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“GASLIGHT, GATEKEEP, GIRLBOSS”
A Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis of *Girlboss*

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences

Master's Thesis

April 2024

ABSTRACT

Sara Rannikko: "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss": A Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis of *Girlboss*
Master's thesis
Tampere University
Master's Programme in English Language and Literature
April 2024

This thesis is a study on the neologism *girlboss*, originated from the 2014 autobiographical book *#Girlboss* by Sophia Amoruso. This study is conducted by utilizing fourth wave feminist analysis and by concentrating on how gender manifests in the English language. In the theoretical framework, the principal topics of interest are the theory of semantic derogation, gender-neutral language, and occupational titles, particularly those containing the term *girl*. Finally, drawing on these theories, the term *girlboss* itself is discussed in more detail.

The purpose of this thesis is to study how gender is represented in the term *girlboss* and how its use has changed between the timeframes 2014–2016 and 2021–2023. The research questions for this contrastive study are: What kinds of representations of gender can be found based on the collocates of *girlboss*? How has the semantic prosody of *girlboss* changed between 2014–2016 and 2021–2023? How is the theory of semantic derogation connected to the possible changes in the semantic prosody of *girlboss*? These questions are studied using corpus-based discourse analysis. The data consists of frequency information and collocates for the term *girlboss*, and it is accessed through the NOW (News on the Web) corpus. The method is used to study the collocates and semantic prosody of *girlboss* first in 2014–2016 and then in 2021–2023. The findings from the different timeframes are then compared.

The study of the collocates and their semantic prosody reveal that the term *girlboss* has pejorated after its initial use. Although the term initially had a mainly neutral and positive semantic prosody that mostly discussed the book *#Girlboss* and its related products, the latter use of the term reveals that it has a mostly negative semantic prosody. The term was for instance found to have been criticized for concerning only few selected women. Although the initial idea of the term combined feminine traits with hard-work and success, the term can arguably be said to be negatively affected by semantic derogation.

Keywords: *girlboss*, semantic derogation, occupational titles, collocation, semantic prosody

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Sara Rannikko: "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss": A Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis on the Term *Girlboss*
Pro gradu -tutkielma
Tampereen yliopisto
Englannin kielen ja kirjallisuuden maisteriohjelma
Huhtikuu 2024

Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa keskitytään neologismiin *girlboss*, mikä on peräisin Sophia Amoruson vuoden 2014 kirjasta *#Girlboss*. Tässä tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään neljännen aallon feminististä analyysia ja keskitytään erityisesti siihen, miten sukupuoli ilmenee englannin kielessä. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen keskeisimpiä aiheita ovat teoria semanttisesta derogaatiosta (*semantic derogation*), sukupuolineutraali kieli ja ammattinimikkeet, erityisesti sellaiset missä esiintyy englannin kielen sana *girl*. Näitä teorioita hyödyntäen myös itse *girlboss*-termiä tarkastellaan tarkemmin.

Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on tutkia sitä, miten sukupuoli ilmenee termissä *girlboss* ja miten termin käyttö on muuttunut ajanjaksojen 2014–2016 ja 2021–2023 välillä. Tutkimuskysymykset tässä vertailevassa tutkimuksessa siis ovat: Miten termi *girlboss* edustaa sukupuolta sen kollokaattien perusteella? Miten termin *girlboss* semanttinen prosodia on muuttunut vuosien 2014–2016 ja 2021–2023 välillä? Missä määrin teoria semanttisesta derogaatiosta liittyy mahdollisiin muutoksiin termin semanttisessa prosodiassa? Näitä kysymyksiä tutkitaan korpuslingvistiikkaan pohjautuvan diskurssianalyysin avulla. Aineisto koostuu termin *girlboss* esiintymistiheydestä ja kollokaateista, ja se on kerätty NOW (News on the Web) -korpukselta. Metodien avulla tutkitaan korpukselta saatavia kollokaatteja ja sen avulla termin *girlboss* semanttista prosodiaa, ensin vuosilta 2014–2016 ja sen jälkeen vuosilta 2021–2023. Eri aikavälien tuloksia verrataan lopulta toisiinsa.

Kollokaattien ja semanttisen prosodian tutkiminen paljasti, että *girlboss*-termin merkitys on huonontunut sen alkuperäisestä merkityksestä. Vaikka termillä oli alkujaan lähinnä neutraaleja ja positiivisia merkityksiä, jotka käsitelivät lähinnä *#Girlboss* -kirjaan ja siihen liittyviä tuotteita, termin myöhempi käyttö paljasti lähinnä negatiivisia merkityksiä. Tutkimuksen perusteella termiä kritisoitiin siitä, että termi koski vain muutamia valikoituja naisia. Vaikka alkuperäinen ajatus termin takana yhdisti feminiinisiä ominaisuuksia kovaan työntekoon ja menestykseen, semanttisen derogaation voidaan nähdä vaikuttaneen negatiivisesti termiin.

Avainsanat: *girlboss*, semanttinen derogaatio, ammattinimikkeet, kollokaatio, semanttinen prosodia

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

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1 Introduction

In 2014, an autobiography titled *#Girlboss* was published, after which the neologism *girlboss* has spread into wider circulation. The author of the book, Sophia Amoruso, has defined the term *girlboss* as a “feeling” and a “philosophy” (Roivainen 2023: 2). Moreover, Amoruso has referred to the idea of *girlboss* as a means for women, for the first time ever, to determine their success according to their own terms (Roivainen 2023: 2).

However, Roivainen (2023: 1) calls this idea bold, since women have been involved in such activities well before the concept of being a *girlboss* was created. Since the launch of the term *girlboss*, other similar phrases that utilize the word *girl*, such as *girl dinner* and *girl math*, have emerged on social media (Murray 2023). Although *girl dinner* and *girl math* could be seen as infantilizing (Murray 2023) and self-abasing, the possible negative prosodies in *girlboss* are not as evident. Self-identifying *girlbosses* are said to have traditionally masculine entrepreneurial values, such as competitiveness and success, which could be viewed as outdated (Roivainen 2023: 4). The definition is complex, however, since *girlbosses* simultaneously draw on feminine values, identifying as possibly even feminist “working girl[s]” (Roivainen 2023: 17).

Even though the definition of *girlboss* has originally been connected to the ideas of female empowerment in the entrepreneurial field (Roivainen 2023: 4), it can be argued that the use of the word, and consequently the semantics related to it, have pejorated over time. It has been argued that the word can now be used to refer to women participating in patriarchy and endeavoring to succeed, even if it is at the price of other’s success (Murray 2023). In addition to this definition, there are linguistic measures to examine whether the term has negative meanings. Although no such marked titles as *boyboss* or *manboss* were commonly used and there was in that sense no need for semantic symmetry, the gendered word *girl* was coined with the occupational title *boss*. Furthermore, using *girl* instead of *woman* when denoting adult women could be described as problematic. As language can mold societal gender stereotypes and vice versa, such terms should be paid attention to. If harmful or negative patterns are detected, starting a discussion could eventually result in changes on a societal level. Moreover, no specifically linguistic and corpus-based studies on the neologism *girlboss* were found. For these reasons, this corpus-based study is conducted to examine the gendered term *girlboss*.

With the help of corpus linguistic and discourse analyses, I examine how gender is represented in the use of the term. I also utilize a corpus to assess whether the use of the term has changed

after its initial launch and whether semantic derogation of women attributes to said changes. Therefore, the research questions for this study are as follows: What kinds of representations of gender can be found based on the collocates of *girlboss*? How has the semantic prosody of *girlboss* changed between 2014–2016 and 2021–2023? How is the theory of semantic derogation connected to the possible changes in the semantic prosody of *girlboss*? Gender in language, semantic prosody, and semantic derogation are discussed in later sections.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that in this study, a binary distinction is made between the terms *male* and *female*, as well as between the terms *man* and *woman*. This distinction and these terms are used as a means to facilitate the specific type of discussion needed for this study (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 8). However, it is simultaneously acknowledged that gender can be considered more as a continuum than as binary (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 8–9). Likewise, it is acknowledged that a similar study could be conducted in which terms related to men are studied, as the problems of sexist language use are not exclusive to female-specific terms. However, as the focus of this study is on the female-specific term *girlboss*, it is conducted from that point of view.

In Section 2, I discuss lexical, social, and referential gender in the English language. I also concentrate on the feminist analyses regarding this topic in Section 2.1. In Section 2.2, I consider sexist language more in depth, and I concentrate on the theory of semantic derogation more specifically in Section 2.2.1. In Section 2.3, I discuss gendered occupational titles in general, covering suggested neutralization strategies in Section 2.3.1. The term *girl* in occupational titles is covered in Section 2.3.2. Finally, in Section 2.3.3, I specifically focus on the term *girlboss* while drawing on theories from previous sections.

2 Gender in Languages

There are four types of gender that can be found in language: *grammatical gender*, *lexical gender*, *referential gender*, and *social gender* (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 6). However, out of these four, grammatical gender no longer exists in the English language. Grammatical gender is found in languages such as French and Spanish, where the gender classes *masculine* and *feminine* in nouns determine the properties of other word classes that co-occur with them, such as those of adjectives and verbs.

Unlike grammatical gender, lexical gender refers to semantics, the extra-linguistic dimension of language, in this case to the *femaleness* and *maleness* of words (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 7). This includes gender-specific words such as *mother* and *son* (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 7). Lexical gender cannot be determined for these words without context, but there are systematic, morphological clues of the lexical gender in English. Most often a clue is gender-specific suffixation at the end of female-specific words, such as the suffix *-ess* that is added to the word *tiger* [+male], resulting in *tigress* [+female] (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 8). Such markedness as part of occupational titles is discussed in Section 2.3.

Although these nouns do not affect the properties of for example adjectives and verbs in English, as grammatical gender would, they do often determine the use of the anaphoric pronouns *he* or *she*. However, seemingly gender-neutral lexical words can also trigger the use of gender-specific pronouns. Gender-specific pronouns are especially used when the referent is a known individual, but tradition can also account for the choice (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 7). This, in turn, is referential gender.

Referential gender indicates identifying a referent as female, male, or gender-indefinite (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 8). Referential gender can be seen in idiomatic expressions and false generics (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 7–8). To illustrate, the title such as *chairman* can be used to refer to both men and women. Similarly, *girlboss*, especially the verb derived from the original noun, could be used to also refer to both women and men. Referential gender may also override the grammatical gender of the word if the individual is known to the speaker (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 8). Despite the masculine grammatical gender of *un professeur* in French, a female professor can be called as such and then also referred to as *she*, especially since nouns that have masculine grammatical

gender could be used in more situations than those with feminine grammatical gender (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 9).

Finally, if the gender associated with a noun is not due to either lexical or referential gender, it is left to be explained by social gender (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 10). Social gender indicates the association of gender to some words due to tradition, stereotypes, and social expectations (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 11), which can be a subconscious association. Social gender can especially be seen in higher-status occupational terms such as *lawyer* and *surgeon* (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 10), titles which are often associated with men. Since there is no gender-specific prefixation or suffixation in these words and no grammatical gender exists in English, the fact that these nouns are often accompanied by the male-specific anaphoric pronoun *he* can only be explained by social gender (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 10). This phenomenon has been studied through the following riddle: “A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies. The son is rushed to the ER. The attending surgeon looks at the boy and says, ‘I can’t operate on this boy. He’s my son!’ How can this be?” (Morehouse et al. 2022: 1). Traditionally, the solution to this riddle is that the surgeon is the boy’s mother. Stereotypes and therefore social gender in the title *surgeon* are tested in how people try to solve this riddle. One study shows that indeed more than 70% of the participants did not solve the riddle, as they failed to suggest that the surgeon is the mother (Morehouse et al 2022: 1). Since the title *boss* is included in higher-status occupational titles, it is possible that it would also more often evoke the idea of a male boss rather than a female one. One solution to contest this could therefore be adding the female-specific *girl* to such words. However, problems of this specific word formation are discussed in further sections.

In summary, since lexical gender refers to semantics and social gender refers to stereotypes, these two types of linguistic gender are mostly used in the following sections of this study. Especially social gender is used to discuss occupational titles in general, and lexical gender is used to specifically discuss the term *girlboss*.

2.1 Feminist Analysis

Waves of feminism refer to the periods of time that are acknowledged in feminist scholarship (Parry 2018: 2). The term *wave* is used as a metaphor for a wave that hits the shore, representing the influence that feminist scholarship has (Parry 2018: 2). According to the metaphor, the wave then moves further

away, grows, and finally comes ashore again, symbolizing new ideas being added to existing ones and resulting in a new feminist wave (Parry 2018: 2).

There have been at least three acknowledged waves of feminism, hereafter referred to as the first, second, and third waves of feminism. Furthermore, the existence of a fourth wave has been discussed (Mills 2012; Parry 2018). However, this idea of feminism consisting of distinct moments can be seen as complex (Parry 2018: 2). This is because when these moments are seen as sequential, there is a risk of perceiving the first wave as inferior to the following one, and so forth (Parry 2018: 2). The different waves of feminism have qualities which are appropriate for their time, and a new wave need not be abandoned for a new one to emerge. In fact, the fourth wave has features that can be considered as a combination of the second and third waves (Parry 2018: 5). Instead of contrasting the waves with each other, the second and third waves could be seen as complementary, meaning that both could simultaneously be utilized in gender and language analysis (Mills 2012: 129).

The first wave of feminism mainly concerns women's suffrage at the beginning of the 20th century, the main aim being that women would be viewed as much as people as men were (Parry 2018: 3). In English, the need for this can still be seen linguistically in such false generics as *mankind* and the use of *he* as a generic pronoun (Baxter 2010: 31–32). Starting from the 1970s, the second wave of feminism has been concerned with battling inequalities (Mills 2011: 14; Parry 2018: 3). However, the inequalities are said to mostly have concerned white heterosexual women who belonged to middle class, thus excluding not only women who differed from this classification by their sexuality, ethnic identity, or socio-economic status, but also men (Parry 2018: 3). Another limitation of the second wave is how men and women were considered to form homogenous groups (Mills 2011: 15).

The third wave, in turn, focuses more on shared, local matters (Parry 2018: 4–5). The third wave has been said to have started in 1992, when Rebecca Walker first wrote an article, calling for equality, female empowerment, and a sense of sisterhood in a society where women were more divided rather than united (Parry 2018: 3–4). Because of the ideas of female empowerment and sisterhood, the term *girlboss* could be studied from the point of view of the third wave feminist analysis. However, despite possible empowering intentions behind the term, it has qualities that could be viewed as negative based on the theoretical framework of the third wave feminist analysis. These qualities are discussed in more details in further sections.

Other subjects of interest in the third wave feminist analysis are sexism and context (Mills 2008: 26). For instance, the word *bitch*, although an offensive and sexist term to women, can also be used

in ironic and humorous ways (Mills 2008: 26). However, although the third wave aids in analyzing such words in their contexts, third wave feminists have had more difficulties in analyzing discrimination that occurs more systematically (Mills 2008: 26). The wave has been criticized for this, and it has been said that it is too focused on individuality and less concerned with group identity (Parry 2018: 5). The possible ironic uses of *girlboss* and the different meanings of *girl* in different contexts are also discussed in section 2.3.3. However, due to the limitations of the third wave feminist analysis, the use of the term *girlboss* and its implications cannot be fully analyzed with the help of this analysis in relation to its possible global, structural, or systematic traits.

In addition to these waves, the term *post-feminism* has been used in claiming that the feminist work has achieved its goals and that it is no longer relevant or necessary to continue the work (Parry 2018: 4). Thus, it has been said that it is key for the third wave to contradict the post-feminist theory by communicating the ongoing necessity for and relevance of feminist work (Parry 2018: 4). Because of this, although its existence is still under discussion (Parry 2018: 5), there is a need for the fourth wave to continue emphasizing the relevance of feminist analysis.

As discussed, the fourth wave can be perceived as the combination of its predecessors, combining the individual focus of the third wave with the larger political and social focus of the second wave (Parry 2018: 6). Moreover, the limits of this wave are considered less transparent than its predecessors'. The reason behind the blurred boundaries is the “ever-changing geographies of digital culture, communication, work, sexuality” as well as the “commodification of femininity” (Parry 2018: 6). The fourth wave is especially concerned with technological mobilization, including women’s representation in the media (Parry 2018: 6–8).

Women can be misrepresented in social media, which includes the oversexualization of girls (Parry 2018: 8). However, with the help of social media, women are also able to immediately respond to such misrepresentation with immediate and humorous replies, which is considered an essential principle in the fourth wave of feminism (Parry 2018: 1). Social media assists fourth wave feminists in combining the second and third waves by setting individual experiences in global discourses and through micropolitics (Parry 2018: 1). As the use of the term *girlboss*, including the use of *#girlboss*, is in particular a work-related social media phenomenon that could be viewed as a commodification of femininity, this study is mainly a fourth wave analysis.

2.2 Sexism in Languages

Sexist language itself can be defined as language that represents or seems to represent women in a negative way, such as through negative stereotypes (Mills and Mullany 2011: 144). However, it is not always evident when language use is sexist, not to mention how one should object to it. It can in fact be “extremely difficult” to resist and to answer to sexist language use (Mills and Mullany 2011: 144). It can for instance be difficult for a woman to reply to sentences like “don’t be such a girl” when it is meant as an insult. As Mullany and Mills (2011: 144) illustrate, it is difficult to resist it by replying that one is “not a girl”, since this reply verifies that it is in fact a negative thing to be a girl. Since words themselves are not inherently loaded with negative, or positive, prosodies, it is rather the way they are used that creates the meaning. For example, the comment “you think like a woman” can be perceived as an insult, yet without context, the comment cannot be claimed to be sexist (Mills and Mullany 2011: 144).

Indeed, there is nothing inherently insulting about thinking like a woman or being a girl. It is rather the institutionalized ideas about women that makes the comment sexist (Mills and Mullany 2011: 144). The context of such utterances can be studied through the words that they most commonly co-occur with. These co-occurrences can be studied for instance with the help of corpus linguistics (Mills and Mullany 2011: 159), which is the chosen method for this study and is therefore discussed more in depth in later sections.

Battling sexist language, a key issue in feminist linguistics, has resulted in people reconsidering their own language use, as well as that of others’ (Mills and Mullany 2011: 144). As language use can influence societal expectations, paying attention to sexist language use is essential. If language users consider sexist occupational titles, for instance, it could eventually result in changes in their vocabularies. This could further lead to changes in whether people perceive certain occupations as exclusively men’s or women’s occupations, especially since gender stereotypes can be seen as ingrained in language users’ mental representations (Sczesny et al. 2016: 6). In fact, it has been studied that girls may not only be less interested in occupations that are presented with male-specific titles instead of gender-neutral ones, but they might also be prejudiced against women’s competence in such occupations (Sczesny et al. 2016: 4). In fact, feminists have acknowledged the problems that are in particular caused by markedness (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 247). To illustrate, reoccurring insults related to occupational gender stereotypes can result in women themselves losing confidence in their occupational competence (Mills 2008: 40).

However, markedness is said to often be a social rather than a linguistic problem, which is seen in the differences in how men and women's behavior is explained (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 247). This can even result in certain occupations being specifically marked to women or men (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 247). Due to such stereotypes, feminist interventions have focused on more than mere linguistic changes (Mills 2008: 36). Feminists are therefore not only concerned with changes in language use, but they are also calling for discussion on gender relations (Mills 2008: 36), thus calling for changes on the societal level. Ideally, this could eventually result in changes in the social gender embedded in words.

Because social norms and linguistic stereotypes are often intertwined, such feminist interventions should not be seen as only an attempt to ban some selected terms (Mills 2008: 36). Calling language use sexist does not necessarily mean that the accuser is merely hurt by words (Mills 2008: 36). Instead, it is the system that seems to tolerate sexist language use and consequently discrimination, indicating that sexist language use reflects much wider problems (Mills 2008: 36). Sexist language can therefore be said to mirror societal expectations and discrimination.

For instance, a study shows men and women face different societal expectations in the workplace context (Schnurr 2013). In fact, stereotypes about women can even be sustained by women themselves (Schnurr 2013: 130). In one example, female employees criticize their female colleague's behavior (Schnurr 2013: 130). The female colleague in question behaves in a masculine manner, as she for instance swears and uses other taboo language in similar ways as their male colleagues (Schnurr 2013: 130). She has thus much to the colleague's grief adapted to the workplace's masculine culture, which is seen as the norm, splitting away from the other women, in a sense fraternizing with the men (Schnurr 2013: 130). In another example, a female employee simultaneously believes that male and female employees have different aims and priorities while acknowledging that her work domain is masculine (Schnurr 2013: 130). She thinks that for her not only to survive but also to succeed in the workplace, she would need to adapt masculine traits (Schnurr 2013: 130). Women are therefore expected to be assertive, but at the same time not too assertive so as not to be seen as "bitch[y]" (Schnurr 2013: 131–132). Simultaneously, traits that could be described as too feminine can be viewed as unprofessional, and decisive and assertive women could be seen as "doubly deviant", referring to the fact that they are not only not men, but also not feminine enough (Schnurr 2013: 131–132).

Sexist language can be divided into multiple subcategories. For instance, both *overt* and *indirect* sexism can be differentiated from sexist language (Mills 2008). Overt sexism is considered

transparent, whereas what is considered indirect sexism is said to depend on the context (Mills 2008: i). It can nonetheless be difficult to determine what the definition of overt sexism entails (Mills 2008: 35). One of the aspects that makes remarking on intentionally used sexist language complicated is the use of irony and humor (Mills 2008: 35). For example, overt sexism can be more difficult to detect when sexist terms are accompanied by exaggeration (Mills 2008: 12). Such behavior therefore makes overt sexism appear as indirect sexism.

Mills (2008: 41) enumerates some types of existing overt sexism. It can manifest in words and meaning, such as naming, generic pronouns and nouns, dictionary entries, insulting names, semantic derogation, as well as first names, surnames, and titles (Mills 2008: 42–61). Although the term *girlboss* does not inherently seem to be sexist, it can be argued to have overt sexist meaning through semantic derogation. This is further discussed in Sections 2.2.1.

In addition to the terms overt and indirect sexism (Mills 2008), three other terms have also been used. The alternative terms for different types of sexism are *blatant*, *covert*, and *subtle* sexism (Swim 2004: 117). The term *blatant* corresponds with Mills' (2008) term *overt*, and the term *covert* corresponds with Mills's (2008) term *indirect*, making *subtle* sexism an additional third term. Here, blatant sexism refers to obvious discrimination of women in comparison to men. Although both covert and blatant sexism are recognized, covert sexism is also intentionally disguised (Swim 2004: 117). Subtle sexism differs from the first two by not being intentional, but much like covert sexism it is also disguised (Swim 2004: 117). Subtle sexism can therefore be difficult to detect, since it is not only not necessarily recognized as sexism, but subtle sexist language could also be perceived as the norm (Swim 2004: 117).

Subtle sexism is thus more difficult to detect and object to than blatant and covert sexism, and due to its nature, subtle sexist language use is common in society (Swim 2004: 117). Subtle sexism remains common since it exists as subconscious stereotypes that sometimes manifest in social gender. It is so deep-rooted in language it can be difficult to change (*ibid.*). This is especially explained by language users wanting to protect the status quo (*ibid.*). Besides this, language users can be unaware of what in fact is considered sexist language, and even if informed, do not necessarily believe it to be so (*ibid.*).

Besides some categories of overt sexism being applicable to the term *girlboss*, it can be argued that the term is also a manifestation of subtle sexism, as it could be seen as a reflection of stereotypes. However, the term *girlboss* cannot be applied to Swim's (2004: 117) categories of blatant or covert sexism due to lack of intent. Furthermore, as the subtle sexism in the term means that it is

hidden, it is not easy to detect without context. Thus, the sexism in the term needs to be examined with the help the theory of semantic derogation, which is discussed in the following section.

2.2.1 Semantic Derogation

The *dominance theory* describes different power dynamics that men and women have in conversation (Baxter 2010: 18). However, dominance theory also explains how some terms that are specifically used to denote women can be considered sexist (Baxter 2010: 31). Thus, according to this theory, words like *girl*, *lady*, *mistress*, and *madam*, along with such marked occupational titles as *actress* and *hostess*, have negative meanings (Baxter 2010: 32). In fact, when it comes to such terms, the negative meanings can be explained by the theory of *semantic derogation* (Baxter 2010: 32).

Semantic derogation, more precisely the semantic derogation of women, refers to the theory of how words that denote women can over time acquire negative, disparaging, or even sexual meanings (Baxter 2010: 32; Mills 2011: 155). In other words, such words can be pejorated, which could eventually apply to all words that denote women (Baxter 2010: 32). This theory can also be used to account for double standards between men and women (Baxter 2010: 32). Due to semantic derogation, some terms that are perceived neutral when used to denote men can be pejorative when they are instead used to denote women (Baxter 2010: 32). The theory of semantic derogation would also explain such semantically asymmetrical pairs where the female-specific term can be viewed as the inferior one (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12), as for instance the occupational titles *hostess* [+female] and *host* [+male].

According to Schulz's (1990, ct. in Mills 2008: 61) theory, there are three ways a word can be pejorated: being associated with a contaminating concept, being used as a euphemism, and prejudice. First, association with a contaminating concept refers to Schulz's (1990, ct. in Mills 2008: 61) theory of men primarily thinking of women as sexual beings, which has resulted in sexual meanings in such originally neutral words as *woman* and *female* at different periods in history. This can also be applied to the word *girl* (Baxter 2010: 32). Furthermore, perceiving women's sexuality as their most prominent feature could, ironically, be seen as something that threatens the societal order (Bucholtz 2004: 153). This is demonstrated with the claim that even neutral or positive terms that refer to a girl or a woman have repeatedly in history acquired negative meanings (Schulz 1990: 135).

Schulz's (1990, ct. in Mills 2008: 61) theory names the second means of pejoration as the use of euphemisms. *Euphemism* refers to using a neutral word to avoid the use of another word (Mills 2008: 61). Eventually, this would lead to the neutral word becoming a tainted, negative euphemism, in other words a dysphemism (Schulz 1990, ct. in Mills 2008: 61). In fact, sexual meanings in *woman* and *female* are the result of the terms being used as euphemisms for the terms *prostitute* and *mistress* (Mills 2008: 61). Finally, according to Schulz (1990, ct. in Mills 2008: 61), prejudice is a key motive for pejoration, arguing that men perceive women as a separate group that is mainly associated with sexuality.

This phenomenon particularly affects words that were initially primarily used for women who have authority, such as not only *lady* and *mistress*, but also the word *dame* (Mills 2011: 155). These words have later started to be used to address lower-status women, and the words have thus eventually acquired negative meanings (Mills 2011: 155). The asymmetry between *lady* and *lord* or *lady* and *gentleman* can be seen from the fact that *lord* and *gentleman* have preserved their original uses, yet *lady* has previously been used as a synonym for *prostitute* (Romaine 2001: 160). This further illustrates how initially relatively neutral terms with female-specific lexical gender can pejorate and acquire sexual meanings.

The word *girl* has undergone many changes over time, having both become specialized and pejorated (Schulz 1990: 138). Initially, *girl* was used to refer to children of either sex, after which it denoted female children (Schulz 1990: 138). However, it also acquired the specialized meaning of *servicing girl* or *maidservant* (Schulz 1990: 138). Later, much like many other words that denote women, it acquired sexual meanings such as a prostitute, a mistress, or the female sex (Schulz 1990: 138). Although the word has become ameliorated after its pejoration, it is continued to be used as a demoting and sexualizing term (Schulz 1990: 138; Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 34–35). The fact that the word *girl* is both sexualized and semantically refers to females in their adolescence or younger is at the very least conflicting. In fact, both *girl* and *woman* are used to denote a female who is young yet sexually mature (Sigley and Holmes 2002: 148). Nevertheless, the age at which the use of *girl* ends and the use of *woman* starts is ambiguous (Sigley and Holmes 2002: 143), which is discussed in later sections.

It has also been theorized that terms that denote men do not become pejorated similarly to those that denote women (Schulz 1990: 140). For instance, words like *boy*, *youth*, *lad*, and *fellow* are said to have avoided pejoration (Schulz 1990: 140). Similarly, it has been claimed that terms that refer to men tend to have a wider range of metaphors, yet metaphors about women are more likely to have a narrower range of references, being mainly sexual ones (Schulz 1990: 141).

Despite this, Schulz does not attest that all pejoration is due to or immediately leads to sexualization (Schulz 1990: 135). Although these three origins of pejoration concentrate on sexuality alone, acquiring sexual meanings is not always the only or even the first way a word can become pejorated (Schulz 1990: 135). In fact, Schulz claims that words that have acquired negative meanings do so by first becoming only somewhat demoting, only later becoming abusive, and finally ending as sexual terms (Schulz 1990: 135). Terms may therefore at first have other types of negative meanings, and might later, if ever, acquire additional sexual meanings.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that men could be insulted by merely calling them by female-specific terms like *girl* and *woman* (Mills 2008: 57). For instance, in an advertisement for a motorbike, the word *girl* is used as an “antonym for everything the motor-biker [sic] would wish to be”: “Harleys are OK...if you’re a girl...That’s the attraction of the classic British bike: they’re for men” (Mills 1995: 112). This can also be seen from the “don’t be such a girl” example. Being insulted in this way implies that the man in question is in fact not masculine enough (Mills 2008: 57). This is therefore also a problem for men, since having stereotypically feminine characteristics can result in being exposed to ridicule. Conversely, it has been stated that it is not necessarily as insulting for a woman to be referred to as a *man* or a *boy* (Mills 2008: 57).

In this section, I illustrated how terms that denote women, including the term *girl*, have become pejorated over time due to semantic derogation. According to Schulz (1990: 144), this routinely happening pejoration mirrors societal attitudes towards women while simultaneously perpetuating them. Schulz (1990: 144) further states that this method should be abandoned. Because of this reoccurring and damaging phenomenon, the female-specific term *girlboss* is the topic in this study to determine whether such semantic derogation can be applied to it as well.

The different negative prosodies of *girl* have been discussed due to its part in the gender-specific term *girlboss*. However, the specific prosodies of the term *girlboss* can only be determined by studying the term itself, especially since the term *girl* has already once before become ameliorated after its pejoration. Therefore, in this study, I use corpus linguistics and discourse analysis to examine what kind of semantic prosodies the term *girlboss* itself in fact carries. It is therefore also eventually examined whether semantic derogation can be detected from the possible changes in the use of the term.

2.3 Occupational Titles

As established above, social norms can affect language use and vice versa. Study on occupational titles could therefore provide insight on social norms in the workplace environment (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 252). As *girlboss* is derived from the occupational title *boss*, the topics of gender and sexism in occupational titles are discussed in this section.

Androcentric worldview refers to how terms with the semantic meaning of maleness are often used as generic terms. Examples of androcentrism are the generic use of the anaphoric pronouns *he*, *him* and *his*, expressions such as *mankind*, as well as the generic use of other terms and titles that semantically refer to males (Baxter 2010: 31–32). Due to androcentrism, such generic titles as *spokesman*, *chairman* or *policeman* can be used to denote both men and women (Romaine 2001: 166). Similarly, the word *guys* can be used to refer to both men and women, notwithstanding whether it is a group of only men, a group of only women, or a mixed group. Androcentrism can even be seen in how women themselves use the term *guys* to address mixed groups without deeming it sexist or perceiving it as a term exclusive to men (Sunderland 2006: 141).

According to the androcentric worldview, titles that denote women can be seen as abnormal or deviant (Baxter 2010: 31). Female-specific words can thus be seen as semantically asymmetrical and less productive compared to their male-specific counterparts (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12). Androcentrism can also be seen in how female-specific occupational titles are often derived from the male-specific ones. In the asymmetrical pair *host* and *hostess*, for instance, *hostess* is derived from the male-specific title through suffixation. Reversely, affixes are not generally used in English to change generic terms into male-specific alternatives, since the latter can already be seen as the generic forms (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 259). The female-specific titles can therefore be understood as extensions of their original male-specific counterparts, which results in them appearing inferior to the male-specific titles (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12).

The use of and the semantic prosody in female-specific suffixes is another reason why female-specific terms can be seen as inferior (Hellinger 2001: 109). In addition to the suffix *-ess*, other suffixes that are used to derive female-specific terms are *-ette*, *-trix* and *-ine*, found for instance in *heroine*, *aviatrix* and *usherette* (ibid.). However, the use of these suffixes has not only been short-lived but also viewed as problematic (ibid.), which can be seen from the fact that for instance *aviatrix* and *usherette* can now be considered outdated. Notably, other instances where such suffixes are commonly used other than in female-specific terms are in such pairs as *kitchen* and *kitchenette*, *book* and *booklet*,

and *leather* and *leatherette* (ibid.). *Booklet* is a “small book”, *kitchenette* is “not a real kitchen”, and *leatherette* is “artificial leather” (ibid.). When used with female-specific terms, the effect of such suffixes could be similar, resulting in an inferior category (ibid.).

Furthermore, whereas male-specific titles can be used as generic titles, female-specific ones are almost exclusively used to refer to women only. The title *actor*, for instance, is a generic masculine that can be used to refer to both women and men, yet the derivation *actress* is female-specific and used to refer to women only (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 9). Since the title *actress* is not used when referring to men, the two titles form an asymmetrical pair. In fact, using female-specific nouns as gender-indefinite reference is an exception, men being marked in such rare instances as adding *-er* to *widow* (*widower* [+male]), and *bridegroom* being derived from *bride* (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 9; Romaine 1999: 130–131).

In this section, I have discussed occupational titles since, among other possible definitions, *girlboss* can be seen as an occupational title where *girl* is added to *boss*. Therefore, I have discussed gender in English occupational titles, particularly concerning the problems related to them. As female-specific titles can be seen as abnormal, inferior, and asymmetrical in comparison to the male-specific ones, the use of such gender-specific titles as *girlboss* can be claimed to be unnecessary. It can be argued that the use of *girlboss* further trivializes women in such professions, especially since the term *girl* instead of the term *woman* is used to refer to adult females. Therefore, neutralization strategies are discussed in Section 2.3.1 as guidelines to the kind of language that could be used to replace such generic and trivializing titles that were discussed in this section.

2.3.1 Neutralization Strategies

Some main guidelines for creating non-sexist and gender-neutral titles have been suggested, a process that is also known as *language planning* (Hellinger 2001: 109; Mills 2008: 84). The primary guideline in English is gender neutralization (Hellinger 2001: 109). Since the generic use of male-specific terms can render women linguistically invisible, the gender neutralization strategy has been seen as the most important method in introducing gender-neutral language in English (Sunderland 2006: 34; Hellinger 2001: 109). When it comes to occupational titles, gender neutralization would for instance indicate replacing a title such as *policeman* with the gender-neutral alternative *police officer* (Mills 2008: 84).

Another way to neutralize occupational titles is to replace gender-specific suffixes with the suffix *-person* (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257). For instance, the gendered and false generic occupational title *chairman* has an alternative gender-neutral form, *chairperson* (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257). However, it has been argued that such gender-neutral alternatives as this are primarily used when referring to women (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257), which would in turn render women less visible. The guideline would therefore be to use the gender-neutral *-person* for both men and women, abandoning such gendered titles as *chairman* altogether. However, as *-person* is not productive with every gendered title (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257), alternatives such as *postperson* are not used in the English language (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257; Sánchez-Torres 2023: 37). Still, using the gender-neutral suffix *-person*, among other alternative gender-neutral titles, such as *chair* (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 257), is more advisable than opting for the false generic title.

The purpose of gender neutralization can be seen as increasing the incorporation of women in gendered occupations. Eventually, such inclusion could even lead to changes on the level of social gender. In fact, the aforementioned study showed that whereas 70% of the participants failed to solve a riddle where the surgeon was the mother, using the term *child* instead of *son* resulted in less of a bias (Morehouse et al. 2022: 1). This indicates that mere secondary exposure to the gender-neutral “kinship term” *child* instead of male-specific term *son* resulted in more than double of the participants solving the riddle in comparison to when *son* was used (Morehouse et al. 2022: 1). This indicates that, although the *son* was not the subject of the riddle per se, even the smallest changes in the use of gender-neutral terms can affect stereotypes (Morehouse et al. 2022: 1).

Reversely, the gender neutralization strategy would also include avoiding such marked titles as *actress* by instead referring to both men and women as *actors*. Such asymmetries that are represented by the titles *actor* and *actress* can also be described as the act of *trivializing* women (Sunderland 2006: 34). In fact, instead of using the derived form *actress*, some female actors explicitly opt to refer to themselves by the title *actor*. However, there are also downsides to using seemingly gender-neutral titles such as these, since it reduces women’s visibility in the field (Mills 2008: 84), especially since *actor* was originally used to specifically refer to men. The choices women have when opting for such titles as these are therefore complex and limited, as no purely gender-neutral alternatives are necessarily available. In such instances where the term either prompts the male social gender (*surgeon*) or where the original form of an asymmetrical pair was used to denote men (*actor*), the solution could be to create a completely new term to avoid interpretations influenced by past meanings. However,

realistically, the creation of such new titles is arduous, and their successful popularization in particular could be difficult.

Another strategy is to use the same pair of gender-specific modifiers and compounds equally, especially in cases when expressing gender becomes necessary (Sánchez-Torres 2023: 38). This would mean that if the use of the modifiers and compounds *male* and *man* is necessary, it should be met with the equal use of *female* and *woman* (Sánchez-Torres 2023: 38), and vice versa. Reversely, if the generic title is not gender-marked, it is equally advised to avoid using marked female-specific titles as well (Hellinger 2001: 110).

To illustrate, the use of the terms *career woman*, *career girl* and *family man* and the scarce use of their equivalents *career man* and *family woman* (Romaine 1999: 131) show societal expectations and stereotypes about men and women. Women are expected to have a family, which can be seen in the skewedness of the terms *family man* and *family woman*, the former of which is significantly more familiar than the latter. The scarce use of the expression *career man* suggests that it is not necessary to specify that the person is a man, since a man having a career is not exceptional. Instead, being a woman, or a girl, who has a career needs to be specifically mentioned, resulting in the use such titles as *career woman* and *career girl*. In fact, these expressions have twice the negative effect on women, since they suggest both women's inability to be "real" professionals as well as women's inability as professionals to be "real" women (Romaine 1999: 131).

Other examples of such markedness are the coined occupational titles *SheEO* and *manny* (Atir 2022: 623). These have been coined from the words *she* and *CEO*, an acronym for *Chief Executive Officer*, and from the words *male* and *nanny* (Atir 2022: 623). As established (see Section 2), these coinages show how higher-status occupational titles (*CEO*) are often associated with male social gender, whereas lower-status occupational titles (*nanny*) are associated with the female one. These examples show similar societal exceptions as *career woman* and *family man*, yet the word formation process has been taken even further by coining the words into fixed expressions. These words have been coined despite the fact that there were no gendered occupational titles that needed equal counterparts (Atir 2002: 623), such as *HeEo* or *fanny*. Similarly, as *girlboss* was originally written together rather than separately as *girl boss*, it can similarly be seen as a fixed phrase. Therefore, since no such marked parallel form as *manboss* not to mention *boyboss*, is commonly used, there is in this sense no need for the title *girlboss*.

However, there are some instances where gender-specification can be used. The first is when they are used to refer to a known individual, such as "Congresswoman Maxine Waters" (Hellinger

and Motschenbacher 2015: 12). The other is to create contrast between male and female delegates (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12). Making the distinction of a *female doctor* is necessary only if the title *male doctor* is also used. The necessity depends on the context, and it can be specified for example in statistics or comparisons: “40% of the doctors at the hospital are female doctors, whereas 60% are male doctors”. Because of social gender and stereotypes in English, however, this is often not the case, and the titles *female doctor* and *male nurse* are more likely used than their equivalents *male doctor* and *female nurse* (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 11; Romaine 2001: 158). It is also argued that the use of the terms *girl* and *lady* should be altogether excluded from such pairs (Sánchez-Torres 2023: 38), as both terms have for instance been sexualized (see 2.2.1). Yet, in one corpus study, *lady doctor* occurred 125 times, whereas *gentleman doctor* was nonexistent with zero occurrences (Romaine 1990: 130).

Gender-specification and women’s linguistic visibility could be seen as a complex topic, especially since the female-specific terms are not used consistently (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12). Using gender-neutral alternatives is the most commonly employed strategy when it comes to changing gendered titles (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 259–260). However, female-specific terms can sometimes be used in occupations that are considered as traditionally men’s occupations to highlight the fact that women now have a part in them (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 259–260). Nevertheless, this strategy is most common in languages in grammatical gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 259–260), which no longer exists in the English language. As gender is an inherent part of nouns in grammatical gender languages, the gender neutralization strategy is not easily applied to the nouns (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 259–260). Moreover, although marking can draw attention to instances where gender is underrepresented in the profession, it can also have a negative, ironic effect, since it can emphasize stereotypes and women as exotic in the occupational area (Atir 2022: 624). Because of these reasons, markedness carries negative meanings, making marked titles inappropriate in neutral contexts (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 12). Thus, due to the marked properties of the term *girlboss*, its use could similarly be seen as unacceptable in professional contexts.

Reversely, neutralization strategies have been easier to enforce in languages without grammatical gender, such as English (Sczesny et al. 2016: 6). However, although changes made with the neutralization strategies are not prevented by grammatical gender, another problem can be social gender (ibid.). Indeed, it is often the ideas of social gender that language users have, specifically ideas of women and men’s social roles, that can slow the process (ibid.). Language planning therefore works in such

natural gender languages as English only if language users eventually adopt the new suggested neutralization strategies. Continuing to create marked labels such as *girlboss* may hinder these neutralization strategies and could instead result in more work when it comes to proposing new neutral alternatives.

2.3.2 “Girls” at Work

For decades, women have opposed the term *girl* being used to refer to adults, particularly in the workplace context (Romaine 1999: 134; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 264). Using *girl* in such contexts can be regarded as especially trivializing, since it might indicate that women are seen as incompetent and subordinate (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 258). This is partly because the term *girl* emphasizes age, or lack thereof (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 259). Feminists have therefore called attention to this type of systematically discriminating language, which would include using *girl* to denote grown women (Mills 2006: 140). Feminists have thus adopted and lobbied this cause in the workplaces so that such word choices would not be part of official documentation, and have started a discussion on the impact that the use of such words has on employees (Mills 2006: 140).

There are several reasons why the use of *girl* has been opposed. Similarly to such semantically asymmetrical pairs as the gendered titles as *actor* and *actress*, it can be argued the words *girl* and *boy* are in fact also an asymmetrical pair. This can be claimed for several reasons. It has been found that *girl* is more often used to denote adult women than *boy* is used to denote adult men (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 34, Sigley and Holmes 2002: 139). In fact, it has been studied that *girl* is used three times more likely than *boy* is when referring to adults (Holmes and Sigley 2002: 145). In the workplace context, *boy* has notably been used when referring to lower-status occupations (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 259). Furthermore, it has been argued that *boy* is seldom used to refer to adult males, ones that are no longer teenagers (Lakoff 1975: 56). In contrast, it has been said that women can be called *girls* regardless of their age (Lakoff 1975: 56).

This can be explained by the ideas that are contained within the word *girl*. Adult women being called *girls* might be seen as a compliment, especially since the word semantically refers to the idea of young age (Lakoff 1975: 56). However, the use of this word has a downside since it can simultaneously remind the hearer of immaturity and irresponsibility (Lakoff 1975: 56). Moreover, the idea of youthful appearance has been perceived as being “traditionally” attractive to men (Holmes and

Sigley 2002: 148–149). If the aspect of appearance makes women attractive to men, this could therefore indicate that the use of *girl* means that women are being objectified (Holmes and Sigley 2002: 147). Attractiveness and appearance are traits that should not need to be relevant in a professional environment, especially since they might override ideas of capability (Holmes and Sigley 2002: 148; Holmes and Sigley 2001: 259). For these reasons, it is not ideal to use the word *girl* in occupational titles for adult women.

However, as women can be called *girls* regardless of their age, other meanings in the word *girl* must also be considered. This is demonstrated by a study where a woman in her seventies is called the “oldest office girl” (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 260). Consequently, it can be argued that in calling women *girls*, women are not allowed to mature and are simultaneously not treated as adults (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 260). Therefore, other meanings that are associated with the word *girl* that should be considered are immaturity, subordinate status, and “financial or emotional dependence or vulnerability” (Holmes and Sigley 2002: 148–149). This indicates that being referred to as a *girl* could reveal a linguistic *glass ceiling*, referring to the notion of a social barrier that prevents women from being hired in leadership positions (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 260; Schnurr 2013: 133). It could hence be argued that the discussed features associated with the term *girl* are not favorable to adult women who want to be respected as professionals.

In addition, not only is *girl* used more often than *boy* when referring to adults, it can also be argued that *girl* is in many contexts used as an equivalent for *man*. *Woman* has in fact said to be commonly replaced by *girl* (Lakoff 1975: 56). When it comes to occupational titles, this asymmetry can be seen for instance in the titles *weatherman* and *weathergirl* (Mills 2008: 135). In fact, in her book *#Girloboss*, Amoruso (2014: 13) herself says that she is “glad to be a girl” in “a man’s world”, illustrating how the two terms can be used in a parallel. Moreover, this phenomenon can be seen in how professional men and women are discussed in televised sports (Messner 1993). It has been found that in sports, although female athletes can also be referred to as *women*, they were often referred to as *young ladies* and *girls* (Messner 1993: 127). In one example, a female athlete was called a “wonder girl of women’s tennis” (Messner 1993: 127), showing how *girl* can be used even in instances where the category itself is “women’s” tennis.

As mentioned in this section, age does not solely determine whether *girl* is used. It has been studied how age does not affect whether female athletes are referred to as *girls*, *young ladies* or by first name (Messner 1993: 128). The first two of these would in particular be infantilizing for adult athletes.

Simultaneously, a study found that male athletes were not referred to as *boys*, but as *men*, *young men* or *young fellas* (Messner 1993: 127). In addition, contrary to women, men are more often called by their surname (Messner 1993: 131). The significance of using a last name comes from research suggesting that using surnames increases the perception of fame, eminence and whether they deserve awards – traits that were said to already not be attributed to women enough (Atir 2022: 623–624).

As discussed in Section 2.2.1, the theory of semantic derogation explains how the term *girl* has gained pejorative meanings. One example of the sexualization of *girl*, here as part of an occupational title, is the term *business girl* (Romaine 1999: 131). Due to semantic derogation of women, the term has been found to have previously denoted a prostitute (Romaine 1999: 131). As discussed, other terms that are used for women have been found to have this meaning in common. In fact, it has been argued that when the term *professional* is used for a man, it carries the meaning of respect (Schulz 1990): 142). Instead, a woman being referred to with the same term can indicate that she is of the “oldest” profession (Schulz 1990: 142), a prostitute.

The word *girl* is therefore asymmetrical to its counterpart *boy*, evokes ideas of young age and consequently often frivolity, immaturity, and irresponsibility, and has become pejorated over time in acquiring insulting and sexual meanings. Due to all these reasons, if possible, the deliberate use of *girl* as part of occupational titles should be avoided. I therefore discuss the term *girlboss* in more detail in Section 2.3.3.

2.3.3 *Girlboss*

The term *Girlboss* can be seen as a slogan, popularized by Sophia Amoruso in 2014, which originally referred to hard-working women who succeeded in the patriarchal society (Murray 2023). In addition to a slogan, the term can be seen as an occupational title or as an identity. Consequently, the term can be used in many different contexts. However, due to the aforementioned ideas that are included in the word *girl* and its consequent unsuitability for the workplace contexts, the term *girlboss* can be considered problematic. In fact, sexism in such titles as *girlboss* can be difficult to detect, especially since women themselves use them.

It has been found that some titles that include the term *girl* are used in ironic ways (Mills 2008: 135). As discussed, sexism can be hidden behind ironic expressions (Mills 2008: 35). Whether using irony is problematic, however, depends on who uses it and in which contexts. For instance, the

word *girlie* was originally used to refer to “soft porn magazines”, or “girlie mags”, as well as to refer to things that were considered too trivial or feminine (Mills 2008: 135). However, as Mills (2008: 135) argues, women themselves can use this term to convey humor, as in the title of the comedy show *The Girlie Show*. Some instances of ironic use of *girlboss* is also expected to be found in this study. As the word *girlboss* was initially used unironically, it is therefore possible to first find more unironic examples, whereas ironic examples, if any, are expected to emerge in the later uses of the term.

Words that had previously suffered from semantic derogation have thus been taken back by women to be used in different contexts with different meanings. Besides irony, another example of women referring to themselves as *girls* is with the term *girlpower*, famously used by Spice Girls (Mills 2008: 135). Negative meanings can hence slowly be removed in favor of women, and terms such as *girl* and *girlie* can instead be used to empower women. It could therefore be argued that the use of *girl* in *girlboss* reflects these ideas of reclaimed power or female empowerment. Yet, the originally neutral word *girl* has over time acquired negative meanings, which makes this argument more complicated.

Originally negative words such as *queer*, *dyke*, and *bitch* have been taken back as self-affirming and empowering labels (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 263). Although words like *bitch* continue to have negative meanings, the meaning depends on the context. In fact, according to third wave feminist analysis, *bitch* can simultaneously have offensive, ironic or humorous meanings (Mills 2008: 26). Similarly, *girl* can have both positive and negative meanings. It can for instance be understood as offensive (“Don’t be such a girl.”), as an endearment (“Girl, you know it!), as empowering (“Woohoo, girl power!”), or in its original, neutral form, referring to biological sex (“I am a girl.”). However, the semantic prosody in *girl* is different from labels such as *queer*, *dyke*, and *bitch* as the latter titles have originally been intended as negative, insulting, and offensive, whereas the original prosody of *girl*, referring to biological sex, has changed over time.

Still, the context in which these terms are used can very much determine the prosody. In a study about “doing femininity” at work, one female participant in a leadership position unapologetically uses the term *girly* when referring to herself (Holmes and Schnurr 2006: 43). The participant in question seems to be aware of gender stereotypes while simultaneously contesting said stereotypes (Holmes and Schnurr 2006: 44). The subject, without being apologetic, embraces her femininity in a workplace context, signaling that a woman can simultaneously be feminine and be in a high position (Holmes and Schnurr 2006: 44). This differs from the findings of another study, where another female subject uses *girl* in a trivializing way, silently accepting a world view where women are inferior to men (Holmes and

Schnurr 2006: 43). These studies show that the different ways these terms are used indeed signal varying attitudes to gender stereotypes and other similar societal issues. It is possible that similar findings can be made from the uses of *girlboss*, in which the attitude can determine the prosody of the term.

It has also been argued that the increase of female-specific pre-modifiers and the decline of the *-man* post-modifier could be seen as a positive change for women, indicating that women begin occupying fields that were previously unoccupied by them (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 254). It has also been predicted that the first women to occupy a previously unoccupied field would have marked titles, particularly since they would be seen as the exception (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 254). As established (see Section 2.3.1), the appropriateness of marked titles depends on the context. Marked titles might evoke two kinds of reactions (Atir 2022: 625). It can get a welcoming reception, accepting markedness as evidence that the occupation is not exclusive to men (Atir 2022: 625). Alternatively, it might evoke a negative reception since it could be argued that marking gender should not be necessary in that context (Atir 2022: 625).

In this case, *girlboss* might evoke the latter reaction. As Roivainen (2023: 1) points out, women have been in leadership positions before the launch of this term. Since the role of women as bosses has been established for some time, using the term could rather be seen as a disservice to women in leadership positions, since coining *boss* with *girl* could be seen as a demotion. Furthermore, the idea of women needing to be marked in such occupations where men are not might indicate that, much like the female-specific title being an extension of the male-specific one, women might also be seen as something lesser (Romaine 1999: 130). Yet, new ways to denote and demote women in such positions have been invented with such titles as *girlboss* and *SheEO*.

An earlier study shows a decrease in the use of both *man* and *girl* in occupational titles (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 253). Reversely, the use of *woman* is said to have increased (Holmes and Sigley 2001: 253). The use of *girl* in *girlboss* is therefore against this former trend, suggesting that either the use of *girl* in occupational titles has changed in the past 20 years, or that it was simply the preferred term in this case over the word *woman*. It is therefore possible that this is a sign of negative change for women in general. It could also be evidence of negative changes for women in the professional context, especially in leadership positions, due to the specific use of the term *boss*. Although the intention behind the use of such terms could be to empower women, it cannot be predicted what types of prosodies it will acquire over time. In fact, after terms such as this are invented, the meanings they later acquire cannot be predicted, and the initial meaning might change beyond the control of its creator (Eckert and

McConnell-Ginet 2003: 262). This phenomenon has also affected some originally feminist terms (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 262). It can nevertheless be argued that the prosody of *girl* depends on who uses it. For instance, in addition to *girlboss*, the word *girl* has been used in another work-related trend, such as in the *lazy girl job* -trend (Murray 2023). The latter trend refers to well-paying and less stressful remote work (Murray 2023). Using *girl* as part of some trends could indicate that it is in fact being reclaimed, consequently removing potential misogynist and pejorative meanings within the term (Murray 2023). However, as the older term *girlboss*, or *girlbossing*, stresses hard work in particular, there is a clear contrast between these *girl* -trends (Murray 2023). Differences such as these might over time affect the meanings of such terms.

It could be argued that those who lobby women's rights at work should concentrate on wages, not on language (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 264–265), such as whether terms such as *girl* should be used or not. However, women who are called *girls* at their places of work can also be called by their first name and by such terms as *honey* and *dear* (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 264–265). Such forms of address are inappropriate and disparaging in this context. Simultaneously, these women might be expected to refer to their male colleagues by “Mr.,” last name, or other more respected forms of address (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 264–265). This type of contrast might in fact mirror the social differences of how men and women are viewed in the workplace context.

Calling oneself a *girlboss* in the workplace context unironically can therefore be argued to be a disservice to one's credibility. Not only is *woman* replaced by the infantilizing modifier *girl*, but the use of the modifier is also not necessary in the first place to create a symmetrical, equal pair for another word marked by gender. Notwithstanding the social gender and stereotypes that the title *boss* evokes, there is no common title of *male boss* or *manboss*. The term *boss man* is sometimes heard, but it is not as equally established a title. Based on this and the language planning strategies that are used to battle sexist terms, the use of *girl* in the title *girlboss* is not necessary. Based on the theory of semantic derogation of women, the previously seen ironic uses of terms containing *girl* as well as the argued unsuitability of the term *girl* in workplace context, it is predicted that the semantic prosody in *girlboss* has changed after its launch, and it is expected to have acquired ironic and negative semantic prosodies.

3 Methods and Data

This study is conducted as a corpus-based discourse analysis on the term *girlboss*. A corpus is used in this study as a source of both reliable and quantitative data (McEnery et al. 2006: 52). The corpus used in this study is the NOW corpus, short for News on the Web. This specific corpus was chosen for this study due to the term *girlboss* being among others a social media phenomenon. As the NOW corpus is a web news corpus on web news language, it was chosen to examine how this social media term changes and circulates over time. It is expected to reflect discourses of the term in the media, that is how the term is used and in what types of trends emerge in its use. Moreover, the NOW corpus is defined as the “only” corpus that shows “what is actually *happening* [sic] in the language”, as well as “the most robust monitor corpus of English” (english-corpora.org/now). Finally, the NOW corpus is a frequently expanding and updated corpus that provides text from 2010 to the present day, which also includes new words and phrases (english-corpora.org/now). As the book *#Girlboss* was first published in 2014, the NOW corpus can be used to study the very first instances of the neologism *girlboss*. Due to these reasons, the NOW corpus was deemed appropriate to reflect the kinds of changes in *girlboss* that are of interest in this study.

The NOW corpus is used to study collocates. The research topics of this study are gender, semantic prosody, and semantic derogation. The research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: What kinds of representations of gender can be found based on the collocates of *girlboss*?

RQ2: How has the semantic prosody of *girlboss* changed between 2014–2016 and 2021–2023?

RQ3: How is the theory of semantic derogation connected to the possible changes in the semantic prosody of *girlboss*?

The method used in this study is explained in the following subsections, followed by a subsection in which the data collection process is explained.

3.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis has been described as the study of the type of language that occurs naturally (Baker 2011: 32). Unlike corpus linguistics, discourse analysis is mostly a qualitative analysis, which consists of close reading of some small amounts of texts (Baker 2011: 32). The method that combines these two analyses is often referred to as corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS). In CADS, discourse analysis

and corpus linguistics are combined for a critical approach to a subject (Baker 2011: 24). In this study, CADS is used to examine whether collocations can be seen as evidence of a certain ideological stance or discourse (Baker 2011: 25).

Thus, in this study, discourse analysis is carried out by *concordance analysis* (Baker 2023: 68). A *concordance line* is a stretch of text that emerges when a *node* word is searched in a corpus (Baker 2023: 68). A node word is the word that is searched for, and the concordance typically consists of a piece of text that includes some words to the left and right of the node word, showing the word in its original context (McEnery et al 2006: 83; Baker 2023: 68). A corpus is then used to find the *collocates* of the node word. Collocates are words that consistently occur in the node word's proximity (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 123). After the appropriate collocates have been chosen, the context and the way the collocates are used in practice are examined (Baker 2023: 32).

Due to the nature of the qualitative analysis, it needs to be noted that objectivity is not seen to be possible in discourse analysis (Baker 2011: 32). Because of this, researchers are required to reflect on their own position and whether it may influence the research process or the findings (Baker 2011: 32). However, this is avoided as much as possible by presenting all concordance lines in this study, so that the reader may see the context themselves and replicate this study if need be.

3.2 Corpus linguistics

This study is conducted using a corpus-based discourse analysis. As discourse analysis is defined as study of natural or authentic language, a corpus can be used to source said language (Baker 2011: 32; McEnery et al. 2006: 4). Typically, a corpus comprises of either written text or annotated speech (McEnery et al. 2006: 4). However, it should be noted that these texts are not chosen at random, but as corpora are *representative* of language or text type, the texts are collected for specific purposes (McEnery et al. 2006: 4). Other requirements for a corpus are that it needs to consist of sampled and machine-readable texts that represent a language, language variety, or text type (McEnery et al. 2006: 4–5).

Representativeness is determined by different qualities, with different requirements depending on whether the corpus is a general or a specialized corpus (McEnery et al. 2006: 15). Some main requirements are *balancing* and *sampling* (McEnery et al. 2006: 13). Balancing refers to a sufficiently varied number of genres included in a corpus (McEnery et al. 2006: 13). This is essential if the corpus represents a language or a variety of language. However, if it is a specialized corpus, meaning

a corpus with a specific domain or genre, it only needs to include texts from the domain or genre in question (McEnery et al. 2006: 15). The findings should then be able to be generalized to the language or language variety in question. Since the entirety of the English language, for example, is not possible to gather, this may be done with a sample of the population (McEnery et al. 2006: 13). Sampling therefore refers to the process of how the text chunks are selected (McEnery et al. 2006: 13).

Moreover, a corpus needs to be updated regularly lest it loses its representativeness (McEnery et al. 2006: 14). For this reason, the chosen corpus in this study is the NOW corpus, short for *News on the Web*. It is accessed through English-corpora.org. The corpus is described as containing 18.7 billion words that are gathered from web-based newspapers and magazines starting from 2010 (english-corpora.org/now). It is regularly updated, and the corpus grows monthly by around 120–140 million words from around 250,000 articles, indicating that it is each year growing by around 1.5 billion words (english-corpora.org/now).

One advantage of using a corpus-based method is replicability (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 16), meaning that following studies should be able to replicate the previous one. This is a fundamental feature of scientific studies (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 16). Other advantages of using a corpus is that frequencies and collocates can be easily obtained straight from the corpus (McEnery et al. 2006: 80). Furthermore, as this study is also interested in gender in language, it should be noted that corpora have been found to be useful in studying how gender is discussed (Hellinger and Motschenbacher 2015: 34).

Corpus-based discourse analysis can be used to study collocates and semantic prosody, which is the chosen method in this study. I use this analysis method to examine whether the contexts for the collocates appear to have neutral, positive, or negative prosodies. I also study whether there are changes between collocates of two timeframes, whether the semantic derogation of women can be detected, and what kind of representations of gender emerge from the context. Hence, I focus on the study of collocation and semantic prosody in the following subsections.

3.2.1 Collocation

As explained, collocation refers to words that would characteristically and frequently occur together (McEnery et al. 2006: 82). Collocations can be found from words that occur immediately next to each other, but even a less of a proximity can constitute a collocation (Baker 2011: 17). In other words, collocation may be viewed as a word preferring the company of another (Baker 2011: 17). Eventually, a collocation can result in an association of two separate words, even when they occur alone (Baker 2011:

18). For instance, if the words *illegal* and *immigrant* occur together frequently enough, an association may be formed between these two words even when the former occurs on its own (Baker 2011: 18). Words can thus evoke ideas and concepts beyond the definition of the word itself. This means that words are often defined by the words that they frequently co-occur with.

Colligation is another measure of co-occurrence. Colligation is different from collocation since it refers to the co-occurrence of a word with a semantic meaning and a grammatical word (McEnery et al. 2006: 82), instead of two words with semantic meanings. One example of such a grammatical word is the word *the* (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 130). Determiners such as *the* and *this* are so frequent in general that they are very likely to be one of the top collocates when sorted by frequency (McEnery et al. 2006: 82). Although this study does not concentrate on grammatical words and thus on colligation, it needs to be considered when deciding how the collocates are sorted. Since grammatical words are such frequent words in the English language and do not carry any semantic meaning, they can be excluded from the list of collocates (McEnery et al. 2006: 82). Any superfluous grammatical words are therefore excluded in this study by sorting the collocates by MI.

Intuition has been proven to be often an insufficient way to identify collocation (McEnery et al. 2006: 83). Basing collocation on intuition is not reliable due to people's partial knowledge of language patterns, possible prejudices, preferences, unreliable memory, and imagination (McEnery et al. 2006: 83). Thus, collocation needs to be studied using a corpus, using the right terminology, and with the help of statistically reliable tests. In fact, linguists generally agree that using a corpus to study patterns is not only the best way but the only way to reliably study collocates (McEnery and Harding 2012: 123). Because of these reasons, the collocates of *girlboss* are best studied using a corpus. Finally, as the collocational term semantic prosody (McEnery et al. 2006: 83) is also part of this study, it is discussed in more detail in the following section.

3.2.2 Semantic prosody

The term *semantic prosody* is discussed in this section. As semantic prosody is based on collocational analysis (McEnery et al. 2006: 83), collocates were discussed in the previous section. Whereas collocation can be seen as the relation between a node word and other individual words or phrases, semantic prosody refers to the meanings in said collocation (McEnery et al. 2006: 84–85).

Indeed, semantic prosody refers to meanings that can be found beyond the definitions of individual words (McEnery et al. 2006: 83). This indicates that meanings that are sometimes hidden in words can be explained by their consistent proximity to other words (McEnery et al. 2006: 148–149). It is hence possible that characteristically neutral words can acquire additional negative semantic prosody if they frequently occur in negative contexts, a process that is sometimes described as imbuing (McEnery et al. 2006: 83; McEnery and Hardie 2012: 139). For instance, although the verb *happen* could be perceived as a neutral word, it often collocates with negative words and thus refers to unpleasant situations, having therefore acquired negative meanings (McEnery et al. 2006: 148–149; McEnery and Hardie 2012: 136). In fact, semantic prosody is said to always be either a positive or a negative evaluation (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 137). However, semantic prosody has been found to usually be negative, and it has been established that comparatively few instances are positive (McEnery et al. 2006: 83).

Semantic prosody is related to the more familiar and perhaps more traditional term *connotation* (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 136). However, although some researchers seem to agree that semantic prosody refers to connotation, it has been argued that whereas connotation can be both collocational and non-collocational, semantic prosody can only be collocational (McEnery et al. 2006: 85). The term *discourse prosody* is also sometimes alternatively used for semantic prosody (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 138). However, there is a difference between these two prosodies. Whereas semantic prosody specifically refers to collocation between individual words, discourse prosody refers to other longer pieces of discourse that collocate with individual words (Baker 2011: 126). Therefore, the term semantic prosody is used in this collocational study.

Semantic preference is another term related to collocation. Whereas semantic prosody is more concerned what the speaker means to convey, or pragmatics, semantic preference is more concerned with the meaning that the word itself has, or semantics (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 138). Semantic preference refers to lexical units frequently co-occurring with a group of words that are semantically similar, known as lexical sets (McEnery et al. 2006: 148–149). Semantic preference can be seen as a phenomenon where words in fact prefer other words, favoring certain semantic fields (Partington 2004: 150; McEnery and Hardie 2012: 137). For instance, the word *cup* has been found to prefer the semantic field of drinks, including the words *tea*, *coffee* and *coca-cola*, as well as the semantic field of sport matches, including the words *world* and *semi-final* (Baker 2011: 125–16).

Another difference between semantic prosody and semantic preference is that the former is more concerned with the node word, whereas the latter is more concerned with the collocates (McEnery

et al. 2006: 85). In this sense, semantic preference is more closely connected to collocation itself (Partington 2004: 150). However, semantic prosody can convey an attitude, which semantic preference does not do (Baker 2011: 126). Despite the differences, these terms cannot be completely separated from one other, as semantic prosody affects the node words' preferences, and semantic preference in turn contributes to semantic prosody (Partington 2004: 151).

As discussed in previous sections, irony can sometimes be found from the uses of previously pejorated words, such as *girlie*. As determined in this section, semantic prosody in general is mostly negative (McEnery et al. 2006: 83). However, when a semantically negative and a semantically positive item co-occur together, it can result in irony (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 137). For instance, the word *bent* typically occurs in negative contexts, as it collocates with *destroying*, *harrying* and *mayhem* (Baker 2011: 126). If the word *bent* is instead used in a positive context, such as with the term *self-improvement*, the outcome can be ironic (Baker 2011: 126). The contradiction between a semantically positive item and a semantically negative item indicates that some kind of falsehood is involved (McEnery et al. 2012: 140). Alternatively, it can be seen as deliberately choosing unexpected words to convey irony (Baker 2011: 126). Based on this method, prosody can be used to study whether *girlboss* is also used ironically.

Since semantic prosody is always collocational and because collocations are best studied using corpus linguistics, this is a corpus-based study. As the word *girl* has been said to have undergone semantic derogation, it can be theorized that it has at least partly happened due to imbuing. In fact, negative semantic prosody can be seen as words often having “bad company”, which results in the word itself then becoming a reference to something undesirable (McEnery et al. 2006: 84). As discussed, the theory of semantic derogation bases on the claim that all words related to women will over time acquire negative meanings. The aim of this study is therefore to determine whether the term *girlboss* has acquired negative semantic prosody over time and whether it can be explained by the theory of semantic derogation of women. In the next section, I discuss the data collection process of this study.

3.3 Data Collection

In this section, the data collection process from the NOW corpus is explained. The NOW (News on the Web) corpus is accessed through English-corpora.org. The collocates in the NOW corpus are studied with the help of statistical tests. Statistical tests are used to determine whether the results come up due to

a coincidence (McEnery et al. 2006: 56). To be able to accept a hypothesis, a statistical test must be conducted, and the level of statistical significance needs to be stated (ibid.). The level of statistical significance is the predetermined level at which the hypothesis can be accepted (ibid.).

Collocates are words that typically occur together (McEnery et al. 2006: 56). For studying collocation, different kinds of tests can be used. Some appropriate tests are log-likelihood test, log-log test and MI3 test (McEnery et al. 2006: 219–220). However, collocation is usually studied based on the MI score, short for *mutual information* score (McEnery et al. 2006: 56).

Mutual information is a formula that is borrowed from information theory (McEnery et al. 2006: 56). The MI score is used to show that a co-occurrence between two items is not only frequent but also special (Baker 2023: 84). To calculate the mutual information score, all potential occurrences of collocates in a corpus are examined (Baker 2023: 84). It is calculated based on the expected probability of the co-occurrence in comparison to the relative frequency of the collocates in the corpus, as well as the overall size of that corpus (Baker 2023: 84). The expected probability is compared to the actual one, which presents itself as a number (Baker 2023: 84). The higher this number is, the stronger the collocational strength is, indicating that it is an effect-size measure (Baker 2023: 84). This also indicates that the closer the number is to zero, the more likely it is that the words in question co-occur only due to chance (McEnery et al. 2006: 56).

As the purpose of statistical tests is to study how likely it is that the results emerge due to chance, it is convenient that MI score shows this automatically. MI score is automatically calculated and accessible through the NOW corpus interface in English-corpora.org. For this reason, the MI test is chosen for this study. It has been proposed that an MI score that is 3 or higher can be considered indicative of an existing collocation (McEnery et al. 2006). However, in this study, the minimum MI is set to 1 due to the frequency of the node word *girlboss* in the NOW corpus, which is especially low in the first years of its occurrence.

Most corpus linguists have followed the guideline of using the span of + and –4 when studying collocation (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 129). This span signifies four words to the left of the node word and four words to its right (McEnery et al. 2006: 56). As collocation can be seen as a potentially freer co-occurrence than just two words in each other's immediate proximity, co-occurring words can collocate even if they are not directly adjacent to each other or occur in a fixed order (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 123). In this sense, the span of 4:4 instead of only 1:1 is justified. For these reasons, this span is utilized in this study.

It should be noted that claiming that a word or a phrase based on collocates “possesses” a certain semantic prosody should be done with caution (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 139). In fact, when it comes to recognizing meaningful collocations, measuring collocational strength is not always the best method to do so (McEnery et al. 2006: 56). It also needs to be added that the MI test usually shows words that are generally rare. The node word and its collocates are thus words that are actually less likely to occur apart from each other than together (Baker 2023: 84). Thus, as collocates often form an infrequent pairing, they should not be used to form generalizations about the node word (Baker 2023: 84).

When it comes to ethical research, some factors need to be considered. As this is a corpus-based study, all data that is analyzed have been previously gathered and are found in the NOW corpus. The NOW corpus is openly accessible, and it gathers data from openly available online magazines and newspapers. Links to the original sources for the hits are available from the concordances, and any user may read the original text in its original context. However, these newspapers and magazines do discuss for example people and corporations by their name, so the corpus is not anonymous. Despite this, typically such magazines and newspapers discuss public people such as politicians or celebrities. Therefore, as for instance Sophia Amoruso has published *#Girldboss* by her name and as she discussed in such newspaper and magazines by, her name or the names of other people that are appear in the corpus are not anonymized in this study.

When it comes to the present study, collocation is studied by choosing the header “Collocates” and by inputting the search **girldboss** in the “Word/phrase” section of the search engine. By choosing to frame the search as **girldboss** with the asterisks, the results show all the possible inflections and derivations of the word *girldboss*, including the noun in plural and possessive forms, as well as the verb derived from the noun and all its tenses. This also includes *#girldboss* and other forms that may come up. The MI score is set at minimum 1, and the results are sorted based on MI. They are not sorted based on frequency, since as noted, frequent collocates tend to be function words (Baker 2023: 83), such as *the*, which is not the subject of interest in this study.

Moreover, it has been stated that the researcher can choose the minimum frequency for a collocate before it can be included in their study (McEnery et al. 2006: 9). In this study, the minimum frequency is set to two occurrences, since one occurrence could be seen as a random. If the collocates have two hits that consist of the exact same concordance line from the same source, they are considered as one occurrence and are thus excluded from the list of collocates. This includes concordances that were from the same exact source that was published on the same exact date and in the same exact edition.

Similarly, if the concordance is repeated in the same source in the form of a pull-quote, they are considered as one hit. Since some concordance lines are excluded, it is acknowledged that this could influence the de facto MI score. However, as the concordance lines were not removed from the corpus itself and the MI score was accessed directly from the interface, the MI score is unaffected by these changes.

Finally, the process of gathering a sample should not be done with the intention of favoring examples that support the hypothesis, but should be conducted without excluding any inconvenient ones (McEnery and Hardie 2012: 15). Thus, for a representative sample (Baker 2023: 70), the concordance lines for collocates that have over ten hits are chosen at random, which is rendered possible by the shuffle-option available from the corpus interface.

The first dates in this study are from May 1, 2014, to December 31, 2016. The second dates are from May 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023. Thus, in both queries, the timeframe is two years and eight months. These are two timeframes which include the very first uses of the term and the latest possible uses of the term. This is done for the purposes of a contrastive study, instead of a study on continual change. These dates were chosen based on the fact that the term *girlboss* first appears in the NOW corpus in May 2014. The end date was set at the end of 2016, which is explained by the high frequency of hits from 2017 referencing the Netflix show *Girlboss*. A peak and a high frequency of references to the Netflix show would indicate that the term enters a second phase in its use, which is not the subject of interest in this study (see Section 4.1). These examples were examined and were found irrelevant for the purposes of this study, which is why the end date for the first timeframe was set at 31 December 2016. For simplicity, the timeframes 2014–2016 and 2021–2023 are occasionally used to refer to these dates.

As the timeframe for the first set of collocates was set to two years and eight months, this timeframe was also applied to the latter set. This study is conducted in spring 2024, for which reason the end date was set at the end of 2023, making the end date for the second timeframe December 31, 2023. Although the interval between 2016 and 2021 could ideally be larger, *girlboss* is a relatively new neologism, and it is therefore not possible to set a much larger gap. Nevertheless, the collocates and concordances from the beginning of 2021 were initially examined, but no significant change was detected when that timeframe was excluded from the set of collocates. Especially the phrase *gaslight*, *gatekeep*, *girlboss* seems to be a phenomenon that emerges after May 2021, and thus excluding the first months of 2021 does not affect the collocates at least related to this (see Section 4.2.2).

4 Results

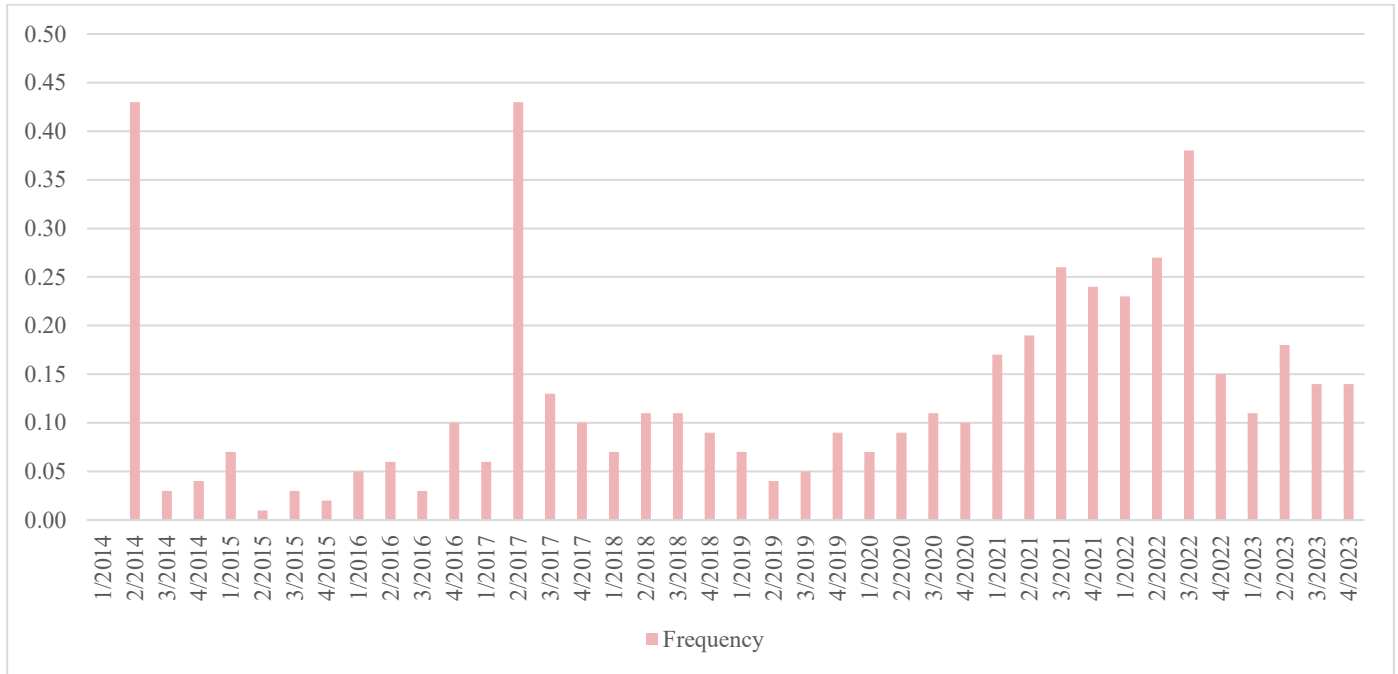
At the time of conducting this study, the different spellings of the lemma **girlboss** has a total of 2,547 hits in the NOW corpus. In addition, the lemma *#girlboss* including its different spellings appear 477 times in the corpus. The lemma **girl boss** written separately and all its different spellings occur 825 times in the corpus. However, it should be noted that not all instances of the words *girl* and *boss* written separately necessarily refer to the term *girlboss*. To determine whether it still refers to the specific term, all the concordances would need to be read through. Moreover, the word *girlboss* written together can be considered as more of an established title in comparison to when it is written together, and it is therefore perceived as more likely that all hits are connected to the topic of this study. Considering these factors and the fact that the NOW corpus does not allow the search of collocates for phrases but only for single words, the hits for *girl boss* are excluded from this study.

Instead, in this study, the main query of interest is **girlboss**. In including the asterisks, the results show all instances of not only just the word *girlboss*, but also the instances where there are characters directly in front of the word, after the word, or both. To illustrate, in doing this, the corpus will include such results as *girlbossed*, *#girlboss*, and *#girlbossification*. This is important since the original title of the book *#Girlboss* includes the hashtag. Including the asterisk immediately before the word ensures that those instances are also part of the study. Using the asterisk at the end of the word also signifies that all possible derivations of the lemma *girlboss* are included, which is also briefly considered when examining how the use of the word has evolved over time.

4.1 **girlboss** in the NOW Corpus

First, the term **girlboss** was searched in the NOW corpus to obtain its frequency information. As can be seen from Appendix 1, the most frequent search results are *girlboss* and *#girlboss*. It can also be noted that the following most frequent results are different kinds of inflections and derivations of the first two terms, such as *girlbosses*, *girlbossing*, *girlbossery*, *girlbossification* and *girlbossed*. Besides these, one of the most frequent results is *@girlbosstown*, which refers to a social media username. These examples show that the original word is highly productive. The word is also highly productive in the sense that it has been used to create new words by coining multiple words together with a hyphen, such as in *girlboss-flavored*, *girlboss-type*, *girlboss-from-hell*, *proto-girlboss* and *anti-girlboss*.

Graph 1 presents the frequency of the term **girlboss** from January 2014 to the end of 2023 in three-month increments. The frequencies are therefore presented as quarters of a year, which are divided as from January to the end of March, from April to the end of June, from July to the end of September, and finally from October to the end of December. The relative frequencies, normalized to the common base of a million words, are illustrated in Graph 1.



Graph 1. Quarterly relative frequency of **girlboss** per million words.

Moreover, the absolute and relative frequencies of **girlboss** obtained from the NOW corpus are shown in Table 1. Again, the relative frequencies are normalized to the base of a million words, and are identical to those illustrated in Graph 1.

Table 1. Absolute and relative frequencies of **girlboss**.

Time	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
1/2014	0	0.00
2/2014	31	0.43
3/2014	1	0.03
4/2014	5	0.04
1/2015	8	0.07
2/2015	2	0.01
3/2015	1	0.03
4/2015	3	0.02
1/2016	15	0.05
2/2016	24	0.06
3/2016	11	0.03
4/2016	43	0.10
1/2017	26	0.06
2/2017	186	0.43
3/2017	59	0.13
4/2017	44	0.10
1/2018	24	0.07
2/2018	42	0.11
3/2018	40	0.11
4/2018	32	0.09
1/2019	35	0.07
2/2019	18	0.04
3/2019	23	0.05
4/2019	52	0.09
1/2020	46	0.07
2/2020	60	0.09
3/2020	78	0.11
4/2020	59	0.10
1/2021	104	0.17
2/2021	114	0.19
3/2021	156	0.26
4/2021	152	0.24
1/2022	174	0.23
2/2022	164	0.27
3/2022	260	0.38
4/2022	89	0.15
1/2023	59	0.11
2/2023	98	0.18
3/2023	57	0.14
4/2023	56	0.14

Graph 1 and Table 1 show that the frequency of the term fluctuates instead of constantly gradually increasing or decreasing. For instance, whereas the highest frequencies occurred in the second quarters of 2014 and 2017, the second highest frequency occurred in the third quarter of 2022. The frequency rises towards these peaks and declines after them. This indicates that some kinds of trends or significant event around the term *girlboss* occurred around those timeframes.

As can be seen from Graph 1, there are no hits for the term in the first quarter of 2014, and the first hits emerge only in May 2014. This can be explained by the book *#Girldboss* being published in May 2014. In fact, the book is discussed in all the first concordances found in the corpus: “The following is excerpted from her new book, *#GIRLBOSS*” (Table 2). In addition, all search results from 2014 include the hashtag, indicating that the term was first used as a concept that was independent from the book title only after 2014. Based on this, it is possible that the term *girldboss* written together originates or was at least first popularized by Amoruso.

Table 2. The complete list of hits for **girldboss** in May 2014.

Concordance line to the left	Hit	Concordance line to the right
The following is excerpted from her book,	#GIRLBOSS	. # I never started a business.
Reprinted from	#GIRLBOSS	by Sophia Amoruso with permission of Portfolio/Putnam
Why	#GIRLBOSS	is the most inspirational fashion book you’ll read this year
Nasty Gal founder Sophia Amoruso’s	#GIRLBOSS	; part-biography and part self-empowerment manual
Oh, and that she only just turned 30. #	#GIRLBOSS	isn’t full of annoying hashtags as the title might suggest.
from thief to chief, rags to riches and anticapitalist to CEO. # ‘	#GIRLBOSS	,’ Ms Amoruso’s first foray into writing.
Ms Amoruso’s first book,	#Girldboss	, was released earlier this month
Sophia Amoruso’s	#GIRLBOSS	# Sophia Amoruso, the 30-year-old founder and CEO
tips for success with her new book	#GIRLBOSS	. # Many are already calling the book a “ Lean in ”
I talk about getting OCD on the BLT in ‘	#GIRLBOSS	’ and how my dad always said ‘when you’re out of work
Sophia Amoruso Wants to Create an Army of	#GIRLBOSSes	# Theft. Hitchhiking. Bad grades. The Nasty Gal queen went from
Now, she wants to teach you how to be a	#GIRLBOSS	, too. # Sophia Amoruso doesn’t want to be your role model
in	#GIRLBOSS	, a new book that wears so many hats it almost defies categorization
“ A	#GIRLBOSS	is someone who’s in charge of her own life,” Amoruso writes.
Amoruso says. #	#GIRLBOSS	covers a lot of ground, but the grand self-help scheme seems
Some of	#GIRLBOSS	’s basic career tips -- think cover letters and interviews
Amoruso is careful to address her readers as “	#GIRLBOSS	” throughout the book, suggesting that you, too, have the
Of all “	#GIRLBOSS	” lessons, though, there’s one that Amoruso hopes readers

It seems that even though the hashtag is included in the concordance lines, the word *girldboss* has been used in the plural form from the very beginning of its use, as can be seen in Table 2. In fact, the concordance lines in Table 2 would suggest that the plural form was used by Amoruso herself: “Sophia Amoruso Wants to Create an Army of *#GIRLBOSSes*”. The first time *girldboss* seems to have been used outside the context of the book was in 2015 (Table 3).

Table 3. Examples of **girlboss** in 2015.

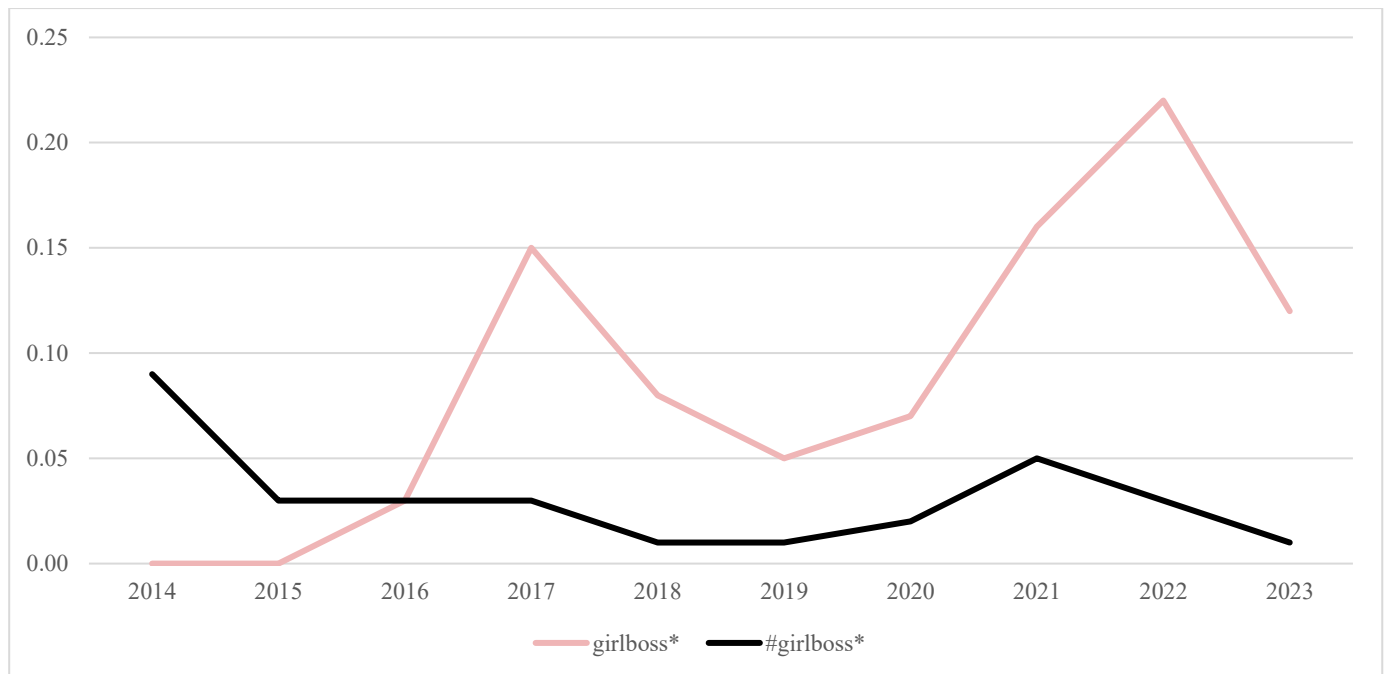
Concordance line to the left	Hit	Concordance line to the right
Serena Williams is a Queen Letizia looks smart in this color-blocked dress that says	#GirlBoss #GIRLBOSS	, but we often forget that at one time, she was an underdog as much as it says #StyleMaven
even without imperial blood in her veins, this ginger is a	#girlboss	. Merida is no damsel in distress, but a rebel heart who can fight in a dress.

The versatile use of the term can also be seen in how it can be spelled with capital first letters (*GirlBoss*), in all capital letters (*GIRLBOSS*) or in all small letters (*girlboss*) (Table 3). The term is used to describe people outside the context of the book, as it is used to refer to characters or people such as Queen Letizia, Merida, and Serena Williams. This indicates that from the very first years, the term had spread so that it could be used to refer to people and matters that were not directly connected to the book, and it had started to gain ground as a general term. However, *girlboss* is in all the concordance lines in Table 3 spelled with a hashtag. Indeed, the first time the term was used without a hashtag in the NOW corpus was when it occurred once in 2015 (Table 4).

Table 4. An example of the query *girlboss** in 2015.

Concordance line to the left	Hit	Concordance line to the right
This month they will also introduce their “	Girlboss	” classes in which women will learn the fierce routines

Although Table 4 shows that the lemma *girlboss** was used only once in 2015, Graph 2 illustrates that already from 2017 onwards, the use of *girlboss** without a hashtag has been more frequent than when the hashtag is included. It can also be seen from Graph 2 that that the frequency of *girlboss** without a hashtag significantly grows from 2016 to 2017. This may indicate that the use of the term *girlboss* as an independent concept was adopted somewhere around 2017, especially since it became more common than the original book title *#Girlboss* around that time.



Graph 2. Annual relative frequency of *girlboss** and *#girlboss** per million words.

In Graph 2, the first discernable peak is from 2014, followed by even higher peaks in 2017 and 2022. This yearly illustration of the queries *girlboss** and *#girlboss** differ from Graph 1 in the sense that here the highest peak occurs in 2022, whereas in Table 1, the years 2014 and 2017 are tied in that position. The first peak can be explained by the publication of *#Girlboss*, which also accounts for hits for *#girlboss** when hits for *girlboss** are nonexistent. These hits from 2014 are included in the study of collocates. The second peak, in turn, can be explained by the Netflix show *Girlboss* being published in 2017. Naturally, as the title does not include the hashtag, it is not included in many hits from 2017. This also explains why the entry *girlboss** first surpasses the entry *#girlboss** this year. The third peak is in 2022, which is also included in the study of collocates. No clear trends that would explain the peak were found, and instead the hits from 2022 were overall varied in nature.

An example from the corpus also reveals that already in 2017, the term was used to derive a new word, *girlboss-y* (Table 5). The *-y* being connected to the node with a hyphen indicates that the term is still considered such a new a neologism that it is not spelled like an established adjective, such as *girlbossy*.

Table 5. A hit for *girlboss-y* from 2017.

Concordance line to the left	Hit	Concordance line to the right
Kim Kardashian West debuted a new	girlboss-y	style of pinstripe suiting and bustier tops at the Forbes Women Summit.

Similarly to 2015, the term was used in 2017 to refer to matters that were not directly connected to the book (Table 5). The hashtag is also excluded in some other examples from 2017 (Table 6).

Table 6. Examples of *girlboss* in 2017.

Concordance line to the left	Hit	Concordance line to the right
reaching out to designers for outfits for keeping	girlboss girlboss	to wear, booking her favourite make-up artists hydrated and to always have breath mints, name cards, a power bank
In my mind, I had all those questions on pursuing my "	girlboss	" dream -- what is it that prevents us from doing something we love?

The general frequencies and the evolution of the term was discussed in this section. In the next section, the focus is not on the frequencies of **girlboss** in these years in general, but on the collocates that emerge during these timeframes. Thus, in the following sections, I analyze the nature of the collocates by examining their concordance lines and contexts.

4.2 Collocates

Both lists of collocates were searched with the entry **girlboss**. The dates in the first list are from May 1, 2014, to December 31, 2016, and the dates in the latter list are from May 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023. The timeframe for both lists was therefore two years and eight months. As established (see Section 3.3), the span was set to $-4/+4$, the minimum frequency was set to two, and the minimum accepted MI was one. MI was set to 1 due to the especially low frequency of hits for **girlboss** in 2014–2016. In doing this, 20 collocates could be included in both lists. The collocates were then sorted by MI. This was done because, as established (see Section 3.3), MI typically reveals different kinds of collocates than frequency does.

4.2.1 Collocates in 2014–2016

The collocates for **girlboss** in 2014–2016 are shown in Table 7. The collocate with the highest MI is *Amoruso* (MI 15.07), while the collocate with the lowest MI is *Netflix* (MI 2.20). In fact, there are four

collocates that have an MI score under 3. However, as they are all over the MI score of 1, they can be seen as significant and are accepted in the list. As discussed, (Section 4.2), the lowest allowed frequency was two, and Table 7 shows that eleven collocates out of 20 occurred only twice. All concordance lines were checked to ensure the actual frequency of available hits in the corpus, and irrelevant duplicates were excluded from the count.

Table 7. Top 20 collocates for **girlboss** in 2014–2016.

	Collocate	MI	Frequency
1	AMORUSO	15.07	27
2	HILBERTIDOU	13.92	2
3	ALEXIA	9.52	3
4	SOPHIA	8.63	16
5	TOME	8.42	2
6	AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL	7.30	2
7	THERON	6.85	2
8	BADASS	6.77	2
9	PODS	6.05	2
10	BESTSELLING	5.95	2
11	MEMOIR	5.66	4
12	BEST-SELLING	5.14	2
13	NZ	4.46	8
14	PODCAST	4.24	5
15	BOOK	3.18	18
16	EMPIRE	3.09	2
17	FOUNDER	2.76	4
18	RADIO	2.70	6
19	COMEDY	2.36	2
20	NETFLIX	2.20	2

Almost all collocates from 2014–2016 are connected to *Girlboss*-related products (Table 7). These include the book *#Girlboss* and related products made by Sophia Amoruso (*Amoruso, Sophia, book, tome, bestselling, best-selling, autobiographical, memoir, empire*), the podcast *Girlboss Radio* by Sophia Amoruso (*radio, podcast*), a network called *Girlboss NZ* founded by Alexia Hilbertidou (*NZ, Alexia, Hilbertidou, pods*), and the Netflix comedy show *Girlboss* produced by Charlize Theron (*Theron, comedy, Netflix*). The *Girlboss*-brand and its connection to both Sophia Amoruso and Alexia Hilbertidou is represented by the collocate *founder*. Of these collocates, *best-selling* and *bestselling* can be considered to have positive meanings, albeit they state facts rather than opinions. Without context, the other mentioned collocates can be seen as neutral, and their semantic prosody needs to be determined based on the context of the concordances lines.

The only collocate from Table 7 that does not fit into any of the mentioned themes is *badass*. Compared to the other collocates found in Table 7, it is the only one that, without context, cannot be

perceived as having neither positive nor neutral semantic prosody. Whether *badass* has positive or negative semantic prosody needs to be determined based on the context of the concordance lines that are part of this study.

Table 8 reveals that, in this context, *badass* is used as a positive adjective. The first concordance reveals that “Lena” is loved as a “badass girlboss”, which is a positive evaluation. The second instance is not as clear, but it can be assumed that “badass advice” is good advice, especially since the title for the article is “6 Reasons You Have to Read #GirlBoss”.

Table 8. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *badass*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
We have declared our love for Lena on numerous occasions, especially because she is a	badass	girlboss who wrote, directed and starred in Girls.
The pages are packed with upfront advice like, “you're not a special snowflake ” and other	badass	advice for burgeoning #GirlBosses.

If there were more than 10 occurrences per collocate, the concordances were picked randomly by using a shuffle-option. Thus, since the number of hits for the collocate *Amoruso* was 27, the concordance lines were chosen this way. They are demonstrated in Table 9. All instances of the collocate *Amoruso* are part of either a neutral or a positive evaluation of the book (Table 9). In this sample, the book “has really inspired” and the author is “well respected” (Table 9). Besides that, the concordance lines include neutral descriptions of the topic.

Table 9. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *Amoruso*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
In her memoir, " #GIRLBOSS, "	Amoruso	said she never planned on running a huge company.
I'm currently reading #Girlboss by Sophia	Amoruso	, and it has really inspired me to keep going while also
It's why the cover of #GirlBoss, Sophia	Amoruso	's best-seller about taking care at work, is pale pink.
best-selling international author of book, #GIRLBOSS,	Amoruso	is well respected in the internal business world.
Watch this space for more on the future	Amoruso	's #Girlboss empire.
a 13-episode series Girlboss based on	Amoruso	's best-selling book #Girlboss.
Netflix on the comedy series #Girlboss, inspired by	Amoruso	herself, starring Britt Robertson as the Nasty Gal founder.
Sophia Amoruso's #GIRLBOSS # Sophia	Amoruso	the 30-year-old founder and CEO of Nasty Gal
In a recent interview with Sophia	Amoruso	on the #Girlboss Radio podcast
As she told #Girlboss Radio host Sophia	Amoruso	Mastromonaco was at the White House for a meeting

A similar theme continues with the collocate *Sophia*. The “certified #GirlBoss Sophia Amoruso” is described as “definitely the winner” on “the fashion front”, and Sophia Amoruso’s “story is inspiring” (Table 10). The podcast is described as one that makes the listener “smarter about business”, and it is said to feature “some of the most impressive and interesting female executives and founders” (Table 10).

The collocate *badass* is also found from Table 10, which is another positive evaluation. Besides those examples, all the other samples are neutral descriptions related to the products.

Table 10. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *Sophia*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
It's why the cover of #Girlboss , podcasts to make you smarter about business #	Sophia Sophia	Amoruso's best-seller about taking charge at work, is pale pink. Amoruso's podcast Girlboss Radio features interviews with some of the most impressive and interesting female executives and founders
On the fashion front, certified #GirlBoss # BUSINESS: " #GIRLBOSS " by	Sophia Sophia	Amoruso was definitely the winner. Amoruso. A female CEO/entrepreneur dolls out advice for young professional women
Daily Ticker A' Lean In' for the 99%?	Sophia	Amoruso's #GIRLBOSS # Sophia Amoruso, the 30-year-old founder and CEO of Nasty Gal
As she told #Girlboss Radio host Sophia Amoruso's #GIRLBOSS . #	Sophia Sophia	Amoruso, Mastromonaco was at the White House for a meeting Amoruso, the 30-year-old founder and CEO of Nasty Gal
badass advice for burgeoning #GirlBosses . 3.	Sophia	Amoruso's story is inspiring.
Reprinted from #GIRLBOSS by	Sophia	Amoruso with permission of Portfolio/Putnam
In a recent interview with	Sophia	Amoruso on the #Girlboss Radio podcast

Related to the book *#Girlboss*, the word *book* is also one of the most relevant collocates (Table 11). When it comes to this collocate, similar prosodies can be found as with *Sophia* and *Amoruso*. Most concordances describe the book in a neutral way, yet there are also some positive evaluations. For example, the book is described as “wildly successful”, the words “bestselling” and “best-selling” are also used here to describe the book, which are simultaneously some of the most relevant collocates of the first timeframe. The author is also described as “rebellious”, and the book is described as a “less corporate, more punk-rock” book (Table 11). These traits can be deemed as positive, particularly due to the title of the source being “40 Under 40: People to Watch in 2015”. However, the first concordance line describes the book as one “that wears so many hats it almost defies categorization” (Table 11). This can be seen as either a negative or a positive evaluation depending on the reader. The context does not expand whether it is one or the other, so it stays undetermined.

Table 11. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *book*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
the lessons she's learned along the way -- in #GIRLBOSS , a new	book	that wears so many hats it almost defies categorization.
he 30-year-old business mogul and author of the new	book	#GIRLBOSS -- part business tome, part personal memoir
Her autobiographical	book	#Girlboss , is about to be made into a Netflix series.
Amoruso is careful to address her readers as " #GIRLBOSS " throughout the	book	suggesting that you, too, have the potential
Ms Amoruso's first	book	#Girlboss , was released earlier this month
online fashion retailer and author of a bestselling advice	book	titled " #GirlBoss " -- is stepping down as CEO of the company
a best-selling international author of	book	, #GIRLBOSS , Amoruso is well respected in the internal business world.
especially in the wake of #Girlboss , her bestselling	book	about female business leadership.
The rebellious, tattooed CEO just came out with her first	book	' #GIRLBOSS ,' this year -- a less corporate, more punk- rock version
Amoruso also authored a wildly successful	book	#GirlBoss , which has since become a podcast, website and Netflix show.

The collocates *tome*, *autobiographical*, *memoir*, *bestselling* and *best-selling* are also related to the book *#Girlboss*. The concordances for these collocates are demonstrated in Table 12. Much like determining whether the book “wearing so many hats it almost defies categorization” (Table 11) is a positive or a negative evaluation, it is difficult to determine whether the tips in the book being “unconventional” (Table 12) is a positive or a negative evaluation.

Table 12. Complete list of concordances for the collocates related to the book *#GirlBoss*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
It also gave Amoruso an audience to target with her motivational	tome	" #GirlBoss , " which was published last year and currently ranks in the top 500 books
the new book #GIRLBOSS -- part business	tome	, part personal memoir -- shares some of the secrets
Her	autobiographical	book, #Girlboss , is about to be made into a Netflix series.
Netflix has just picked up an adaptation of Sophia Amoruso's	autobiographical	work, #Girlboss , which Theron will executive produce
Re/code reported last year. # In her	memoir	#GIRLBOSS , Amoruso said she never planned on running a huge company.
an email to Business Insider in February. # In her	memoir	#GIRLBOSS , Amoruso said she never planned on running a huge company.
Amoruso's New York Times best-selling	memoir	, #GirlBoss , are filled with unconventional tips for success like this one.
She published the bestselling	memoir	, #GIRLBOSS , landed \$49 million in funding from Index Ventures and is expected to sell upward
especially in the wake of #Girlboss , her	bestselling	book about female business leadership.
She published the	bestselling	memoir, #GIRLBOSS , landed \$49 million in funding from Index Ventures
Netflix is working on a 13-episode series Girlboss , based on Amoruso's	best-selling	book #Girlboss .
The pages of Amoruso's New York Times	best-selling	memoir, #GirlBoss , are filled with unconventional tips for success like this one.
Watch this space for more on the future of Amoruso's #Girlboss	empire	.
And now, she's added a book to her	empire	# #GirlBossis no ordinary business book.

As can be seen from the samples, some concordance lines overlap, as the same excerpts occur with multiple collocates. This shows that the collocates that are here mentioned as being related to the book are in fact related to each other. For instance, the same concordances about how “the author of *book*, **#GIRLBOSS**, *Amoruso* is well respected” can be found in both in Table 9 and Table 11. Especially the word *book* emerges in many of the concordance lines: it is a “best-selling book”, a “bestselling book” and an “autobiographical book” (Table 12). Similarly, the collocates *bestselling* and *best-selling* overlap with more than one collocate: “best-selling book”, “bestselling book”, “best-selling memoir” and “bestselling memoir” (Table 12).

Alexia Hilbertidou and her network *Girlboss NZ* is another theme with multiple collocates, which are *Hilbertidou*, *Alexia*, *NZ* and *pod*s. When it comes to collocates related to Hilbertidou, positive evaluations and the theme of “gender issues” comes up (Table 13). *Girlboss NZ* was created so “students can learn more about women in STEM” and “to address gender issues in science and technology” as, for years, Alexia Hilbertidou was “the only female in many of her classes” (Table 13). The network *Girlboss NZ* is said to have “650 members and school clubs in six schools”, and it was “set up by teenage girls to support their peers” (Table 13). The founder of *Girlboss NZ* has also been officially recognized as “a top

Kiwi change maker”. Furthermore, the founder is trying to “establish Girlboss pods” to “get girls in school to talk about feminism” and to “encourage like-minded people to chase their passions” (Table 13).

Table 13. Complete list of concordances for the collocates related to Alex Hilbertidou and her company *GirlBoss NZ*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Young Leader # Alexia	Hilbertidou	created GirlBoss NZ to address gender issues in science and technology
Founder Alexia	Hilbertidou	thought of GirlBoss after years of being the only female in many of her classes
	Alexia	says GirlBoss is all about getting out there.
Young Leader #	Alexia	Hilbertidou created GirlBoss NZ to address gender issues in science and technology
Founder	Alexia	Hilbertidou thought of GirlBoss after years of being the only female in many of her classes
GirlBoss	NZ	is an online community where students can learn more about women in STEM careers
The Westpac Women of Influence young leader finalist started GirlBoss	NZ	at the end of 2015, after finding herself short on community
GirlBoss	NZ	has 650 members and school clubs in six schools
Alexia Hilbertidou created GirlBoss	NZ	to address gender issues in science and technology and C-suite positions
this 17-year-old founder of website GirlBoss	NZ	has been named as a top Kiwi change maker.
GirlBoss	NZ	-- is a 'for youth by youth' organisation
# Alexia Hilbertidou, Kayla Turner, Sayurie Naicker # GirlBoss	NZ	# 19-24 years # Vivek Kumar # Fulcrum # Caitlin Smart
Thus, at a recent forum for GirlBoss	NZ	, which was set up by teenage girls to support their peers
We also trying to establish GirlBoss	pods	and trying to get girls in schools to talk about feminism
plans to launch several initiatives to expand GirlBoss including Girl	pods	in schools, to encourage like-minded people to chase their passions

One collocate that especially connects Alexia Hilbertidou and Sophia Amoruso is *founder*, as it is used to refer to them both. In addition to it referring to both founders, two of the concordance lines in Table 14 refer to female empowerment. Sophia Amoruso is the “founder of The Girlboss Foundation’s mission which wants to empower the next generation of female entrepreneurs”, and her book is described as “part-biography and part self-empowerment manual” (Table 14). Alexia Hilbertidou is also named “a top Kiwi change maker”. All these are not only positive matters but also influential on a societal level.

Table 14. Complete list of concordance lines for the collocate *founder*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
maths (STEM) careers is undoubtedly the reason this 17-year-old	founder	of website GirlBoss NZ has been named as a top Kiwi change maker
Sophia Amoruso is the founder of online retailer Nasty Gal and	founder	of The Girlboss Foundation's mission which wants to empower the next generation of female entrepreneurs
Nasty Gal	founder	and #Girlboss author Sophia Amoruso
It's hard to summarise Nasty Gal	founder	Sophia Amoruso's #GIRLBOSS ; part-biography and part self-empowerment manual

Many concordance lines related to the *Girlboss Radio* podcast discuss women by name, specifically successful working women. For instance, “meaningful career lessons”, “most impressive and interesting female executives and founders”, “successful women”, and being motivated “to found Bumble” are among the discussed topics (Table 15). Again, as these collocates are closely related to each other, there are multiple occurrences of several concordance lines in Table 15. Also, as it is Sophia Amoruso’s podcast, her name comes up in the concordance lines.

Table 15. Complete list of concordances for collocates related to the *Girlboss Radio* podcast.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
On a recent episode of the #Girlboss Radio	podcast	, Alyssa Mastromonaco shared some meaningful career lessons she learned
8 podcasts to make you smarter about business # Sophia Amoruso's	podcast	Girlboss Radio features interviews with some of the most impressive and interesting female executives and founders
In a recent interview with Sophia Amoruso on the #Girlboss Radio	podcast	, Whitney Wolfe discussed the experiences that motivated her to found Bumble
other successful women, including Theron, on her #Girlboss Radio	podcast	. If #Girlboss is ordered to series, we’ll see if
her insights and those of other successful women, including Theron, on her #Girlboss Radio	podcast	. If #Girlboss is ordered to series
On a recent episode of the #Girlboss	Radio	podcast, Alyssa Mastromonaco shared some meaningful career lessons
As she told #Girlboss	Radio	host Sophia Amoruso, Mastromonaco was at the White House for a meeting
Sophia Amoruso's podcast Girlboss	Radio	features interviews with some of the most impressive and interesting female executives and founders
In a recent interview with Sophia Amoruso on the #Girlboss	Radio	podcast, Whitney Wolfe discussed the experiences that motivated her to found Bumble
successful women, including Theron, on her #Girlboss	Radio	podcast. If #Girlboss is ordered to series, we'll see if
those of other successful women, including Theron, on her #Girlboss	Radio	podcast. If #Girlboss is ordered to series, we'll see if

The collocates related to the Netflix comedy show *Girlboss* are *Theron*, *Netflix* and *comedy* (Table 16). Consequently, almost all concordance lines discuss the show or the producer of the show, apart from Theron being mentioned as a topic of the podcast. Theron is described as a “successful woman”, but beside that, the descriptions are neutral. Although the comedy show’s writer is described

as “enormously talented”, the descriptions of the collocate *Netflix* are neutral, possibly since the show was not yet published at the time.

Table 16. Complete list of concordances for collocates related to the Netflix comedy show *Girlboss*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
share her insights and those of other successful women, including	Theron	, on her #Girlboss Radio podcast.
an adaptation of Sophia Amoruso's autobiographical work, #Girlboss , which	Theron	will executive produce with Pitch Perfect franchise scribe
Amoruso's next project will involve working with Netflix on the	comedy	series #Girlboss , inspired by Amoruso herself
writer behind Pitch Perfect and Netflix's upcoming	comedy	Girlboss .
Theron to bring the world of the #Girlboss to	Netflix	# Back in December, we reported that Charlize Theron
enormously talented writer behind Pitch Perfect and	Netflix	's upcoming comedy Girlboss .

In this section, the collocates and concordance lines from the first timeframe were presented and discussed. In the following section, the collocates and concordance lines from the latter timeframe are in turn examined, after which they are compared in Section 4.2.3.

4.2.2 Collocates in 2021–2023

Table 17 shows all the most relevant collocates for **girlboss** from May 1, 2021, to the end of 2023. The collocates are sorted by MI, and the minimum MI score was set to 1. The highest MI score is for the collocate *gatekeep* (18.11), whereas the lowest is for the collocate *archetypal* (9.14). As the lowest MI score in the list is discernably higher than 1, these results can be said to be significant. The minimum frequency per collocate was set to two occurrences. Again, all concordance lines were checked for duplicates, and the de facto frequency of the collocates is presented in Table 17.

Table 17. The top 20 collocates for **girlboss** in 2021–2023.

	Collocate	MI	Frequency
1	GATEKEEP	18.11	35
2	SOCK-PUPPET	17.53	4
3	ANTI-WORK	15.59	2
4	COPAGANDA	14.51	2
5	HILBERTIDOU	14.51	3
6	GIRLBOSES	14.50	2
7	MOSSBACHER	14.39	2
8	AMORUSO	14.27	15
9	GASLIGHT	13.66	35
10	SOCKPUPPET	13.39	2
11	GIRLBOSS	13.37	9
12	INFANTILIZING	12.11	2
13	GATEKEEPING	11.54	5
14	NEOLOGISM	11.48	2
15	GERRI	11.20	2
16	13-EPIISODE	10.49	2
17	CRUELLA	10.45	6
18	FEMINISM	10.43	54
19	GASLIGHTING	9.94	5
20	ARCHETYPAL	9.14	3

First, the collocate *13-episode* refers to the Netflix comedy series. This itself is a neutral collocate, especially as the positive adjective “popular” refers to the book *#Girlboss* instead of the Netflix show (Table 18). Compared to the three collocates from 2014–2016, only one collocate in this timeframe is directly connected to the Netflix show *Girlboss*.

Table 18. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *13-episode*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Britt Robertson is set for the lead in Girlboss , Netflix's	13-episode	comedy series inspired by Sophia Amoruso's popular autobiography
Netflix has released the official trailer for Girlboss , its new	13-episode	comedy series inspired by Sophia Amoruso's popular autobiography

The collocates *neologism*, *girlboss*, *girlbosses*, and *infantilizing* could be described as self-referential, since they refer to the term *girlboss* itself. However, *infantilizing* is discussed more in detail later in this section. The collocate *neologism* occurs twice in the NOW corpus (Table 19). In the concordance line, the “demise” of the “neologism *#Girlboss*” is mentioned (Table 19). In these concordance lines, it is also acknowledged that the term *girlboss* was “coined” by Amoruso in 2014. Already one of these two concordance lines reveals that the term is viewed negatively.

Table 19. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *neologism*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Kate Demolder writes about the demise of the	neologism	# Girlboss and the notion that women could fix a broken system
When Nasty Gal founder Sophie Amoruso coined the	neologism	# girlboss in her memoir of the same name in 2014

Discussing the word *girlboss* itself is also self-referential. For instance, in Table 20, it is questioned whether “girlbossing” is “always something to be derided so readily”, indicating that in 2021–2023 it is, in fact, readily derided. Being a girlboss is connected to “aspirational femininity and independent entrepreneurship” (Table 20). However, both the node word and the collocate here also note the idea of the “demise of women’s utopia”, “the alleged death” of girlboss, and “girlbosses who girlbossed too close to the sun” (Table 20). These examples would indicate that the term *girlboss* has at this point lost its popularity.

Table 20. Complete list of concordances for the collocates *girlboss* and *girlbosses*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
The finalists are: # Alexia Hilbertidou #	GirlBoss	NZ # GirlBoss New Zealand is New Zealand's leading network
Alexia Hilbertidou # GirlBoss NZ #	GirlBoss	New Zealand is New Zealand's leading network for young women.
She explained the trend on her Instagram account named The Anti Work	Girlboss	(antiworkgirlboss). # Lazy girl jobs refer to those jobs that require minimal effort
Defending the	girlboss	# Is girlbossing always something to be derided so readily, though?
were misinterpreted as Anne being a " girlboss . " A	girlboss	character would be taken seriously by the supporting cast around her
dialogue queues were misinterpreted as Anne being a "	girlboss	. " A girlboss character would be taken seriously by the supporting cast around her
They are the ultimate girlbosses in a	girlboss	world.
anti-work arguments online is the alleged death of the "	girlboss	. " The girlboss can be exemplified by Kim Kardashian, who models aspirational femininity and independent entrepreneurship
is the alleged death of the " girlboss . " The	girlboss	can be exemplified by Kim Kardashian, who models aspirational femininity and independent entrepreneurship
The	girlbosses	who girlbossed too close to the sun: The demise of women's utopia'
They are the ultimate	girlbosses	in a girlboss world. In fact, when men do show up

As exemplified by Table 21, the node word *girlboss* collocating with *feminism* is mostly due to the phrasing “girlboss feminism”, although some concordance lines include other additional examples of the two words collocating together. Feminism itself is a social movement that can have both positive and negative meanings, depending on the person and the context. However, the concordance lines in Table 21 would indicate that “girlboss feminism” is mostly a negative form of feminism. It has

had “a rise and a fall”, something “many activists have moved past by this point”, and it is said to represent “the horrors of capitalism”. It seems that “girlboss feminism” is viewed as negative due to it being “about a select few, individual women” and “far from being an empowering emblem of feminism” (Table 21). In particular, it is described as a “white” form of “girlboss feminism” (Table 21).

Table 21. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *feminism*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
It traces the rise and fall of a particular movement in	feminism	. Girlboss originated around 2014 as an approving description of the type of success
I grew up with girlboss	feminism	. I was a precocious, lonely kid who loved to read and write
What's more, it's stuck in the type of white girlboss	feminism	that many activists have moved past by this point
Far from being an empowering emblem of	feminism	, the girlboss represents the horrors of capitalism.
In the mid 2010s, Girlboss	feminism	was preaching liberation through capitalism -- beating men at their own game
Girlboss	feminism	emphasised individual choice, " leaning in " in the corporate sphere
a relic of the Girlboss era of	feminism	, when cute slogans that sassed the patriarchy read like borderline sore-winner taunts.
Girlboss	feminism	was about a select few, individual women
I find it frustrating that the things that we do get to read and see about women artists are often very' girlboss	feminism	': they're very marketable and less critical. "
And to me, like the whole Girlboss	feminism	thing, and that scene in particular is so indicative of this like way that people maybe thought

The node word *girlboss* collocates with four names in 2021–2023, two of which are the same as in 2014–2016: *Amoruso* and *Hilbertidou*. These last names refer to the creators Sophia Amoruso and Alexia Hilbertidou who are related to the girlboss-brand. Table 22 shows that in addition to neutral descriptions about the book and the podcast, some criticism is included. For instance, “girlboss” is described as “essentially a power-suited working girl for the Instagram era, a pinkwashed hypercapitalist career queen”. Here, the term “working girl” is met with the negative association of “pinkwashed” and “hypercapitalist” (Table 22). Amoruso herself is also described as being “eventually discredited for overseeing a toxic work environment” (Table 22). Amoruso’s “#Girlboss approach” is also described as being “odious” and having “the additional drawback of coming with a hashtag” (Table 22). However, Amoruso’s book is again described as being “18 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list”, which launched “Girlboss Radio” that includes “interviews with other female founders” (Table 22). Moreover, the book being a bestseller does indicate that book was generally regarded positively or at least interesting for many to purchase it. Nevertheless, although being a best-seller is positive, it is also a fact instead of an opinion.

Table 22. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *Amoruso*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
from a 9-5 life to independence. #GIRLBOSS by Sophia	Amoruso	# Maverick misfit, Sophia Amoruso's story
(this, according to the businesswoman and #Girlboss author Sophia	Amoruso). The girlboss is essentially a power-suited working girl for the Instagram era, a pinkwashed hypercapitalist career queen
Even Girlboss's Sophia	Amoruso	stepped down.
the actress appeared on Sophia	Amoruso	s podcast, Girlboss Radio.
precursor to the Girlboss era, marked by the 2014 publication of Sophia	Amoruso	's GIRLBOSS . Popular at the same time, It and GIRLBOSS represented different approaches to " " influencing " in the 2010s
the " original Girlboss ", Sophia	Amoruso	, who was eventually discredited for overseeing a toxic work environment
When Nasty Gal founder Sophie	Amoruso	coined the neologism #girlboss in her memoir of the same name in 2014
spent 18 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and propelled	Amoruso	to launch Girlboss Radio, a podcast featuring interviews with other female founders.
and Sophia	Amoruso	's odious #Girlboss approach, which had the additional drawback of coming with a hashtag.
Sophia	Amoruso	s 2014 book Girlboss explained that the term applies to a woman " whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world

The collocate *Hilbertidou* includes concordance lines that discuss both Alexia Hilbertidou herself, as well as the network *Girlboss NZ*. The organization is named as “New Zealand’s leading network for young women”, as well as “Aotearoa’s largest organization for young women” (Table 23). Both of these are positive evaluations, the possible significance of which is discussed in Section 5.

Table 23. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *Hilbertidou*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Alexia	Hilbertidou	, Founder of GirlBoss NZ, says, " We had over 530 nominations from Paihia to Invercargill
Alexia	Hilbertidou	# GirlBoss NZ # GirlBoss New Zealand is New Zealand's leading network for young women.
Alexia	Hilbertidou	, Founder of GirlBoss NZ, says, " We had over 450 nominations from Paihia to Invercargill,
	Hilbertidou	's GirlBossNZ group has become Aotearoa's largest organisation for young women.

Table 24 shows that in 2021–2023, the reference to people is no longer limited to Sophia Amoruso and Alexia Hilbertidou, since Gerri and Mossbacher are also named as girlbosses. This could indicate that the term has become more general, since these people are not part of the original girlboss-brand, but have nevertheless earned the title. In fact, the term *girlboss* being used without context to refer to people who are not connected to the original brand itself could signify that the term is at this point widely understood enough so that readers may understand the reference to without an explanation.

Table 24. Complete list of concordances for the collocates *Gerri* and *Mossbacher*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Shiv has had run-ins with another <i>Succession</i> girlboss , Shiv skitter about in all the shades of beige, and	Gerri	(J Smith-Cameron). flip-flop from girlboss to Logan lapdog
The White Lotus's narcissistic, cancel-culture-decrying girlboss Nicole	Mossbacher	. In many ways, she's in a league of her own
neither her new husband nor her girlboss role model Nicole	Mossbacher	(Connie Britton) have any respect for her attempts

Cruella can be considered a negative collocate, particularly since the name of the Disney villain Cruella de Vil itself refers to the words *cruel* and *devil*. The concordance lines in Table 25 reveal Cruella’s association with being a girlboss is seen in the descriptions of the “‘girlbossification’ of Cruella de Vil”. The phenomenon is described as Cruella’s “defining cruelty” being “switched out for the demands of glossy, girlboss feminism”, due to which “Cruella is now a girlboss” (Table 25). This is described as “harrowing”, “slightly baffling”, but also “glossy” (Table 25). The possible significance of these statements is further elaborated in Section 5.

Table 25. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *Cruella*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
in a world where The' girlbossification ' of	Cruella	is now a girlboss and Maleficent is an antihero de Vil in Disney's Cruella is an example
We had this slightly baffling, girlboss adaptation of	Cruella	at the end of last year
Does	Cruella	have the " Girlboss Joker " aesthetic that the trailer so harrowingly teased?
Her defining cruelty has been switched out for the demands of glossy, girlboss feminism.	Cruella	is often fun to watch

The collocates *sockpuppet* and *sock-puppet* seem to be referring to the same citation from the show *Succession*. The collocates are paired with the phrase “girlboss presidents” (Table 25). The concordance lines in Table 26 demonstrate that being “sneeringly” described as a “sockpuppet girlboss president” is a “cutting insult partly because it is dripping with misogyny” possibly because the insult “is right” (Table 26). In fact, being called a “sock-puppet girlboss president” is confirmed to be a “mock” (Table 26).

Table 26. Complete list of concordances for the collocates *sockpuppet* and *sock-puppet*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
meeting by joking: " What were you doing, brunching with some other	sock-puppet	girlboss presidents? " In Industry, what both the female leads
Roy in Succession (" What were you doing, brunching with some other	sock-puppet	girlboss presidents? " her brother Roman mocks her at one point)
notably off-putting. (" What were you doing? Brunching with other	sock-puppet	girlboss presidents? ") # * Assuming Connor met Pope John Paul II
(Roman: " What were you doing, brunching with some other	sock-puppet	girlboss presidents? " Shiv: " You haven't got a date?
When he describes Shiv, sneeringly, as a "	sockpuppet	girlboss president, " it is a cutting insult partly because it is dripping with misogyny, and partly because he is right
	Sockpuppet	Girlboss Presidents # Roman, in a move that will not come as a surprise to

The self-referential collocate *infantilizing* is in itself a negative term. The concordance lines in Table 27 show that the collocate is used to directly refer to the term *girlboss*: “The girlboss was an infantilizing, demeaning term” and “calling out the term #GirlBoss as infantilizing”. The term described as “infantilizing” and “demeaning” because whereas women are *girlbosses*, “men are simply boss-bosses”. In addition, it is argued that “calling out the term” as “infantilizing and sincere” is in fact “warranted” (Table 27). These concordance lines are also further discussed in Section 5.

Table 27. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *infantilizing*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
this particular moment of media obsession over girl-trends. The girlboss was an	infantilizing	, demeaning term that made clear that men are simply boss-bosses
The de-platforming of these leaders -- and the calling out of the term #GirlBoss as	infantilizing	and insincere -- is warranted.

The collocate *anti-work* occurred twice in the NOW corpus. Both concordance lines differ from each other. In the first one, the collocate is directly adjacent to the word *girlboss*: “a self-proclaimed ‘anti-work girlboss’” (Table 28). In the second one, the collocate is used in the sense that it as “The Anti-Work Response to the Girlboss”, where “the alleged death of the ‘girlboss’” is used as support for “anti-work arguments online” (Table 28). The concordance lines are therefore contradictory. However, they do reveal that the term *girlboss* evokes a reaction to be anti-work, calling back on the idea of *girlboss* being about hard work and striving for success. Being an “anti-work” *girlboss* needs to be specifically mentioned, and the “death” of *girlboss* seems to support being anti-work (Table 28).

Table 28. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *anti-work*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Judge, a self-proclaimed "	anti-work	girlboss , " told Insider of the trend
The	Anti-Work	Response to the Girlboss # One example often used in support of anti-work arguments online is the alleged death of the " girlboss. "

Girlboss also collocates with the word *copaganda*. *Copaganda* is a portmanteau of *propaganda* and *cop*. The word *propaganda* is not neutral, as it is among others described as “biased or misleading” spreading of information (OED). The two concordance lines seem to support this view. The first concordance line is “Copaganda but make it girlboss”, and the second is “copaganda (girlboss edition)” (Table 29), creating a parallel between the two terms. As they are presented as parallels, the negative meanings in the term *copaganda* would indicate that *girlboss* is seen as something equally negative.

Table 29. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *copaganda*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Another person wrote, "	Copaganda	but make it girlboss "
Not to endorse yet another example of	copaganda	(girlboss edition), but the HBO limited series

Another collocate, *archetypal*, occurs thrice in the corpus (Table 30). Table 30 reveal that an archetypal girlboss is personified by Elizabeth Holmes, who was infamously exposed as a fraud. An archetypal girlboss is also described as someone who is “white or white-passing”, who “comes from money”, and who “treats her (often female) employees terribly”. Finally, the third concordance lines does not reveal much about the archetypal girlboss, but rather describes characters from the show *Blue Eye Samurai* (Table 30). However, the line does reveal that although these characters are not archetypal girlbosses, they “learn what it means to use their gender as a weapon and a tool” (Table 30). This indicates that the archetypal girlboss is viewed as a woman who would also behave in that way.

Table 30. Complete list of concordances for the collocate *archetypal*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
A real-life figure who has been called an	archetypal	" girlboss " is Elizabeth Holmes
Never mind that the	archetypal	girlboss is typically white or white-passing, comes from money and treats her (often female) employees terribly
Mizu is not an	archetypal	girlboss , and neither is Akemi, though both of them, as well as other, more minor female characters, learn what it means to use their gender as a weapon and a tool.

The concordance lines in Table 31 show that “gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss” is a “viral phrase”, an online meme, an “Edinburgh show” title, and a “forthcoming book” title (Table 31). The table shows that the phrase is not fixed, since it can sometimes take the form of “Gatekeeping Gaslighting Girlbosses” or “gaslighting, girlbossing, gatekeeping”. The concordance lines also describe what the viral phrase stands for. According to Table 31, the phrase is “a counter-meme against the overwhelming pressure to forge ahead”. It is also paired with the concepts “gender norms” and “toxic masculinity” (Table 31). Most importantly, however, the phrase seems to signify a negative association to *girlboss*. As *gaslighting* denotes “to restrict or discourage” (OED) and *gatekeeping* denotes manipulating “by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity” (OED), these actions can arguably be described as negative be seen as negative actions. Juxtaposing *girlbossing* with these two verbs indicates that it is seen as something equally negative.

Table 31. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *gatekeep* and the complete list of concordances for the collocate *gatekeeping*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
(" Gaslight,	gatekeep	, girlboss " is a viral phrase that mocks capitalist feminism.)
There is a current Edinburgh show called Gaslight,	Gatekeep	, Girlboss and a forthcoming book by the same name.
showing up online in memes such as " gaslight,	gatekeep	, girlboss .
It was full-out " Let's Go Girls, " but " gaslight,	gatekeep	, girlboss " edition.
behind her cycled through the words " GASLIGHT, " "	GATEKEEP	" and " GIRLBOSS , " before reading: " PAY ME. "
2021 was the year of the " Gaslight,	Gatekeep	, Girlboss " meme, so LuLaRich couldn't have come at a more fitting time.
Now, we have " Gaslight,	Gatekeep	, Girlboss , " a counter-meme against the overwhelming pressure to forge ahead
Instagram's Most Popular Memes Are A Cry For Help Gaslight,	Gatekeep	, Girlboss : How Memes Became A Cry For Help
" Gaslight,	gatekeep	, girlboss " is the popular meme you may have seen circulating the internet for a bit.
There is also the popular phrase " Gaslight,	Gatekeep	, Girlboss " that has entered popular culture as a succinct, satirical summation of what critics see as the malign girlboss ethos.
toxic masculinity, gender norms, peer pressure, gaslighting,	gatekeeping	, and girlbossing -- this engineered reality show lends itself to critical analysis
The gaslighting,	gatekeeping	, girlboss energy I now exhibit when merely walking to Coles?
Margaret Thatcher, Queen of the	Gatekeeping	Gaslighting Girlbosses , is coming back from Hell
Users began sharing instances of gaslighting,	gatekeeping	and girlbossing throughout pop culture, including the below reference to Gone Girl
" We're gaslighting, girlbossing ,	gatekeeping	too close to the sun with Noodle.

Finally, Table 32 shows hits for the collocates *gaslight* and *gaslighting*. As with the previous collocates, this too exclusively refers to the phrase *gatekeep*, *gaslight*, *girlboss*, although there is some

variation on the order of the words. Here, too, it is described as an online meme and a counter-meme (Table 32).

Table 32. Ten randomized concordances for the collocate *gaslight* and the complete list of concordances for the collocate *gaslighting*.

Concordance line to the left	Collocate	Concordance line to the right
Gatekeep,	Gaslight	, Girlboss # The mythical " girlboss " jumped the millennial pink shark
It's	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss' vibes, 100%, "
Now, we have "	Gaslight	, Gatekeep, Girlboss , " a counter-meme against the overwhelming pressure to forge ahead
Many listings reference the meme "	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss , " a phrase used to poke fun at and describe a capitalistic version of feminism online
showing up online in memes such as "	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss . "
"	Gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss " is the popular meme you may have seen circulating the internet
to gatekeep,	gaslight	, and girlboss her way into your hearts
so sorry that Shiv did not make your delusional "	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss " wet dream come true
Thompson is a walking, talking manifestation of the "	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss " meme.
The " good for her " cinematic universe:	gaslight	, gatekeep, girlboss
the phrase gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss . Though	gaslighting	and gatekeeping are not exactly positive phenomena, women use the phrase humorously to subtly reclaim their power
The	gaslighting	gatekeeping, girlboss energy I now exhibit when merely walking to Coles?
Margaret Thatcher, Queen of the Gatekeeping	Gaslighting	Girlbosses, is coming back from Hell
Users began sharing instances of	gaslighting	, gatekeeping and girlbossing throughout pop culture, including the below reference to Gone Girl
We're	gaslighting	, girlbossing , gatekeeping too close to the sun with Noodle.

The significance of the findings from Table 31 and Table 32, as well as some other previously mentioned excerpts are discussed in more detail in Section 5. However, first in Section 4.2.3, the collocates from both timeframes are compared to see how much the list of collocates has in fact changed.

4.2.3 Comparing the Two Timeframes

In addition to discussing the top 20 collocates from 2014–2016 and 2021–2023, the top 100 collocates from both timeframes were compared. This comparison was made to see how much of an overlap and a possible turnover there is between the collocates. The collocates were sorted similarly to the queries from the previous lists, meaning that the MI was set at one and the minimum frequency was set to two occurrences. When examining the top 100 collocates from the first timeframe, two collocates from the list of top 20 collocates of the latter timeframe emerged: *Amoruso* and *Hilbertidou*. These collocates are

ranked by MI in Table 33, and their frequency was checked based on the concordance lines. Naturally, as these two collocates occurred in the top 20 list from both timeframes, they were also included in the first list of top 100 collocates.

Table 33. Top 20 collocates from 2021–2023 included in the top 100 collocates in 2014–2016.

Collocate	MI	Frequency
Amoruso	15.07	27
Hilbertidou	13.93	2

In turn, when the top 100 collocates from the latter timeframe were examined, four collocates that occurred in the first timeframe emerged. These were *Hilbertidou*, *Amoruso*, *Alexia*, and *Sophia*, respectively (Table 34).

Table 34. Top 20 collocates from 2014–2016 included in the top 100 collocates in 2021–2023.

Collocate	MI	Frequency
Hilbertidou	14.51	3
Amoruso	14.27	15
Alexia	8.94	2
Sophia	7.55	8

Table 34 shows that *Hilbertidou* is ranked higher than *Amoruso* and *Alexia* is ranked higher than *Sophia* in the latter timeframe. The ranking of the collocates is the opposite in the first timeframe, when *Amoruso* has a higher MI score than *Hilbertidou*. Based solely on the MI score, this could signify that as the founder of their product, Alexia Hilbertidou might later be considered equally relevant, if not more relevant, than Sophia Amoruso.

What is notable about these collocates is that they exclusively refer to the two founders Sophia Amoruso and Alexia Hilbertidou. No other collocates from first list are found in the second list and vice versa. Based on the collocates, this would indicate that only the names of the creators are still relevant later on. Reversely, none of the negative collocates from the second list yet appeared in the first one, and similarly none of the book-related collocates from the first list were included in the second one.

In Section 4, I presented result from the NOW corpus regarding the general frequencies for **girlboss** and *#girlboss**, the collocates from two different timeframes, and finally compared the top 100 collocates from these timeframes. The results revealed that since the first years of the term’s existence, its related meanings have notably changed. Initially, the node word collocated with neutral and positive words that referred to not only the book *#Girlboss* and its author, but also other related products and people that were inspired by the book. The term *girlboss* seems to therefore have started to be used

outside the context of the book mainly after 2016. The collocates from the later timeframe and the comparison of the two timeframes show that the term has not only been productive, but the turnover in the collocates and in their semantic prosody has been notable. Whereas collocates were at first mainly neutral and positive, the list of collocates later included mainly negative contexts. This includes one of the collocates that emerged in both lists, *Amoruso*. Although the collocate at first had mainly neutral or positive contexts, later concordance lines revealed that the collocate had over time acquired negative meanings. The collocate *Hilbertidou*, however, seems to have avoided pejoration, which is discussed more in detail in the following section.

In the Section 5, I analyze and discuss these results based on the theoretical framework presented in Section 2. This includes for instance the theory of semantic derogation, fourth wave feminist analysis, and discussion on social gender.

5 Analysis and Discussion

Initially, the term *girlboss* was described as a slogan, a feeling, or a philosophy. In this study, the term has mostly been treated as an occupational title. This was done since the term is very much connected to work context, specifically to working women. Initially, girlbosses were defined as hard-working, independent, and successful women, who not only made it in the male-dominated field but also did so as feminine, empowered and even feminist entrepreneurs. However, the definition has also been criticized as outdated and bold, especially because of the assumption that before the idea of being a *girlboss*, women had never reclaimed their power in their own terms.

In addition to these interpretations, the results in Section 4 show other ways the term is understood. These interpretations come from authentic examples, illustrating how the term is described in the media. The collocates and their concordance lines from 2014–2016 had fewer descriptions for the term itself. The book was described as a less corporate and more punk-rock book, as containing unconventional tips, and as a business book that was out of the ordinary. These descriptions coincide with the initial idea that being a girlboss meant the redefinition of what a successful woman is, thus perhaps more unconventional and punk-rock. The network *Girlboss NZ* is also discussed in 2014–2016. It is depicted as being “all about getting out there”, and as an online community “where students can learn more about women in STEM careers”. These definitions, too, can be seen as positive and empowering. However, as the network *Girlboss NZ* is separate from the original book *#Girlboss* both by founder and location respectively, the former is not necessarily directly connected to the values of the latter.

As the term gained ground, it seems to have become the object of varied opinions, and has consequently acquired new collocates and semantic prosodies. Based on the collocates in 2021–2023, the descriptions are mainly focused on the term *girlboss* or its personification, as well as the phrase *girlboss feminism*. There are some additional evaluations on Amoruso’s “#Girlboss approach” and the “Girlboss era”. The term is “exemplified by Kim Kardashian”, who is said to “model aspirational femininity and independent entrepreneurship”. The “2014 book” is also referred to, and the term *girlboss* is defined as denoting a woman “whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world”. Moreover, the term is also viewed as specifically a 2010s phenomenon. “Girlboss feminism” and “Girlboss era” are connected to both the “2010s” and “mid 2010s”. The term is thus referred to retrospectively, and the “Girlboss era” is acknowledged to have been “[p]opular at the time”, and it is said to have represented “different approaches to ‘influencing’”.

In 2014–2016, topics such as the book *#Girldboss* and its author, as well as other related products such as the *Girldboss NZ* network, are evaluated positively. The book is described as inspiring, successful, and a bestselling self-empowerment manual specifically on female business leadership. Amoruso is well-respected and a definite winner who aims to “empower the next generation of female entrepreneurs”. The last part also alludes to the Girldboss brand’s objective of addressing gender issues. Especially the podcast *Girldboss Radio* interviews female executives and successful women, and covers the topic of meaningful career lessons. As discussed, the collocate *badass* is also used positively when referring to “girldboss” Lena and the book *#Girldboss*. *Girldboss NZ* also stresses gender issues and women in STEM, its objective being to inspire more discussion on feminism, to encourage like-minded people, and to support teenage girls in general. These objectives can be deemed as good news for young business-minded women.

The fact that “girldbossing” is “derided so readily” is critiqued in 2021–2023. Simultaneously, this concordance line demonstrates how the concept is at that point in time something that in fact needs defending. Other positive evaluations in 2021–2023 are mainly about the network *Girldboss NZ*. It is both “New Zealand’s leading network for young women” and “Aotearoa’s largest organization for young women”. However, these are facts rather than opinions, but do reflect on the general success of the network. The fact that *Girldboss NZ* seems to avoid pejoration can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the network *Girldboss NZ* could be seen as a separate concept, as although the name refers to *girldboss*, it is mainly concerned with gender issues and encouraging young entrepreneurial women instead of focusing on the definition and identity of *girldboss* itself. Secondly, it needs to be highlighted that the very concept of the network defines itself as a network for “young women”, striving to encourage “girls in school to talk about feminism” by establishing a podcast called “Girl pods”. Finally, the founder Alexia Hilbertidou herself was 17 during the first year of the network’s existence, due to which it is described as a network “set up by teenage girls to support their peers”.

These, however, seem to be the only neutral or positive interpretations from that timeframe. A *girldboss* is described as “pinkwashed” and “hypercapitalist”, even “power-suited working girl”. Amoruso’s approach is also evaluated as “odious,” and the era is defined as one where slogans that “sassed the patriarchy read like borderline sore-winner taunts”. Moreover, Girldboss feminism is described as “preaching liberation through capitalism” in mid 2010s, which included “beating men at their own game”. This, too, refers to the criticism on capitalism, which can be seen from the title of the

source: “The lobotomy-chic trend has an ugly history”. Whereas *lobotomy-chic* refers to something separate, the “ugly history” seems to among other trends refer to *girlboss*.

One concordance line from 2021–2023 reveals that the “popular” phrase *gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss* is used by women “humorously to subtly reclaim their power” and to “poke fun at and describe a capitalistic version of feminism online”. The fourth wave feminist analysis was mentioned (see Section 2.1) to be specifically interested in how women are represented in the media. Thus, as using humor online can be considered as one of the most essential traits of the fourth wave analysis, the phrase *gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss* can be analyzed from that point of view. Since women themselves use this phrase, it could be seen as reclaiming the power by also making fun of the pejorated word *girlboss* instead of leaving that option to the hands of others. Whether the others in this case could be men or other women, however, is left undetermined, since this study does not analyze who the term is primarily used by.

Since the fourth wave also focuses on work and commodification of femininity, the use of this phrase can also be analyzed from that point of view. The phrase is defined as one that “mocks capital feminism” and is a “counter-meme against the overwhelming pressure to forge ahead”. Although the problem in this context is not directly that women are for instance underrepresented or otherwise dismissed in the work life, they criticize the strain that the *girlboss* ethos puts on women. Thus, it is described as “a succinct, satirical summation of what critics see as the malign *girlboss* ethos”. In fact, Amoruso herself was said to have been “discredited for overseeing toxic work environment”, indicating that this idea is possibly based on some real events.

Simultaneously, the phrase *gatekeep, gaslight, girlboss* could in many instances be analyzed as ironic. As discussed, the possibility of irony was previously discussed due to the previous ironic uses of *girl*. The phrase itself juxtaposes the originally neutral or even positive term *girlboss* with the inherently negative terms *gaslight* and *gatekeep*. The phrase itself, therefore, could arguably be seen as ironic. Similarly, as the phrase can be seen as negative, the description of “to gatekeep, gaslight, and girlboss her way into your hearts” could be seen as ironic due to the juxtaposition with the positive prosody of making a way into one’s heart. Similarly, juxtaposing “queen” with the negative descriptions “pinkwashed” and “hypercapitalist” could also be seen as ironic. In this sense, irony could be regarded as another way for women to create humor and thus reclaim the power around the use of the pejorated term. Moreover, although sexualization seems to be scarce in the results of this study, possibly due to mainly women seeming to use the phrase, one concordance line stands out: “delusional ‘gaslight,

gatekeep, girlboss' wet dream". However, this example does not sexualize the term *girlboss* itself, as it is not for instance used as a euphemism.

When referring to girlbosses, the concordance lines exclusively name women, be it real-life people or fictional characters. The terms "female" and women" are also used, and no instances of men being referred to as *girlbosses* were found. This could indicate that the term is mostly if not solely used to denote women. Whether it is mostly used by women, however, is left undetermined, since the gender of all authors or quoted interviewees is not determined. However, at least one instance does include a "brother" mockingly calling another character one of the "sock-puppet girlboss presidents", showing that although no men were called *girlbosses*, the term could be used by men.

The *girlboss* ethos is especially critiqued since it seems to overwhelmingly pressure women to succeed at the expense of others. The critique could be tied to social gender, social expectations, and double standards. The almost demonization of the "working girl" *girlboss* is illustrated by the collocate *Cruella*, referencing Disney's Cruella de Vil. According to the concordances, the juxtaposition of Cruella and *girlboss* could rather be more of a reflection of the term *girlboss* than of the character Cruella. As Disney's villain Cruella de Vil refers to the words *cruel* and *devil*, it clearly demonstrates that the character herself is meant to be the villain. The concordances refer to the movie adaptation of the character from 2021, which is defined as the "girlbossification" and the "girlboss adaptation" of Cruella. One concordance line reveals that Cruella is depicted as a girlboss, juxtaposed with another Disney villain Maleficent being depicted as an antihero. Neither are any longer the villains of their eponymous movies, but *girlboss* is still juxtaposed with the negative term *antihero*. According to the concordance lines, it would seem that the intention of the movie would be to some extent de-villainize Cruella, yet she comes across as a girlboss, so that her "defining cruelty has been switched out for the demands of glossy, girlboss feminism". Although *girlboss* does not equal villain, it could indicate that being a girlboss is still seen as negative, perhaps as a villain with a more or less feminist twist. This argument could be fortified based on another juxtaposition, *girlboss* and *copaganda*. The latter term is not neutral, and could even be described as negative due to the definitions of propaganda: spreading "biased" misinformation (OED). The collocates *copaganda* and *Cruella* therefore are arguably more indicative of the negative qualities of the term *girlboss* and not vice versa.

Other personifications of *girlboss* can be found from both 2014–2016 and 2021–2023. In the first set of concordances, Sophia Amoruso is defined as a "certified #GirlBoss" who is "definitely the winner". A "badass girlboss" Lena is loved for these qualities, Lena referring to the writer, director and

actor in the show *Girls*. However, other types of personifications emerge in 2021–2023. Besides Kim Kardashian who models “aspirational femininity and independent entrepreneurship” and Cruella, the names of Shiv and Gerri from *Succession*, Margaret Thatcher, and Nicole Mossbacher emerge, as well as the title *Gone Girl*. The concordance lines of Margaret Thatcher, the *Succession* characters and Nicole Mossbacher reveal negative attitudes towards them. In addition, the title *Gone Girl*, a book and a movie about a woman who stages her own death and almost convinces people that her husband has murdered her, is referred to as an instance of “gaslighting, gatekeeping and girlbossing” in pop culture. Furthermore, the controversial fraudster Elizabeth Holmes is appointed the “archetypal” girlboss. Besides the positive evaluation of Kim Kardashian, the descriptions from 2021–2023 show how *girlboss* is used to refer to unlikable people and characters, further illustrating the pejoration that the term has undergone.

In addition to the term itself being discussed, an overall negative attitude to so-called girlbosses could be said to mirror societal expectations. Regardless of the previously discussed problems of coining *girl* with *boss*, it does not remove the fact that the negative and possibly even hostile attitude towards girlbosses could be seen as equally problematic. It raises the question of whether men who exhibited similar behavior to girlbosses would be equally criticized. In fact, archetypal girlbosses are described as women who “use their gender as a weapon and a tool”, which might be something that men would not be accused of. This could, therefore, suggest that the attitude towards girlbosses conceals subtle sexism and subconscious stereotypes about how women should behave in the workplace context, alluding to similar expectations as what the ones demonstrated by Schnurr’s (2013) study. Women might be expected to be “girls’ girls”, meaning that they should support other women, should not represent too many masculine traits, and should not wish to succeed if it is done at the expense of other women. Girlboss being a heavily criticized female-specific term, this type of pejoration is indicative of specifically the semantic derogation of women.

However, as this study does not examine the semantic prosody of male-specific occupational titles, no authentic comparisons can be made, hence this discussion stays on the hypothetical level. This attitude and critique could also be deemed warranted based on some of the information available from the concordances. The “original Girlboss”, Sophia Amoruso, was “discredited for overseeing toxic work environment”, and another “girlboss” is identified as a “narcissistic” and “cancel-culture-decrying”. It is even mentioned that the archetypal girlboss is someone who “treats her (often female) employees terribly”. If the employees are most often other women, this would overturn the

argument that girlbosses are judged merely due to being assertive and not typical “girls’ girls”. This description seems to in fact reinforce the impression that girlbosses wish to succeed even if it means that it would have negative consequences for other women. Nevertheless, such definitions cannot comprehensively be generalized to all women who identify as girlbosses, and there could be additional reasons that account for the negative evaluations of the term.

Gender and femininity are represented in the initial branding of girlboss by the stereotypically women’s color pink. While the book was initially almost praised for its “pale pink cover”, the word *pink* is in 2021–2023 referred to as jumping the “pink shark”. The latter could be argued to be demoting, especially due its title: “The 32 Most Defining Memes of 2021”. *Pink* is also used in criticizing the *girlboss* as “pinkwashed” in a concordance line from 2021–2023, referring to companies that advertise as ones that promote women’s rights while in fact trampling on them, a term similar to *greenwashing*. This can also be analyzed from the point of view of the fourth wave of feminism, one of its main issues of interests being the commodification of femininity. Especially the initial brand of girlboss seems to have marketed the brand by juxtaposing the “unconventional” and “punk-rock” attitude with pink, much like how the term *boss* is paired *girl*, a female-specific term that could be perhaps seen as more feminine and girly than woman. In this sense, femininity can be seen as represented and commodified by the word *girl* and the color pink.

The self-referencing collocate *infantilizing* from 2021–2023 seems to especially represent critique on the trivializing and infantilizing properties of the term. The two hits name the term “infantilizing and insincere”, as well as “infantilizing” and “demeaning”. Although these negative evaluations do not mention the term *girl* per se, the context would suggest that *girlboss* is criticized because of the previously mentioned prosodies the term *girl* carries. Especially the use of “demeaning” reinforces this argument, and the context implies that the term is seen as a putdown as it can remind for example of young age and thus immaturity, subordinate status, or incompetence in the context of an occupational title.

The concordance line of the collocate *infantilizing* provides another argument against the term *girlboss*. In acknowledging that “men are simply boss-bosses”, the concordance line suggests that nothing is added to the term *boss* when referring to men. This refers to social gender of the occupational title *boss* itself. Other gender issues are also raised in juxtaposing the following concepts: toxic masculinity, gender norms, peer pressure, gaslighting, gatekeeping, and girlbossing. This not only again compares the term *girlboss* and the phrase *gaslight*, *gatekeep*, *girlboss* with other negative concepts, but

also raises the gendered issue that men face, toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity would explain semantic derogation in such instances where *girl* is used as an insult for men who are not stereotypically masculine enough. Because of this, toxic masculinity can be seen as a negative phenomenon to both men and women.

Based on the concordance analysis, *girlboss* feminism is a particularly criticized concept. Although it is positioned as something that emphasizes individual choice, it is also described as one that mainly concerns selected, individual white women, much like what the second wave of feminism was criticized for. In fact, according to the concordance lines from 2021–2023, the term *girlboss* seems to entail the idea of privilege. To illustrate, the archetypal *girlboss* is depicted as typically “white” or “white-passing”, and as someone who not only “comes from money” but also “treats her (often female) employees terribly”. Accordingly, *girlboss* feminism seems to be something that benefits only those who are from privileged circumstances, not only excluding but also being disadvantageous to those who are not.

Some of the clearest criticisms is when the *girlboss* feminism’s marketability is found “frustrating” and seen as something that represents “the horrors of capitalism”. Specifically, it is stated that it is in fact “[f]ar from being an empowering emblem of feminism”, and *girlboss* feminism is something that “many activists have moved past by this point”. Although *girlboss* feminism itself is not otherwise defined in the literature review, these definitions seem to concur with the most with the later criticism of the term *girlboss*.

Despite this, the reasons behind the negative prosodies of the concept *girlboss* feminism itself cannot be analyzed, as the term did not emerge in the first set of collocates from 2014–2016. However, it could be explained by the prosodies of *girlboss* discussed in this section. It might have pejorative meanings due to the “toxic” traits connected to *girlbossery*, since the third and fourth waves of feminism themselves are based on the rights of all and not just some women. Considering this argument, it could be said that the phrase *girlboss feminism* has been coined to denote a form of feminism that is in fact not feminism at all.

The theory of semantic derogation, which explains how words related to women over time acquire negative meanings, can be detected from the term *girlboss*. The theory includes a prediction that eventually all terms that denote women would pejorate at some point of their existence, which seems to now include *girlboss*. The results of this study show that not only has the original semantic prosody changed over time, but it has also acquired collocates with negative prosodies and has consequently in

itself acquired negative prosodies. Next it needs to be established to what extent the theory of semantic derogation of women can be used to account for these changes in semantic prosody. The term *girlboss* was exclusively used to refer to girls and women, as well as to name real-life women or female characters. However, very little sexualization was detected. Despite this, as the term is both female-specific and could be indicative of double standards and gender stereotypes in the workplace context, it could be said that the theory of semantic derogation of women could be applied to the word.

The possible sexist meanings of the term *girlboss* is a complicated topic. On one hand, theories seem to concur that unnecessary gender-specific terms should be avoided in favor of gender-neutral ones, and that terms like *girl* and *lady* should especially be excluded from occupational titles and the work context. However, using the word *girl* has become more and more common in such phrases as *girl dinner*, *lazy girl job*, and *girl math*. On the other hand, although these phrases are derogatory and self-abasing, they could be seen as reclaiming the power, stressing that even “girls” who makes mistakes are valuable and should be taken seriously. However, the prosody could arguably be different if men would instead use these phrases when referring to women, which helps understand the prosody of these types of expressions. It is therefore possible that since many theories in this study are from the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s, they are still not up to date on such expressions, albeit reclaiming the term *bitch* has already been analyzed from the point of view of the third wave of feminism.

This study showed that although the use of a term such as *girlboss* could have initially been meant positively, the ideas of *girlboss* provided by Amoruso were not sustainable. In fact, it has taken under a decade for the term to become pejorated. The strategy to neutralize *girlboss* should therefore be discussed. As the *girl* -trends, such as *girl math* and *girl dinner*, are an intricate subject to enclose, their use cannot be evaluated based on this study. However, what can be determined is that the use of *girl* seems to still be unsuitable in the occupational context. As the term *boss* was not initially gendered but unnecessarily coined with *girl* so that it became marked, the traditional gender neutralization strategy would be to simply revert to using the term *boss* again. Although it is possible that *boss* itself has the social gender of maleness, social gender could be tried to change by other means. As *both* *girl* and *lady* have been previously determined as inappropriate in work contexts, the use of *girlboss* and terms such as *lady boss* or *boss lady* could therefore simply be completely avoided, notwithstanding whether *girlboss* has become pejorated due to misogyny or due to women purposefully criticizing the term’s inherent problematic properties.

6 Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine whether the meanings in the gendered occupational title *girlboss* has changed over time. *Girlboss* was the focus of this study as an example of a social media neologism that, arguably unnecessarily, coins the gender-neutral occupational title *boss* with the gender-specific and in this context infantilizing term *girl*. This study was conducted from a linguistic point of view, as although some previous studies have discussed the term, neither purely linguistic nor specifically corpus-based studies were found. Based on the theory of semantic derogation and the focus on semantic prosody, the key findings of this study are that much like many female-specific terms before it, the term *girlboss* has also become pejorated over time.

The first research question was how gender is represented by the collocates of the term *girlboss*. Based on the findings, the gendered term *girlboss* is exclusively used to denote women. As predicted by the female-specific lexical gender of *girl* and the scarce use of such terms when referring to men, no men in the data were referred to as *girlbosses*. This was despite the possible social gender of the title *boss*. Reversely, it was acknowledged that women are demoted to *girlbosses* while men continue to simply be seen as *boss-bosses*. This is possibly a reference to the fact that no words are added to the occupational title *boss* when referring to men. Not only was *girlboss* used to refer to women only, but the concordances also revealed how gender is represented by *girlboss*. The allegedly new and controversial aims of *girlboss* are paired with the traditional feminine color pink. However, this was criticized as pinkwashing, as while the *girlboss* movement supposedly emphasizes unifying femininity and success in the name of female empowerment, it was also found to be about a few individual white women who maintain a toxic work environment for their mostly female employees. *Girlbosses* are therefore in the later use of the word represented as toxic women that are associated for instance with the actions *gaslighting* and *gatekeeping*.

The second research question was how the semantic prosody of *girlboss* has changed between the years 2014–2016 and 2021–2023. In fact, based on the comparison of the collocates from these timeframes and the closer discourse analysis of their context, a negative change is perceivable in the semantic prosody of the term. The collocates that were mostly neutral and positive in 2014–2016 were in turn mostly negative and partly neutral or positive in 2021–2023. This is also perceivable from the concordance analysis of the initially neutral terms. A collocate that had neutral or even positive prosodies in 2014–2016 conversely acquired negative concordances in 2021–2023. Therefore, not only

did more negative collocates emerge in 2021–2023 in general, but the same collocates from the first timeframe also acquired negative contexts in their later use.

The theory of semantic derogation was described as the pejoration of female-specific terms. The third and final research question was how this theory could be applied to possible changes in the semantic prosody of *girlboss*. The concordance did reveal a general change in the attitude toward the term. It was discussed more self-referentially in 2021–2023 compared to its earlier uses when it was either mainly discussed as a name or used to refer to women who could be described as *girlbosses*. Later, the collocates *neologism* and *girlboss* emerged, and the term *girlboss* itself was discussed. It was deemed among other things as infantilizing. The concept *girlboss feminism* emerged through the collocate *feminism*. The context revealed the concept to be regarded as a negative manifestation of feminism, due to which it could arguably be seen as a non-feminist movement. *Girlboss feminism* was criticized as being for selected mainly white and privileged women, and as something that represents the downsides of capitalism. The results showed that as self-awareness towards the term increased, so did criticism. Based on the results, the term could be argued to entail sexist meanings, and the findings would therefore indicate that *girlboss* has been affected by semantic derogation.

However, when it comes to semantic derogation, very little sexualization of *girlboss* was found. As the future of this term is uncertain, it is possible that women can still later reclaim this pejorated term. Similarly, it is equally possible that, much like many terms that have undergone semantic derogation, this term could also later acquire sexual meanings. This type of analysis could therefore be a possible topic in future studies. Furthermore, as the amount of data used in this study is relatively small due to the low frequency of *girlboss* in the first years of this use, these results cannot be fully generalized. Moreover, this study focused on contrasting changes in meaning instead of analyzing continual change, it lacks a comprehensive depiction of the stages of change that the term has undergone.

As this study did not focus on continual change, the reasons when and why the term has pejorated are left undetermined. Another study could be conducted focusing on who the term is used by, in which case it would be advisable to utilize another corpus than the NOW corpus. Such studies could aid in clarifying who the term is mostly used by, men or women, and whether there is a difference in the prosody of the term depending on the language user.

It is also unclear whether semantic derogation happened because of the specific meanings connected to the term *girl*. Therefore, another possible topic of future research could be comparing *girlboss* and its collocates to those of other female-specific occupational titles, such *boss lady*, *boss*

woman, or even *boss bitch*. However, in this study, the results would indicate that the term *girlboss*, coined by using *girl* and *boss*, has become pejorated in a way that could be described as semantic derogation.

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Appendix I: List of search results for **girlboss** in the NOW corpus.

	Result	Frequency
1	GIRLBOSS	439
2	#GIRLBOSS	142
3	GIRLBOSES	57
4	GIRLBOSSING	24
5	@GIRLBOSS TOWN	19
6	GIRLBOSSERY	18
7	#GIRLBOSES	16
8	GIRLBOSSIFICATION	15
9	GIRLBOSS E D	9
10	GIRLBOSS.	7
11	PROTO-GIRLBOSS	6
12	POST-GIRLBOSS	5
13	GIRLBOSS TOWN	5
14	GIRLBOSS-Y	4
15	#GIRLBOSS-Y	3
16	GIRLBOSS-IFICATION	3
17	HASHTAG-GIRLBOSS	3
18	GIRLBOSS Y	3
19	GIRLBOSSERATTI	3
20	GIRLBOSS-IFIED	3
21	#GIRLBOSSING	3
22	#GIRLBOSS-IFICATION	2
23	@GIRLBOSSNETFLIX	2
24	@GIRLBOSS	2
25	AVIDGIRLBOSS	2
26	ANTI-GIRLBOSSERY	2
27	ANTI-GIRLBOSS	2
28	19TH-CENTURY-GIRLBOSS	2
29	GIRLBOSS-TYPE	2
30	GIRLBOSSAWARDS.CO.NZ	2
31	GIRLBOSS.COURTENEY	2
32	GIRLBOSS.COM	2
33	GIRLBOSSIAN	2
34	GIRLBOSSNOUN	2
35	YAY-GIRLBOSS	1
36	TURBO-TOM-FORD-GIRLBOSS	1
37	TOINFO@GIRLBOSS.CO.ZA	1
38	STOP-AT-NOTHING-GIRLBOSS	1
39	PROTO-GIRLBOSES	1
40	PAMPERED-GIRLBOSS	1
41	OUT-GIRLBOSS E D.	1
42	OUT-GIRLBOSS	1
43	ONGIRLBOSS	1
44	GIRLBOSS THERE	1
45	GIRLBOSSPHOTO	1
46	GIRLBOSSNZ	1
47	GIRLBOSSINSTAGRAM	1
48	GIRLBOSSINGTHERE	1
49	GIRLBOSSIFYING	1
50	GIRLBOSSIFY	1
51	GIRLBOSSIER	1

52	GIRLBOSSEXPO.COM	1
53	GIRLBOSES-ONLY	1
54	GIRLBOSS.CO.NZ	1
55	GIRLBOSS/SCAMMER	1
56	GIRLBOSS/SCAM	1
57	GIRLBOSS/EVANGELICAL	1
58	GIRLBOSS/CON	1
59	@GIRLBOSSA.	1
60	@GIRLBOSSA	1
61	GIRLBOSS-RIDDLED	1
62	GIRLBOSS-ONLY	1
63	GIRLBOSS-MEETS-EASY	1
64	GIRLBOSS-ISM	1
65	GIRLBOSS-IFY	1
66	GIRLBOSS-FROM-HELL	1
67	GIRLBOSS-FLAVORED	1
68	GIRLBOSS-ERY	1
69	GIRLBOSS-ERA	1
70	GIRLBOSS-CULTURE	1
71	GIRLBOSS-BRANDED	1
72	GIRLBOSS--YOU	1
73	GIRLBOSS--AND	1
74	GIRLBOSS(NETFLIX)	1
75	DARKGIRLBOSS	1
76	CUPCAKES-AND-GIRLBOSS	1
77	BALLARD/NETFLIX'GIRLBOSS	1
78	1/5GIRLBOSS	1
79	@GIRLBOSSTV	1
80	@ANTIWORKGIRLBOSS	1
81	#GIRLPOWER#GIRLBOSSNZ	1
82	#GIRLBOSSWITH	1
83	#GIRLBOSSTRIBE	1
84	#GIRLBOSSS	1
85	#GIRLBOSSLIFE	1
86	#GIRLBOSSIS	1
87	#GIRLBOSES.	1
88	#GIRLBOSS-ERA	1
89	#GIRLBOSS-ISM	1
90	#GIRLBOSS-ING	1
TOTAL		2,540