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The Hypersexualization of Young Girls and the Infantilization of Adult Women

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ABSTRACT: It is commonly known that women deal with societal pressures at all ages. When they are young, little girls, they are hypersexualized. When they are grown, adult women, they are infantilized. Just like any other societal pressure, these notions lead females to develop and carry various physical and psychological problems throughout their lives, ranging from eating disorders, depression, anxiety, self-harm, to suicidal thoughts and more. There are multiple factors that appear to be reinforcing these phenomena such as schools, families, media, influencers, and much more. These issues can be dealt with and addressed in several ways, some of which could be setting firm regulations and laws on the media and what they're permitted to put out, monitoring companies and their advertisements to ensure they are not promoting either, and raising awareness on these topics in schools, universities, and with parents, through awareness sessions, campaigns, and workshops that could be mandatory. In this way, the general public will become aware of these stigmas that they might be partaking in or encouraging unconsciously, thus making the world a safer place for females of all ages and would promote gender equality.

Throughout history, women's physical appearance has been constantly criticized and under fire and dispute. It has been continuously changed, altered, redesigned, and reshaped for the benefit of the patriarchal society and to fit into the "male gaze". As time progressed, the infantilization of women has become far more apparent in societies around the world. To infantilize someone is defined as treating them as a child, primarily through demeaning actions. Women are usually infantilized by men and treated as children often concerning sexism and misogyny. The most common manifestations of infantilization are through linguistics, such as overly simplifying explanations or using demeaning nicknames. However, it can also be physical such as offering a woman a hug when offering a man a handshake. The infantilization of women often includes policing their appearances and which social spheres they're allowed to occupy. Infantilizing a person generally conveys a sense of superiority. As a gendered practice, women's infantilization is related to patriarchal structures that situate men in the default position of power.

Whereas, on the other hand, young girls are being hypersexualized. This sexualization occurs when society demonstrates and makes a girl believe, whether implicitly or explicitly, that her value comes primarily or solely from her sexual appeal, when she is sexually objectified, or when sexuality is inappropriately imposed on her, and where her other characteristics are excluded. (Sheppard, 2022)Hypersexualizing young girls is linked to negative mental health consequences. As is infantilizing adult women, which also leads them to develop adverse mental health issues.

Social media appears to encourage young girls to act older than their age and adult grown women to act younger. Both of these behavior have several reasons and serve a purpose to the patriarchal society.

These phenomena that have existed for several years now have contributed greatly to gender discrimination, pedophilia, misogyny, and much more. There are multiple different factors that contribute to these two phenomena, most notably, social media, in addition to other factors such as, families and educational institutions. These phenomenaareprevalent all around the world. It goes back to even Ancient Greek societies, where Pederasty was endorsed. It was seen socially acceptable for grown, adult, men to date young boys. The reason behind this was that grown women were believed to be similar to these young boys, in all different aspects, from

their bodies, to their behavior, to their maturity. They were not seen different from young boys, thus deeming it acceptable and normal for a grown man to form a relationship with a male child. This was rooted in their belief that women are much less developed and weaker than men.(Sood, 2021)

Multiple studies have been done regarding both topics of infantilizing adult women and hypersexualizingyoung girls as their impact on the different societies around the world has been tremendous.

The sexualization of young girls has led to various of problems, especially considering how widespread this phenomenon is. Young girls are being sexualized every day, all across the globe. This ranges from their exposure to societal pressures to perpetuating sexualized violence. As expected, this immense sexualization of young girls present in the world has tremendous effects on their cognitive functioning, in addition to their physical and mental health. In general, girls tend to experience more mental health problems than boys and their sexualization often plays a huge part into the way these girls identify themselves and view or measure their self-worth.

Their ongoing sexualization is encouraging specific gender stereotypes that are leading young girls to face various mental health issues ranging from, low self-esteem, anxiety, eating disorders, depression, self-harm, to suicidal thoughts. (Sheppard, 2022) Being sexualized at such a young age, girls are most probably unfamiliar with how to interpret it or address it outwardly, thus they may turn inwardly, and release all the built up stress by harming themselves. The hyper sexualization and objectification of young girls has led them to adopt these views and self-objectify, especially when they start to prioritize and value their attractiveness and beauty over their intelligence and well-being. Many girls deal with mental health issues, however it often goes unnoticed and unaddressed as women's issues are often downplayed.

On the other hand, older women who are infantilized are also bound to experience mental health problems. Looking at it from a psychological perspective, it is seen that infantilization of women conveys a sense of superiority over women which can cause psychological damage. (Adams & White, 2021)

According to the Mental Health Foundation (n.d), in today's society, women are three times more likely to experience common mental health problems. It appears that both of these phenomena contribute heavily to worsening the female population's mental health and they affect women at all ages.

Nowadays, young girls dress more provocatively. Naturally, social media plays a huge role in that as teens tend to follow trends and often desire to look "trendy". However, there is still a limit that must not be crossed. It's is important to also note how clothes that are targeted at young girls such as Halloween outfits, are often very sexualized and lewd in nature. Young girls are not equipped or prepared to deal with the attention and sexual pressure that comes from boys. When put in such situations, where they don't have neither the physical nor mental capacity to handle what is going to come at them, young girls are bound to make poor or damaging decisions that could physically or mentally scar them forever. In a study that was conducted at Knox College, in the United States of America, where they had to choose between a sexy and conservative doll. 68% of girls would prefer to look like the sexy doll, 72% believed that the sexy doll would be more popular at school, and 55% thought they looked like the sexy doll. All of which are very alarming statistics. (Stimpson, 2014)

It has reached a point where multiple stores, specifically clothing stores, targeted at young girls have announced bankruptcy and had to shut down due to lack of business. Some examples are, Justice, Claire's, and even GAP. During this past year, several clothing stores such as Bershka, have recently expanded their size range to 11-12years old as they noticed that their clothes are heavily demanded by young girls.

While young girls are trying to look older, grown women are doing everything in their power to look younger. They try to achieve that through the clothes they wear, the makeup they put on, the surgeries they undergo, and more. Women go to extreme lengths to be seen as "pretty" and to fit the "male gaze". A woman's physique is rooted in the infantilization of femininity. One of the most common examples, being the woman having a hairless body. The idea of a hairless body being "feminine" is infantilizing as it is imitating the body of a little girl.

The sexualization of girls is seen in often movies, video games, music lyrics, magazines, and music videos. TV shows and movies tend to sexualize girls to increase their profits and gain a larger popularity. (Suryadewara, 2021) To take an example, the movie "Cuties" had 11-year-old girls dancing provocatively while dressed up in revealing clothing, taking the focus away from the main storyline which is about girls on their

journey to self-realization. In just one singular year, grade school kids can consume as many as 80,000 "sexy girl" portrayals when watching TV shows targeted at kids. Experts have linked such imagery with long term psychological damage. Having kids watching shows or music videos that depict girls their age dating, dressing proactively, and engaging in sexual behavior, then that is what the child is going to aspire to dress and look like. Moreover, when girls are exposed to unrealistic media portrayals of girls their age, this can easily lead them to become more insecure, self-loathing, and worsen their mental health. (Suryadewara, 2021) To dig deeper into this, many celebrities, most notably the Kardashians, who got famous at a young age, were known for posting "sexy" selfies. While the message behind their actions might have been to empower other young teen girls, the reality is that it influenced a multitude of minors to post sexually charged photos online on social media. When girls are viewed as objects they begin to prioritize their physical attractiveness and sexual worthiness over their personal well-being. (Sheppard, 2022) During their teen years, girls are often concerned about fitting in with their peers and being viewed as popular. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, have contributed greatly those views, where girls might feel more pressured to post pictures that are more sexual in nature as that is what garners them the greatest amount of likes, which can "elevate" a teen's social status. A very recent scandal that sparked outrage was taking the sexualization of young girls to the next level. An advertisement that Balenciaga put out portraying a little girl holding a teddy bear in BDSM, inappropriate sexual gear looking up at the camera innocently. Fortunately, the general public did not turn a blind eye to this and decided to boycott the brand and openlyspoke up and condemned the brand.

Another notion worth mentioning, is the immense romanticization and normalization of getting an older man spoil one, often young women, with money and other luxuries in exchange for their time and sometimes, more often than not, sexual favors, typically such men are referred to as "Sugar Daddies". During 2020, shortly after lockdowns started, this notion started gaining attraction and popularity as an easy way to make money. While there is not anything inherently wrong with having a sugar daddy, the problem remains that this "quick way to make money" was promoted to younger girls, "barely legal" girls. Young girls who have barely hit 18 years of age were encouraged to fall into this lifestyle. Naturally, as it was talked about in such a positive light and praised and flaunted by many girls, it encouraged little girls, to look up to that behavior and aspire to be, what is called a "sugar baby". Sex work as well, through selling promiscuous pictures of themselves on sites like Only Fans, was also encouraged as a form of empowerment or reclamation to make quick and easy money. As a result of that, many girls were creating accounts on Only Fans as soon as they turn 18. This presents a huge problem as it appears to be normalizing child pornography, seeing that girls who are barely legal are participating in sex work so early on. From this point, it can be noted that pornography as well, has immensely ruined the minds of young girls and boys alike, as what is deemed okay, acceptable, and favorable during sex nowadays is encouraging violence against women. Young girls are learning that their pleasure is linked to them being abused and in pain. This sexual objectification dehumanizes girls and women, that plays a part in supporting rape culture and violence against women (Baker, 2022).

Recommendations:

These two notions that the whole world has grown to accept and has completely conformed to urgently have to be changed. As mentioned before, they affect women in multiple different aspects, from the way they get to lead their lives, to how they get treated by their male counterparts, and most importantly their mental health can be greatly affected. Young girls do not deserve to grow up believing they have to sexualize their bodies in order to be seen, heard, and simply viewed as attractive. Neither do adult women have to infantilize themselves to be deemed attractive to the male gaze. Women are then stuck in a dilemma where they never feel like they fit or belong in any age group; young girls are not getting to truly experience and live their preteen and adolescence years and are not having the chance to have a proper, innocent childhood due to them being hyper sexualized, and adult women are shamed, looked down upon, and are not considered as "attractive" or "worthy" unless they infantilize themselves and look younger. Women and men alike should not feel the need to hide their age by acting, dressing up, or undergoing surgeries to look more youthful. These are both serious issues that should be addressed by different responsible factors. For instance, educational institutions as a whole, should promote mandatory workshops and awareness sessions to break down this stigma that women face and to help shine a light on this issue. Parents, as well, as they are the greatest influencers in shaping their children's minds

should be encouraged, or even mandated to attend them. Universities, such as the Lebanese American University, a leading university in ensuring gender equality for its students and staff, could have different mandatory workshops be done to increase young adult's awareness towards these topics as they are the new generation. This could be done through different clubs, such as the Intersectional Feminist Club, for example, at LAU Beirut. They could even create small booths around the campus to inform people about these stigmas. By doing these workshops, kids, young adults, and parents will become more aware of the behaviors that they have been socialized into which could help adults break this pattern and help women break free from this. Moreover, campaigns must be done to speak up against these two concepts. Such campaigns can be done through social media where they would promote awareness on these topics and reject them. Some influencers on TikTok, a mobile entertainment application, have openly spoken about the hypersexualization of young girls, as have some celebrities spoken up about being sexualized when they were younger such as Britney Spears, Megan Fox, Scarlett Johansson, and much more. Very few people have also spoken about the infantilization of women however, it is not as known or talked about as the latter. Regardless, there has evidently not been enough people speaking up about them as we have yet to see any change. Moreover, government officials responsible for monitoring advertisements, such as the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Economy and Trade, should reinforce rules that prohibit companies from creating advertisements that sexualize young girls, or encourage their sexualization, in addition to prohibiting advertisements that infantilize adult women or encourage their infantilization since as the current laws stand in Lebanon, there are no laws or restrictions against either. Additionally, companies themselves should be monitored and must have rules against encouraging or promoting these ideologies openly, or subliminally as is done in most cases. Lastly, applications and websites that promote(?) sex work should increase the minimum age from 18 years to at least 21 years. This would make sex work a much safer space for adults, help keep young girls safe, as it would also decrease child pornography that is increasingly available of barely legal teens.By taking such steps, the hyper sexualization of young girls is bound to decrease drastically as is the infantilization of women.

As shown throughout this paper, it can be noted that hypersexualizing little girls and infantilizing grown women has a myriad of negative impacts on females and ultimately only serves the patriarchy. Hypersexualizing girls is setting them up to carry a lot of trauma and unnecessary societal pressures that boys do not ever have to face or carry. As does infantilizing women, which helps keep men in power and superior to women in all different ways. Both of these phenomena must be put to an end. Females of all ages deserve to live their age without carrying any societal pressures to act, look, or behave a certain way or age. Just as men are accepted and embraced at every age, and are able to experience a normal childhood without being sexualized, women deserve that as well. This can be seen as a crucial step to reach a more gender equal society.

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