

# I'm Just a Girl in the Word (That's all you'll let me be): Exploring Young Women's Perceptions of Hypersexualization and Infantilization within Experiences of Girlhood

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## Introduction

The release of the Barbie movie in July 2023 mainstreamed the concept of "girlhood," sparking TikTok trends that explored the term. With 66.2% of the film's audience being women, 74.6% of whom were under 29, themes of girlhood resonated deeply with younger female viewers. In the film, one emotional scene between Barbie and her creator showcases clips of girls running, women embracing, and moments of vulnerability, symbolizing the breadth of female experiences. Fans responded by creating TikTok montages under the hashtag "girlhood," using the trend to reflect on their journeys as women.

Although "girlhood" predates the film, with roots in media and academic studies, Barbie introduced the term to a broader audience. This research investigates how North American women in their 20s perceive girlhood as mediated by online trends, particularly on TikTok. It explores how the platform's portrayals of girlhood intersect with hypersexualization during adolescence and infantilization in adulthood. By examining these digital trends, this study highlights how TikTok shapes cultural understandings of girlhood, not as a static childhood phase but as a continually evolving, socially negotiated process.

## Theory

This research applies Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory, a feminist framework that examines the psychological effects of sexual objectification on women. The theory explains how Western norms of objectifying women's bodies and sexuality lead to self-objectification, where women internalize others' perspectives, prioritizing physical appearance as central to their identity. While incorporating Cooley's Looking Glass-Self theory on self-perception, Objectification Theory emphasizes the overlooked role of women's bodily experiences in shaping identity.

This study extends Objectification Theory by exploring how online trends mediate hypersexualization and infantilization, shaping young women's perceptions. It highlights how social media, particularly TikTok, influences self and social perceptions, framing girlhood as a dynamic, culturally and psychologically negotiated process.

## Research Questions

- #1: How do women in their 20s interpret and engage with cultural messages of hypersexualization and infantilization?
- #2: In what ways do "girl" internet trends grant women in their 20s the space to construct their understandings of girlhood online?
- #3: What meanings do women in their 20s ascribe to the renewed cultural emphasis on 'girlhood' post-Barbie movie, and how do they relate these meanings to their lives beyond childhood?

## Methodology

The study recruited six self-identified women, ages 20-25, through purposive sampling to focus on young women's experiences with hypersexualization and infantilization on social media. Qualitative methods included semi-structured focus groups, which encouraged participants to share experiences and build on each other's ideas. This reflected the communal nature of online girlhood trends. Video elicitation using TikTok clips was selected for themes of hypersexualization, infantilization, and girlhood and explored participants' interpretations of feminized content. NVivo software was used to organize and code the data to prepare for analysis.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, with inductive coding, to identify patterns and themes.

## Results

- 1) Cultural normalization of infantilization within a heteropatriarchal society obscured participants' awareness of infantilization
- 2) Participants' first experiences of hypersexualization sparked bodily awareness, evoking empowerment or shame
- 3) Participants viewed girlhood as both nostalgic and a lasting connection among women
- 4) Participants understood girl trends in relation to capitalism, conformity, and belonging
- 5) 'I'm just a girl' memes empower only when women use them to cope with patriarchy and capitalism.

Themes were chosen due to the prevalence in the interview data, encompassing participant's experiences and beliefs.

## References

Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T.-A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 175-206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>

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## Discussion

Participants understood infantilization as closely linked to hypersexualization, both serving to objectify women. Infantilization was often overlooked unless tied to sexualization or explicitly illustrated. Participants highlighted how societal norms, such as workplace language and grooming expectations, dismiss infantilizing behaviors as harmless. They emphasized the need for greater awareness and language to critique these subtle controls.

Hypersexualization was discussed in relation to participants' first memories of bodily awareness, which led to either empowerment or discomfort. Empowerment occurred when participants had agency over their bodies, while negative experiences stemmed from external sexualization. Hypersexualization was framed as a spectrum, empowerment arose from owning one's narrative, while harm occurred when sexualization was imposed without consent.

Girlhood was described as both a nostalgic connection to childhood and an ongoing identity. Nostalgia evoked feelings of safety and joy, while girlhood in adulthood fostered solidarity and connection among women. However, participants noted the commodification of girlhood in digital spaces, where Eurocentric portrayals dominate and limit diverse representations. Social media trends promoted both connection and exclusion, as women navigated pressure to conform to idealized aesthetics rooted in whiteness and thinness.

Trends like the "I'm just a girl" meme exemplified social media's dual role in shaping girlhood. These memes provided cathartic humor and solidarity but also risked reinforcing infantilization and objectification. Participants viewed them as coping mechanisms and critiques of societal pressures, expressing feminist exhaustion in a patriarchal, capitalist society.

Ultimately, participants recognized social media as a space where women negotiate and challenge societal narratives, navigating empowerment and objectification on their own terms.