

# The phenomenology of the normalization of the Word "Tobrut" as the sexual objectification of women on TikTok social

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## Abstract

The emergence of the term "tobrut" on TikTok marks a new phase in the normalization of sexual objectification mediated by social media. This study aims to understand the normalization of "tobrut" behind this trend, where the language of harassment is transformed into a digital identity acceptable to users. Using phenomenological methods, the study involved in-depth interviews with five female streamers and digital observation. The central paradox uncovered is how female streamers internalize the derogatory term as a form of "empowerment" and a means of self-image. The results show that this normalization does not occur passively, but rather through tactical agency in which women negotiate their bodies to meet the demands of the male gaze incentivized by the TikTok platform. This normalization of tobrut occurs through the experiences of female streamers who are part of TikTok's visual culture. The process of externalization and objectification of the term "tobrut" has reached a stage of internalization, causing individual moral sensitivity to be eroded by the need for digital visibility. This study concludes that under the control of TikTok's patriarchal algorithm, women's agency is used to reproduce their own subordination, creating long-term risks to the integrity of women's identities in the digital public space.

## Keywords

Tobrut, Sexual objectification, Phenomenology, Women, TikTok

## Introduction

The contemporary digital phenomenon on the TikTok platform has given rise to a significant sociolinguistic shift through the popularity of the term "tobrut." The term "tobrut" originates from netizen slang used to describe women with body shapes deemed sexually attractive, particularly their breasts. Initially appearing in TikTok comments and videos as a joke or compliment, the term has evolved into a popular cultural symbol with connotations of objectification. While etymologically rooted in slang that reduces women's bodies to sexual commodities, the term's use has now transcended conventional verbal harassment. In this context, the word "tobrut" is no

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longer simply a spontaneous expression, but rather a reflection of how women's bodies are reduced to visual objects judged based on their physical attractiveness. The concise and cool-sounding language characteristics have made the term "tobrut" a trend and a frequent use in everyday conversation, especially on platforms like TikTok, which prioritize concise and direct branding (Tribun, n.d.).

The "tobrut" trend is crucial to investigate due to the paradox of agency: a term inherently objectifying is now being claimed and actively used by female streamers as a self-image tool. The use of the word "tobrut" as a form of objectification of women is considered commonplace by some TikTok users, due to the formation of certain perspectives on the female body. In the social context of digital platforms, the use of this term is even considered capable of attracting more interaction, thus becoming increasingly recognized and accepted in the perception of the body by some TikTok users. For example, several accounts that have experienced the normalization of the word "tobrut," such as @aprilcandu et al., feel there is no problem with the word "tobrut." In fact, with the word "tobrut," they can express themselves on TikTok by uploading photos and videos without fear of harassment.

Therefore, we conducted this research not simply to document language trends, but to uncover how the normalization of abusive language can operate as social capital in the digital attention economy. Berger and Luckman argue that societal intuitions are created, maintained, or changed through human actions and interactions (Yusri, 2020). Unlike previous literature that generally positions women as passive victims of the male gaze, this research highlights how female subjects become active agents in facilitating this normalization. In the TikTok ecosystem driven by engagement algorithms, the term "tobrut" has been recontextualized from mere harassment to a self-claimed identity. Using the logic of Social Constructivism, this phenomenon is not seen as a linguistic coincidence, but rather as the result of the ongoing internalization of hyper-sexualized body standards. The massive use of "tobrut" hashtags and content by popular accounts—as observed in public data on the accounts @aprilcandu et al.—demonstrates that objectification has been institutionalized into digital behavior that is considered normal. According to Suryadi and Idris (2010), cultural processes cause gender construction gaps. Cultural processes lead to the selection of roles between men and women in society, especially in everyday life, which are formed within existing social norms or social order. As is currently happening, with a new trend concerning women's self-esteem, the practice of sexual objectification of women's bodies on the social media platform TikTok, with the use of the term "tobrut" as a sign of a woman's body part, is a practice that continues to occur repeatedly and only occurs in women with breasts that are larger than normal.

Seeing this phenomenon, it is important to understand the use of the word "tobru" from a phenomenological perspective. This approach allows us to explore the subjective experiences of women affected by the term, as well as its impact on how they are viewed in society. Therefore, this study aims to investigate why women, as subjects who

have historically been disadvantaged by objectification, are willing to adopt a term that demeans their dignity. There are worrying intellectual indications where informants feel "safer" and "empowered" by using this label. This raises a critical question: is this a form of authentic empowerment or a manifestation of false consciousness in which women's agency is co-opted by digital patriarchal structures for the benefit of engagement and followers. Using a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to dissect the psychosocial processes behind the subjects' decision to "accept" harassment as a compliment, as well as how this desensitization impacts the erosion of public moral standards for the wider social media audience.

## Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to explore the essence of the experiences of subjects involved in the phenomenon of the normalization of the term "tobrut." Unlike traditional objectification studies, this study specifically uses strict operational criteria in selecting informants through a purposive sampling technique. The informants in this study are five female TikTok streamers who actively use hashtags, terms, or visual attributes associated with the "tobrut" trend as a means of digital self-image. These female streamers were selected because they routinely experience this labeling but choose to internalize it as a form of appreciation.

Data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researcher implemented an anonymity protocol by using initials (Informants A, J, S, et al.) for private data from the interviews. Regarding the mention of public accounts (such as @aprilcandu et al.) in the introduction, the researcher used a netnographic approach, where the data is treated as public documents available in cyberspace. Observations were conducted on interaction patterns, content types, and responses to the use of the term to separate the researcher's personal moral perceptions from the subjective realities experienced by the informants. The researcher observed relevant TikTok content to understand how the term "tobrut" is used, disseminated, and received by the digital community. Documentation in the form of screenshots of digital interactions was also analyzed to complement the research findings.

The data were analyzed using grounded phenomenological analysis, where each informant's statement was grouped into coding themes for further analysis. The researcher maintained a critical distance (epoche) to ensure that conclusions regarding "false consciousness" or "tactical agency" were a synthesis of the informants' voices and an analysis of digital patriarchal structures, not a reflection of the researcher's personal moral bias.

## Results

### *Internalization and Desensitization: From Resistance to Acceptance*

The phenomenon of the use of the term "tobrut" demonstrates how language that originally had vulgar and sexually charged connotations can expand and shift in meaning in the digital space. This term is now used not only in specific sexual contexts but has spread widely and become part of everyday conversation among digital communities. On various social media platforms, especially TikTok, the word "tobrut" frequently appears in comments, hashtags, and video captions as an expression of humor, praise, or even self-branding.

Field data indicates that the process of normalizing the term "tobrut" among research subjects occurred through a process of psychosocial desensitization. Informant J revealed a transformation in her perception from rejection to acceptance. Initially, informant J felt annoyed when hearing or receiving "tobrut" comments, but because it occurred frequently, she eventually got used to it and no longer considered it annoying. She even used the word jokingly with her friends.

Meanwhile, informant S offered a view that reinforced the male dominance in communication practices on TikTok. She explained that comments using the term "tobrut" more often come from men, and such comments are often perceived as having sexual connotations. However, she feels more comfortable when similar comments come from other women, as they are perceived as a form of appreciation, not teasing. The statements of informants J and S indicate that "habituation" is not simply a passive process of habituation, but rather a pragmatic decision to gain digital economic benefits (engagement). Sociologically, this demonstrates tactical agency, where subjects choose not to feel harassed in order to maintain their existence in the digital space.

As explained by [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#), this feeling of "being okay" is the result of the internalization of objective reality, where objectification has reached a stage of habituation, where it is no longer perceived as a nuisance but as a normal part of the digital ecosystem. Referring to social constructivism theory, this feeling of "comfort" is the result of the ongoing internalization of the objectifying demands of the digital market, blurring the boundaries between harassment and appreciation in the informants' consciousness.

This practice of normalization reflects the persistence of unequal power relations between men and women. Men continue to dominate in determining women's bodily representation and self-image through digital interactions. Although its forms are increasingly veiled and often disguised as praise, such as the use of the term "tobrut," its essence remains a reflection of the continuity of patriarchal structures in the digital space. [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#) in their Objectification Theory explain that women's experiences in patriarchal societies are often colored by the view that their bodies are objects open to the judgment of others. In this view, women are no longer subjects who have control over their self-representation, but become objects of the

male gaze, which judges women's worth based on their physical attractiveness and sexuality. Women who meet the "tobrut" body image are often considered more attractive, while those who do not meet these standards often feel less confident or are left out of digital beauty trends.

### *Gender Asymmetry in Humor: Solidarity vs. Covert Harassment*

Informant A explained that she first heard the term "tobrut" from friends in everyday conversation, before later discovering its widespread use on the social media platform TikTok. Informant A admitted that she initially felt the term was rude and inappropriate, but due to its frequent appearance in various content and comments, its meaning became more familiar and eventually accepted as normal. For informant A, "tobrut" is now more often used in the context of joking or complimenting the appearance of women who are considered physically attractive. She noted that many social media users, including women, use the term without feeling uncomfortable or offended. This indicates the internalization and adaptation of vulgar meanings into normalcy, where the term, which was once taboo, is now accepted as part of digital slang.

In addition to informant A, informant Y revealed that she had received a comment calling her "tobrut" on one of her TikTok posts. At first, she felt uncomfortable and "shocked," but after encountering similar incidents more often, she began to accept it as normal. He also believes that these kinds of comments more often come from men, who use the word as a form of teasing or an expression of interest in a woman's body. This difference in perception demonstrates the dual function of humor. According to [Allan and Burrige \(2006\)](#), humor is used as a mitigation strategy for taboo language. However, in gender relations, male humor often constitutes veiled harassment, wrapping objectification in jest to avoid resistance. Conversely, among women, the term is reclaimed as an instrument of internal solidarity. However, researchers continue to see this as a paradox: women unconsciously engage in horizontal objectification, where they continue to use male gaze standards to validate each other. In the hands of men, "tobrut" humor functions as disguised aggression, wrapping objectification in jest to avoid social resistance. Conversely, among women, the term is reclaimed as an instrument of internal solidarity. However, critically, researchers see this as a paradox: despite being used for solidarity, the female informants are actually engaging in horizontal objectification, where they unconsciously continue to use patriarchal standards to judge each other.

Interviews with five informants confirmed that male dominance in digital spaces, particularly on TikTok, is manifested not only through direct actions but also through symbolic mechanisms operating in language, discourse, and social interaction patterns. Men exert power by controlling and directing the meanings attached to women's bodies through the use of terms, comments, and humor containing elements of physical judgment. This pattern reinforces what [Fredrickson and Roberts \(1997\)](#) call the objectification process, where women begin to see themselves through an external, male-dominated gaze. In fact, some women unconsciously internalize this view and

adjust their behavior and appearance to male expectations in order to gain social validation.

These results show that how women interpret the use of the term "tobrut" depends heavily on who utters it, indicating differences in meaning based on gender. When men use the term, its meaning tends to contain elements of power and sexual judgment, whereas when uttered by women, its meaning shifts to a form of solidarity or recognition. This phenomenon emphasizes that male dominance in digital spaces is not only present through the frequency of comments, but also through symbolic power in determining the social meaning of a word. This phenomenon is further complicated when projected into social media spaces, such as TikTok, where body visualization is central to social interaction. Men still hold a dominant role in determining how women's bodies should be presented and socially accepted. [Connell \(1987\)](#) in his concept of hegemonic masculinity asserts that the patriarchal social system constructs a gender hierarchy that places men as the center of symbolic power. Through this system, the values of hegemonic masculinity are reproduced through the media and popular culture, thereby influencing how society views women. In the digital context, this dominance is evident in the way men control narratives, language, and humor that contain elements of sexualization towards women, such as the use of terms that refer to women's bodies or attractiveness, one of which is tobrut.

## Discussion

### *The Role of Social Media Algorithms in the Normalization Process of "Tobrut"*

A close link was found between the use of the term "tobrut" and a false sense of empowerment. Streamers (agents of normalization) tended to feel more confident once they adopted this identity. Informant R stated that she wasn't afraid of harassment because she told her followers she was "tobrut" from the start. Informant R felt that by being the first to announce it, she felt in control. Therefore, it was normal for her followers to comment "tobrut."

This statement of "having control" is an example of false consciousness, which, intellectually, is a paradox, stating that submitting one's body to verbal objectification can create "confidence." However, this false consciousness is the result of total adherence to masculine structures; they feel secure because they no longer resist the flow of objectification, but rather follow it for the benefit of their followers. Their agency, in this case, is not used for liberation, but rather to negotiate the best position within a system that remains oppressive.

The results of this study reveal a fundamental paradox in the digital space: how a term designed to demean is instead claimed by its victims as an instrument of self-image and identity. The finding that informants felt "okay" or even "empowered" by the label "tobrut" should not be interpreted as a loss of the word's objectifying nature. Rather, it

indicates the success of the algorithm's architecture in creating an incentive system that forces subjects to normalize harassment for the sake of digital survival.

The informants' claims that they "control" the use of the term "tobrut" demonstrate tactical agency. They are not helpless, passive victims, but rather astute actors who understand how the attention economy works. However, intellectually, we as researchers must maintain a critical distance from this claim. As conceptualized by [McRobbie \(2009\)](#), this is a form of double entanglement, in which women's freedom is used to reinforce the norms that constrain them. The informants' perceived self-confidence is a manifestation of false consciousness; they feel safe not because the harassment has stopped, but because they have aligned themselves with the expectations of the male gaze, thus eliminating the friction between the subject and the patriarchal structure. TikTok, as an algorithm-based interaction space, plays a significant role in accelerating the term's spread and reinforcing the process of normalizing meaning. Gillespie (2018) explains that algorithms do not operate morally, but rather based on engagement. This means that terms or content that elicit high engagement are displayed more frequently. This explains why the term "tobrut" quickly went viral—because users actively engaged with content containing sexual elements or body humor. [Foucault \(1980\)](#), through the concept of power/knowledge, asserted that power operates through the production of knowledge and discourse. In this context, social media functions as a space where patriarchal power operates subtly.

Furthermore, the statement that informants are "used to it" suggests that TikTok's platform algorithm, which operates on engagement—not morality—systematically encourages content that emphasizes hyper-sexualized aesthetics. In this context, the normalization of "tobrut" is not simply an individual psychological process, but rather the sociological impact of a technological structure that values objectification. When women feel compelled to "play along" to avoid being submerged in the algorithmic flow, their agency is no longer emancipatory, but rather adaptive pragmatic. In synthesis, the normalization of "tobrut" is clear evidence of how digital patriarchal structures operate through consensus, not coercion. Informants are not forced to adhere to masculine standards, but rather they are "invited" through the incentives of virality and popularity. The confidence they feel is the result of a clever yet fragile negotiation, in which subjects surrender sovereignty over the meaning of their bodies in order to gain recognition within a system that continues to position them as visual objects. "Tobrut" becomes a form of "popular knowledge" that is considered humorous, lighthearted, and entertaining, yet behind it lies the reproduction of an ideology that values women through their bodies. This process is a form of normalization of power, where patriarchal dominance is disguised through seemingly neutral digital trends.

This phenomenon also demonstrates how algorithms reinforce hegemonic masculinity ([Connell, 1995](#)), the dominant form of masculinity that dictates social and aesthetic standards on social media. Videos depicting women's bodies in a particular style often

go viral more easily because they conform to masculine aesthetic expectations. As a result, women are not only objects but also complicit in maintaining the system by continuing to produce content that conforms to the same standards. Papacharissi (2010) explains that social media spaces create new forms of communication characterized by expressive intimacy—a mix of personal expression, entertainment, and public opinion. In this situation, the line between awareness and harassment becomes blurred. Users feel free to express their opinions, but this freedom is often misused to express sexist views in a lighthearted manner.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the "tobrut" phenomenon on TikTok is not simply a superficial linguistic trend, but rather a manifestation of institutionalized objectification through algorithmic technology. The results suggest that the normalization of the term occurs not through direct structural coercion, but rather through tactical agency mechanisms that foster false consciousness. Informants in this study demonstrated significant resilience and a sense of "being okay," which sociologically is interpreted not as evidence of the disappearance of the impact of objectification, but as an indicator of normative desensitization. Under these conditions, female subjects cleverly negotiate their bodies as social capital to gain visibility and engagement in the digital attention economy.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in revealing the asymmetry between individual agency and digital patriarchal structures. While informants feel in control through their claims of "tobrut" identity, this study demonstrates that their claims are illusory and operate within a false consciousness. Subjects do not truly disrupt the standard male gaze, but rather adapt it as a tool for digital self-image. As a result, there is an erosion of collective sensitivity, blurring the lines between appreciation and harassment. The agency demonstrated by female streamers is ultimately reproductive—they gain personal benefits while simultaneously reinforcing structures that position women's bodies as visual commodities for public audiences. This aligns with Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, which states that in visual culture, men act as viewing and controlling subjects, while women are positioned as objects of gaze, judged by their physical appearance and attractiveness.

In closing, our research can provide in-depth insights into the normalization of sexual objectification on social media, however, there are several limitations that need to be considered in interpreting the results, namely this research focuses exclusively on the TikTok ecosystem and cannot be fully generalized to other digital platforms, informants in this study are limited to TikTok users in Indonesia with a specific cultural background so that perceptions of "empowerment" and "objectification" are strongly influenced by local norms, so similar phenomena in other cultural areas may produce different agency dynamics, and as a phenomenological study this research focuses on women who have internalized or used the term as a branding strategy (normalization agents) so it does

not explore in depth the perspectives of women who choose to resist completely or leave the platform in reaction to such objectification. Therefore, for future research, we recommend using a media political economy perspective to dissect how platform policies technically incentivize objectifying content.

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