts from the Reddit community r/femcelgrippysockjail, including 17 discussion threads and 395 comments. The data was collected between November 11, 2024, and February 13, 2025.

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