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Purity to Parody: *Girl Defined*'s Fall from Grace

As reliance on technology expands, social media platforms have become the modern-day agora, serving as a public forum where differing ideas, values, and opinions are exchanged and challenged. Similar to the agoras within ancient Greek societies, social media functions as a space where users can connect and engage in rhetorical discourse over countless topics. Rhetoric on these platforms shapes public discourse and influences how people understand the world around them and the issues within it. While social media can be a tool for rhetorical exchange, it also invites a new level of scrutiny and mockery, unlike what is seen in traditional discourse.

This shift in discourse is especially evident on YouTube, where creators are rewarded for making long-form content that resonates with their targeted audience. In many cases, YouTubers create content based on their personal experiences, values, and opinions, convincing their audiences of the “correct” way to live. This is especially true in the world of conservative Christian creators who use their platforms to preach to their audiences and promote traditionally religious ways of living. One of the most striking examples of this is the *Girl Defined* channel, especially when understanding how their teachings have been scrutinized, memeified, broken apart, and led to rhetorical shifts in internet culture.

This paper will argue that *Girl Defined*'s social media rhetoric, rooted in conservative Christian pathos and ethos, has been undermined by the ability of social platforms to satirize

content. Using Aristotle's rhetorical appeals and Burke's dramatistic pentad, I will analyze the intentions and interpretations of the channel's teachings. I will also dive into ways that *Girl Defined*'s rhetoric has been critiqued and mocked by social media creators, ultimately leading to the downfall of their channel trust.

Since launching in 2014, the YouTube channel and blog, *Girl Defined*, has grown into a fully-fledged business with over 150,000 subscribers, a podcast show, 5 published books, and an 8-week mentorship program (Girl Defined, 2024). The channel was created by sisters Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal to teach their audience about fundamental Christian values, particularly relating to womanhood, purity, and marriage. When describing the purpose of their pages, the sisters state, "We don't have all the answers, and we most definitely have not arrived at the perfect place. But we know some truths – and it's radically changed our lives," (Girl Defined, 2024). Their teachings resonate with a very specific audience of viewers on YouTube, targeting young, impressional girls seeking to align their lives with God. Through their content, *Girl Defined* has established itself as the moral authority for Christian women on social media and within their personal lives. They heavily persuade their audience using ethos and pathos, convincing viewers that following their personal rules and convictions is the only way to become righteous and godly.

While much of *Girl Defined*'s content is open for interpretation, some audiences believed it mainly focused on guilting women and girls into religious lifestyles. Rhetoric is the art of using language and communication to shift a targeted audience's beliefs or actions to reflect a specifically crafted message. *Girl Defined* uses rhetoric in every video that they post. The channel has positioned itself with the ideals that there is one true design that God has planned for womanhood, and these two sisters are the only catalysts that will share God's intentions.

However, many of their videos are equipped with rage-baiting titles and condemnation that reflect the worst parts of purity culture. Kristen and Bethany attempt to base their content on the ethos of God's word, but instead base it on the pathos of shame and guilt within their audience.

The transformation of *Girl Defined* into a meme, most notably through the comedic *THAT'S CRINGE* series by Cody Ko and Noel Miller, shows how common it is for rhetoric posted online to be subversive of the creator's original intentions. Before Cody Ko's video, *Girl Defined* was a niche channel outside of fundamentalist Christian scenes. However, the *THAT'S CRINGE: Girl Defined Edition* video, currently sitting at 34 million views, catapulted them into the spotlight and the scrutiny of the public. Through this video, Cody and Noel watch multiple clips from the *Girl Defined* channel, satirizing their content by making jokes and noting their outrageous beliefs.



Cody and Noel's reaction videos take *Girl Defined*'s content and direct it through a comedic lens, exaggerating their contradictions and simplifying their arguments into satire. One of the more serious comments that was made in the video was by Cody Ko, where he said, "These girls are just confused man. They think they know everything, but everything they say is a contradiction. It's dangerous for girls on YouTube that come across this shit," (2018).

Much of YouTube agreed with this statement, and many audiences found the content published by Kristen and Bethany concerning. This video by Cody and Noel started a trend of channels doing deep dives into the *Girl Defined* content, leading to hundreds of creators sharing their takes. These creators began to unravel the many contradictions within *Girl Defined*'s messaging, highlighting the disconnect between the lives that the sisters preached and the ones that they lived. It is evident when considering Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad that Kristen and Bethany were using YouTube, which allows for direct communication with their audience, to convince their viewers to adopt their fundamentalist Christian lifestyle. They are the agents and their purpose is clear while watching their videos. However, when Cody Ko and Noel Miller redefined their content and ridiculed their original message the pentad shifted. The shift highlights how fragile rhetoric can be, especially when it is published in a realm where it is so easily torn apart.

The ethos they had relied upon to craft their Christian narrative and credibility as a channel had completely fallen apart after Cody and Noel's video. No longer were they defending themselves from nonbelievers, instead they were defending themselves against the entire social landscape. Their expertise in God's word was pointed out to be flawed, and their messages quickly became repurposed for humor. This created a gap in their credibility as a channel, while also fueling the fire for Internet trolls and cancel culture. One comment from user @confusionandcreation6036 on the *THAT'S CRINGE* video even stated, "Jokes aside, I do appreciate Cody and Noel saying that it's wrong to invalidate people's feelings like this and that it's perfectly normal to experience attraction. I don't think these girls are qualified to be giving

life lessons,” (2021). These interpretations led to the downfall of the *Girl Defined* channel, separating the sisters and destroying the messages they had initially posted.

In conclusion, *Girl Defined* serves as a prominent case of how rhetoric functions in the digital age of social media. The complex journey of Kristen and Bethany from niche fundamentalist Christian creators to parodied internet memes is a blatant display of the power that internet culture maintains. The initial messages that *Girl Defined* aimed to deliver, regardless of flaws, have been completely undermined by the ability of social platforms to satirize and memeify content. They have lost credibility as a channel and become a pinpoint of online scrutiny and hate. *Girl Defined* ultimately shows the power of the Internet as a platform for rhetorical engagement, as well as cultural commentary on that engagement. It also reinforces the fact that the Internet is a vast landscape, where even carefully crafted content can be skewed



and remain in the social stratosphere forever.

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