Girlhood vs Womanhood: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

Good girl bosses eat their girl dinners. They count their expenses using girl maths and go on hot-girl walks. It is almost impossible not to notice the recent surge in women of all ages calling themselves girls on social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, with the keyword Girl Dinner amassing over 30 million views on TikTok last year (Jennings, 2023; Roy, 2023). It is even harder not to notice the contentious debate this tends to gather around itself. Some claim that it is a way to subvert stereotypes and reclaim them. Others claim that this focus on traditional feminine expression diminishes women's experiences outside of it. Some see this as yet another way to market extreme consumerism. Who, if anyone, is in the right then? What do the Girl trends mean for women? Are they a positive influence on cultural feminism? This essay will argue that these trends, which emphasise girlhood over womanhood, in and of themselves, are marginally harmful. Only when they are conflated with feminism do they begin to be detrimental. To analyse these trends, I will start by creating a framework based on sociolinguistics to outline the differences in uses of the terms Girl and Woman and their respective meanings in social interactions and on postfeminism and its conceptualisation of empowered femininity. It will then use this framework to analyse these trends to offer a conclusion and, hopefully, to start a discussion on the future of feminism in the cultural sphere.

Sociolinguistics offer a way to study how people use language to create meanings, including how it can signal parts of a person's identity (Deckert & Vickers, 2011). Language makes it possible to engage in categorisation processes that may delineate groups based on gender identities. It is important to note that those categories and their assigned meanings are unstable and can differ among speech communities and contexts (Deckert & Vickers, 2011). That points to the fact that the term Girl applies to a person well past their adolescence, and the word Woman may signify very different conceptualisations of gender identity. A

convincing analysis comes from Wasserman (2016). By looking at various case studies of alternate uses of the words in contemporary literature, she concludes that self-identification as a girl rather than a woman is connected with the loss of freedom, empowerment, and individual identity. A loss that traditionally comes with transitioning into womanhood, maturing and becoming someone's wife or mother. Girl stories centre around prioritising the self, showing that the transition can be reversed. Girlhood is no longer associated with age but with a state of mind (Wasserman, 2016).

Analysis of postfeminism unmasks how the instrumentalisation of feminism and the appropriation of its vocabulary is used by neoliberal power structures (McRobbie, 2009). Individuality, empowerment, and choice are now found within the system by engaging with consumerism and individuality in the most vital sense of the word—the only keys to success. It postulates a focus on self-emancipation through individual action. That offers the illusion of endless possibilities while, in reality, entrenching disembodiment from other women and feminism as a social movement (Marchetti, 2020; McRobbie, 2009). This frames success or failure as a woman in a social setting as contingent only upon her own decisions, implicitly denying the existence of power structures working directly against any such success (Marchetti, 2020).

Out of all the Girl trends, Girl Dinner garnered the most popularity. Creating a snack platter comprising ingredients, bits, and pieces haphazardly thrown together holds a noticeable appeal. It can be seen as a declaration of independence: assembling—not even cooking—a one-person meal for oneself and nobody else. The Girl in Girl Dinner stands, in line with Wasserman (2016), for a freedom to be found within femininity, unbound from responsibilities owed to others.

Girl trends, then, on the individual level, can be seen as an assertion of personal identity, of a life lived for herself. Calling oneself a girl rather than a woman, even if age

suggests belonging to the latter category, is in keeping with the sociolinguistic notion of self-categorisation and the fluctuating social meaning of both those words. Here, the term Girl should be understood not as its dictionary definition but rather as an expression of gender identity that combines femininity and independence, which, unfortunately, as a result, positions the concept of womanhood in direct opposition to that assertion. From this point of view, they cannot be said to be feminists in their own right. Conflating trends such as Girl Dinner with feminism as a social movement may lead to falling into the postfeminist trap again—looking for empowerment where there is none to be found. Enjoying a girl dinner or a hot-girl walk will never end gender inequality. However, the postfeminist vision will claim the opposite—not doing those things or working to better oneself as a woman are the only obstacles to achieving broadly defined societal success of the same scale as one's male counterparts, which effectively leads to ignoring the genuine societal barriers and internalised biases that make this feat that much harder. If the barriers are ignored and made invisible, they cannot be tackled.

I argue that this rage for all things Girl, rather than being seen as the be-all and end-all of modern feminism, should indicate that there is a problem to be addressed and work to be done to resignify the term Woman and womanhood to mean something else than an erasure of self (Wasserman, 2016). Individual action will never sufficiently realise this task. The fact that these trends become increasingly prominent on social media suggests that the underlying sentiment embodied by the term Girl is recognised by many. If one can see it as a starting point for a cultural feminist movement rather than the end solution, one may begin to pull at the veil of postfeminism and engage with it more critically.

To conclude, the Girl trends seem to indicate a need to express individual gender identity that allows for both femininity and independence, which, due to social contexts and biases, cannot be realised by the conception of womanhood. Additionally, viewing those

trends as signalling feminism and not an expression of gender identity leads to conflating those two and diminishing the visibility of the need for feminism as a social movement and not only as an individualistic feat.

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