

“You Know Who the Sluts Are”: A Qualitative Analysis of the “SlutWalk”

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Abstract

In 2011, third-wave feminist activists initiated the “SlutWalk”, a protest march drawing attention to victim blaming and rape myths. The word “slut” has evolved within the context of a discourse of power and, by reaffirming categories of “good” and “bad” women, been used to justify sexual assault. The current study used three focus groups (men only, $n = 2$; women only, $n = 7$; mixed, $n = 6$ [3 men/3 women]) to explore Canadian undergraduate students’ views on the meaning and use of the term “slut”, and to gauge whether participants saw the “SlutWalk” as a valuable form of feminist political action. Data were examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results indicated that the term “slut” was perceived as negative; more applicable to women than to men; and based on having an “inappropriate” appearance and/or engaging in sex-related behaviour perceived to be “inappropriate”. The underlying message of the “SlutWalk” was sanctioned by discussants. However, support for the event itself was minimal suggesting that, contrary to opinions expressed by some academics, participants did not regard the “SlutWalk” as embodying a politics of re-signification.

Keywords

Sexuality, Feminist, Rape, Sexual Victimization, Political Activism, Re-Signification

1. Introduction

Feminism has long been concerned with exploring and challenging ideas present in the hegemonic discourses of society. From perceptions of women’s inherent inferiority to notions of equal pay for equal work, the road toward equality has been long and arduous. Contemporary third-wave feminists, perhaps, face even greater challenges than their second-wave forebears due, in part, to the emergence of modern sexism (Swim, Aikin, Hall, &

Hunter, 1995). This construct is represented by a constellation of beliefs including: 1) women in Western society are no longer subject to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination; 2) the achievement of gender parity has rendered feminism unnecessary; and 3) women self-identifying as feminists have a covert agenda of providing members of their sex with “special” rights and privileges that are unfairly denied to men. Arguably, a more recent manifestation of modern sexism resides in the belief that feminism has subverted the traditional gender hierarchy with men now constituting “second class” citizens in relation to women.

Regardless of whether sexism is old-fashioned (i.e., based on the belief that characterological differences exist between men and women) or modern (Swim et al., 1995), both forms possess entrenched ideas of what constitutes normative gender behaviour. The issue of gender normativity is particularly salient within the realm of sexuality (Morrison, Ryan, Fox, McDermott, & Morrison, 2008). For example, in a qualitative study consisting of personal interviews and focus groups with American undergraduate students, Sweeney (2011) found that both male and female participants were cognisant of a sexual double standard in which men were expected to want “recreational or non-relational sex” (p. 7), whereas any woman desirous of the same type of activity was penalised for “sexual impropriety” (p. 7).

Flood (2013) acknowledges that “while slut and related terms remain powerful disciplinary mechanisms for regulating women’s sexual behaviour... such terms also are being subverted and reclaimed” (p. 95). The reclamation of a derogatory label embodies Butler’s (Butler, 1997) concept of “re-signification” whereby “an injurious term is re-worked in the cultural domain from one of maligning to one of celebration” (Ringrose & Renold, 2012: p. 334). Some have asserted that a feminist-initiated event, entitled the “SlutWalk”, which was originally organised in response to a Toronto police constable’s offensive statement that in order to minimize the risk of sexual assault “women should avoid dressing like ‘sluts’” (Rush, 2011, n.p.), constitutes a “significant form of feminist political action” (Ringrose & Renold, 2012: p. 334; also see McCormack & Prostran, 2012).

The “SlutWalk” is designed to challenge myths that conflate revealing dress with sexual consent; draw attention to societal attitudes that assign blame to the victim, rather than the perpetrator; and, in general, critique the discourses supportive of male sexual aggression. Originally held in Toronto in 2011, and drawing a crowd of over 3000 people (McArthur, 2011), numerous satellite “SlutWalks” have been held throughout Canada and the United States as well as internationally (see Carr, 2013: p. 35 for a select listing of locations).

The “SlutWalk” has been subject to both praise and condemnation. Savage (2011) asserts that this event has the power to increase young women’s engagement with feminist activism, a point echoed by McCormack and Prostran (2012):

The real feminist action and solidarity that took place at Toronto’s “SlutWalk” had transformed us. We felt empowered. We felt stronger. We felt that we were not alone. That day at “SlutWalk” Toronto, we felt like we had finally found our voices (p. 411).

Others have asserted that it embodies the “inclusive and eclectic nature” (Borah & Nandi, 2012: p. 419) of the women’s movement and reflects young feminists’ emphasis on sex positivity and their interpretation of the body as a means of contesting normative expectations about women’s sexuality (Borah & Nandi, 2012; Carr, 2013). Stated succinctly, by re-signifying the word “slut”, protesters make it impossible to differentiate archetypal “good girls” from their “bad girl” counterparts (Carr, 2013).

In terms of criticisms, first, some feminists contend that the word “slut” is beyond re-signification (e.g., Dines & Murphy, 2011, n.p.). As Nguyen (2013) observes: “Add an adjective to the noun [slut] and the word remains unkind, unredeemable, a stinging slap of judgement to reduce a woman to sexual essence. Is it possible for a woman to be a ‘kind slut’, an ‘intelligent slut’, or a ‘generous slut’?” (p. 16). Others have argued that it is an elitist event of questionable relevance to marginalised women (i.e., those operating outside the constituencies of being urban, English-educated, and financially comfortable: Sharma, 2011). The intersection of gender, race, and class necessitates recognition that women labelled “sluts” experience this label in a variety of ways (White, 2002) and that, for some, the term itself is part of a larger system of racism and colonialism (Walia, 2011). Finally, some activists note that the “carnival-like atmosphere” and “fun, party vibe” (Barber & Kretschmer, 2013: pp. 42-43) of many “SlutWalks” run the risk of (potentially) trivialising the event’s core message: sexual agency is an integral element of women’s full liberation.

The rhetoric surrounding the police officer’s comment about women needing to avoid “dressing like sluts” and the resultant “SlutWalk” movement reflects more than victim blaming and rape myths. It embodies the societal trend of “slut shaming” (Tanenbaum, 1999), which is a “powerful tool used to attack and discredit girls and women whose behaviour or speech is non-conforming or rebellious, or who dare to hold men accountable

for their action” (Carr, 2013: p. 30). Given that a central objective of “SlutWalks” involves the re-signification of the term “slut”, delineating how the “slut” construct has functioned historically and within the judicial system is critical in unpacking the ways it operates in feminist and mainstream discourses. This information also serves to contextualize the key objectives of the current paper, which are to examine: 1) how male and female university students conceptualise the term “slut” and 2) whether participants consider the “SlutWalk” a meaningful form of feminist political action.

1.1. A Brief History of “the Slut”

The word “slut” was originally related to notions of cleanliness and order, and used to describe someone of “dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance” and later simply “a kitchen maid” (Slut, 2011). The use of the word as a pejorative term with implications for a woman’s¹ moral character—“a woman of low or loose character... a hussy” (Slut, 2011)—has strayed from its now obsolete original meaning, but retains undertones that link female sexuality to notions of physical and moral insalubrity. Greer (2011) connects the message of “SlutWalk” participants to the desire to be freed from the “tyranny of perpetual cleansing” (n.p.); that is, the notion that domestic space and the female body should always appear pure and presentable.

“Slut” has been contextualised within a paradigm that conceives of female sexuality in dichotomous terms: Madonna versus whore (Attwood, 2007). Feinman (1994) describes the Madonna/whore binary as having “arisen from the two sharply different ways in which female sexuality has affected men... possess[ing] unique powers that made them both necessary and dangerous” (pp. 3-4). Feinman (1994) identifies this view as the root of female subservience, and the notion that women are inherently inferior to men. Implicit in the Madonna/whore dichotomy is the double standard that it is female rather than male sexuality that constitutes a threat to moral order (White, 2002). This negative characterisation was a powerful tool used to label women who did not conform to notions of virtuous femininity. It was adopted by both men and women to monitor the actions of women and devalue those who were perceived to be promiscuous. The binary conceptualisation of female sexuality also permitted wives to “save face” by shifting blame for a husband’s infidelity to his mistress, thereby distinguishing themselves sexually, socially, and economically from the usually lower class figure of the “slut” (Blackwell, 2004). The “slut”, while inherently gendered, often took on ethnic and class dimensions as well (i.e., different ethnic and class groups seem to provide varying reports regarding their experiences), a practice that remains today (White, 2002).

The creation and perpetuation of a “slut” discourse and narrative produces a distinct image of what a “slut” looks like. As she operates outside accepted sexual norms, she threatens the moral fabric of society and the institution of the family. Due to penalties meted out to “bad girls,” many women not only fear the “slut” (i.e., labelling by proximal contamination), they fear *becoming* her. Researchers have found, for instance, that women evidence greater hostility toward a promiscuous woman than a chaste woman whereas men’s hostility does not differ across these types of women (A. F. Fowers & B. J. Fowers, 2010). Men’s apparent ambivalence toward the “slut” is understandable. She serves as a conduit through which men can adhere to expectations of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Sweeney, 2011), and gratify sexual desires that do not fit within the bounds of acceptable monogamous relationships (White, 2002). For men, she is to be used, but not loved. Women do not experience similar ambivalence in their evaluation of the “slut”; indeed, derogation of this category permits women to “demonstrate their own virtue in an exorcism of the unclean” (Attwood, 2007: p. 234).

1.2. The “Slut” and the Judicial System

The way in which the “slut” figure relates to sexual assault can be understood in the context of “rape culture” (Ahrens, Dean, Rozee, & McKenzie, 2008; Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2011), which proposes that the prevalence of rape is partially explained by the way Western society constructs and responds to sexual violence. Rape culture is evident in phenomena such as victim blaming and rape myths that shift blame from perpetrators onto victims. Rape culture perceives male sexual aggression as normal and places the onus on women to serve as bearers of morality and, thus, avoid being the victims of assault. Research also shows that many police officers subscribe to rape myths and do not view victims as credible when they fail to conform to the rape script of the chaste or violently-attacked victim (Campbell & Johnson, 1997). For example, Page (2008) found that, while

¹Historically, there is no male “slut”. The promiscuous man is romanticised whereas the promiscuous woman is feared and reviled (Tanenbaum, 1999; White, 2002).

nearly all officers acknowledged that rape was a serious crime, they were far more likely to disbelieve the claims of a prostitute than those of a virgin or a woman with a professional job. Such attitudes prevent women from coming forward with rape charges, out of fear of not being believed and/or having their own characters assaulted by representatives of the judicial system (Spohn & Tellis, 2012).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Five males and 10 females ($N = 15$) were recruited via an introductory psychology student participant pool. Participants registered for one of three focus groups: men only ($n = 2$), women only ($n = 7$), or mixed-gender ($n = 6$; 3 men and 3 women). Other than gender, no additional demographic information was collected.

2.2. Procedure

A focus group methodology was employed because: 1) it permitted the researchers to study participants' views within a social context (i.e., discussants could interact with each other and better approximate the everyday process of creating collective sense through social interaction: Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1999); and 2) in accordance with feminist epistemology, focus groups acknowledge that the researcher is an active participant in the construction of meaning (Garko, 1999).

Prior to commencing each focus group, the second author reviewed key ethical requirements for conducting research with human participants. Discussants also were informed that: a) the conversation occurring during the focus group would be audio-recorded and transcribed, b) transcripts would use pseudonyms and omit any information that might (potentially) identify discussants; and c) the discussion taking place during the focus group should be treated as confidential (i.e., any information shared therein should *not* be divulged to others).

To familiarise discussants with the “SlutWalk”, a brief news vignette outlining this event was shown to attendees. Focus group discussions followed a series of prepared questions (available upon request), which attempted to assess participants' understanding of the word “slut” as well as their thoughts on the “SlutWalk”. When the focus group ended, participants were thanked and presented with a debriefing form.

2.3. Analysis

The analytic approach used was a version of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003), which emphasizes the lived experiences of participants and the ways in which they construct personal and social meaning. IPA was selected because it is designed for use with small samples (e.g., Stinson, Levy, & Alt, 2014: $N = 3$), and “allows themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts of their experiences instead of utilizing pre-existing theory to drive analysis” (Stinson et al., 2014: p. 62). This technique interprets the researcher as having an active role in interacting with participants and interpreting meaning from the data, making it consistent with the feminist epistemology underlying this study. Although primarily used with interview data, IPA has been employed with focus groups (e.g., Söderström & Skårderud, 2011: $N = 8$).

Transcripts were read carefully for themes that would illuminate the discussants' opinions on the central research questions. After identifying broad themes, quotations were analysed further for patterns and contradictions across groups. The most prominent themes are discussed below, with relevant quotes given for illustrative purposes. Quotes have had grammar corrected for readability, with changes identifiable by the use of square brackets and ellipses.

The conversations from the three focus groups produced 44 pages of single-spaced text (11-point Times New Roman font). The first three authors read the transcripts separately and compared the themes they identified in response to the questions posed. A guiding analytic principal, adopted from Morrison and Tallack (2005), was that differences in textual analysis—should they emerge—would not be “resolved” (i.e., there was no interest in asserting that one researcher's interpretation of the data was somehow more “accurate” than another's). However, no interpretative differences were noted.

3. Results

First, how participants conceptualize the term “slut”, and position the term relative to the self is detailed. Then, participants' beliefs about the “SlutWalk” are elucidated.

3.1. Discussants' Understanding of the "Slut"

[A *slut*] refers to women... women dressed provocatively (men's group: John).

I think it's partly because of the way they dress, and because they sleep around a lot (mixed group: Brooklyn).

A slut basically means promiscuity; and, yeah, it's definitely negative (women's group: Christina).

The above quotes reflect three elements of the term "slut" for which there was unanimous agreement among discussants: 1) "slut" is a negative term; 2) it applies to women rather than men; and 3) a "slut" is identifiable based on her appearance and/or sex-related behaviour. Participants also noted that it is extremely difficult for a "slut" to rid herself of this label. Each of these themes will be discussed briefly.

"*Slut*" is a negative term. All of the discussants concurred that the term was "definitely negative" (women's group: Christina); "offensive" (mixed group: Brooklyn) and typically, though not exclusively, used as an "insult" (women's group: Claire)². Discussants asserted that the meaning of the term has remained fairly static and that it's "[never] been a really positive thing" (men's group: Thor). The only instance in which "slut" was regarded as potentially empowering was among "chicks" that indiscriminately tell people how "they're in love with so and so and so... it's almost like they're proud of it; like, they want to be labelled a slut" (mixed group: Dave). Discussants believed that these women—typically high-school students—"love [the] attention" (mixed group: Derek) that accompanies announcing "to the entire world that they had sex with, like, thirty guys" (mixed group: Larissa).

"*Slut*" is gendered. While concurring that, technically, a man could be a "slut", several participants noted that they had never heard this label applied to men (e.g., mixed group: Larissa and Sarah). One male discussant said that he had been called a "slut" (men's group: John) but "just found it really funny". Other discussants concurred that if a man calls another man a "slut", "it's more or less a joke" (men's group: Thor) and is "just bantering back and forth" (mixed group: Dave). Further, the "sting" of the label is not intensified if a man is called a "slut" by a woman: "Nothing hits guys like it hits girls... it doesn't really matter if people call them [a] man whore or slut... because it only comes from girls and... their words don't really have that much effect on the boys... who are proud of what they are doing" (women's group: Anne).

Discussants were aware of the double standard that applies to men and women in terms of being labelled a "slut". They recognised that "guys that sleep around aren't called [slut] as often" (women's group: Elizabeth) and that the number of sexual partners needed to earn this designation differs:

For a man to be called a slut, I feel like he has to have hooked up with way more women. Like, girls, if you hook up with... I don't know... I'm just throwing out a number... just say... four or something... consecutively... you can just be like "Oh, you're a slut". But a guy, they'd have to hook up with, like, eight... like double that or something (women's group: Elizabeth).

Discussants also felt that men "don't get as bad a reputation" (women's group: Claire) for engaging in sexual activity. Indeed, they acknowledged that "...having more sexual relationships [for men] is... you know, you're more experienced; ... you're a player; you're more manlier [sic]" (men's group: John) and that "guys are judged more if they *don't* do stuff with girls" (women's group: Elizabeth).

The double standard identified with respect to the differential application of the term "slut" was accounted for in evolutionary terms³.

[Women] have a limited amount of eggs. And guys... we make millions of sperm every day... And we can let that go wherever, with whoever [sic], for as long as we want, as much as we want. Women... have... a controlled amount. So... they're trying to find that special one... (men's group: John).

... girls have to invest so much more... when they have a child [whereas guys] can go around and reproduce (women's group: Claire).

A "slut" is identifiable by her appearance and/or⁴ sex-related behaviours. Discussants felt that a "slut" was

²Participants also acknowledged that the term "slut" can be used in a "joking way too" (women's group: Elizabeth)... *if my friend hooked up with a guy... you could be, like, "Oh, you slut!"... just as a joke..., even if you don't mean it in, like, a negative way* (women's group: Elizabeth).

³When asked explicitly if the double standard was biologically ingrained or "society interpreting that evolutionary basis and applying these rules differently to men and women" (women's group: interviewer), discussants stated "society". However, at no point did socio-cultural factors emerge as a spontaneous explanation for "slut" being gendered. A feminist explanation for the gendering of the term was mentioned briefly ("Because we live in a patriarchal society": Anne [women's group]), but triggered laughter among the other members and did not generate further discussion.

⁴The use of "and/or" in reference to appearance/behaviour is intentional. Discussants explicitly noted that both criteria need not occur for a woman to receive the "slut" label.

readily identifiable.

... *if we were all wearing turtlenecks... you can still point out who is the one that is the most easy* (women's group: Alex).

... *I grew up in a small town and... you know who the sluts are...* (mixed group: Larissa).

However, beyond this broad definition, participants were unable to provide exact qualities or specific examples of what constitutes "slutty" behaviour or a "sluttish" appearance. A "slut" is a woman who "has a lot of sex" (men's group: John), goes "from guy to guy" (women's group: Elizabeth), and is "easy" (men's group: Thor). Men perceive her as "someone... they can get stuff out of... really fast" (women's group: Alex). She "has no morals to do with sex" because "it's just an act; it's nothing with meaning" (women's group: Anne); she "lacks confidence" (women's group: Alex); and, although "considered, like, easy [doesn't] even care" (women's group: Elizabeth). She "needs attention [regardless] of whether it comes in a negative form or a positive form" (women's group: Kelsey) and has failed to "keep... a respectful reputation" (women's group: Claire).

The number of sex partners that constitutes too many (i.e., enough to make a woman a "slut") was indeterminate, with discussants using ambiguous language such as "[sleeping] with a *bunch* of guys" (men's group: Thor), "[having] *multiple* sexual partners" (mixed group: Derek), and "*constant* one night stands" (women's group: Kelsey). The implication was that unless she had a "steady" (women's group: Elizabeth) or "serious" (women's group: Alex) boyfriend, any woman—with the exception of the female discussants themselves—could potentially *become* a "slut".

In terms of appearance, the "slut" has "like, panties showing and stuff" (men's group: John); she dresses "really provocatively" and shows "a lot of skin" (men's group: Thor). She dresses "kind of, half... undecent [sic], let's say to go to school or to church" (mixed group: Sarah). The latter comment emphasises that the *context* in which a woman wears provocative attire is critical: in a situation where it is expected that women will "dress properly" (mixed group: Sarah), "you don't come... dressed in bar clothes" (mixed group: Larissa).

The "*slut*" label is *resistant to change*. Participants emphasised that it was extremely difficult for a woman to rid herself of the "slut" label.

She could probably get out of it, if she moves away, and starts over (mixed group: Brooklyn).

She could probably become a devout Christian or something for a couple years before anyone would start taking it [the desire to change her reputation] seriously (mixed group: Dave).

Changing the way she dresses and being involved in a "serious" relationship were also articulated as strategies that a "slut" might employ to alter the way she is perceived. However, discussants noted that, even a "serious" boyfriend may be insufficient "depending on how far you went as a slut beforehand" (women's group: Claire).

The "*slut*" as "*other*". Participants engaged in a unique process of constructing themselves in relation to the "slut." The "slut" was conceived of in a distinctly "Othered" way, both recognizable and recognizably "not me". It was noted that "almost everyone's been called one, even though you aren't one" (women's group: Claire). The broad application of the term as an insult is evident in the interplay between Larissa and Sarah (mixed group):

... *almost every girl always has something about her that you can just be...* (Sarah).

[interrupts] "*Oh, she's a slut*" (Larissa).

While a majority of female discussants asserted that "slut" was a ubiquitous insult and mentioned having used the term themselves, few reported ever being called a "slut". Further, discussants that had received this label noted emphatically that the term did not apply to them.

I have been [called a slut]... but... I'm not. I'm pretty conservative... I don't really sleep around, so I don't think I am (women's group: Elizabeth).

[Be]cause *I'm definitely not one* (women's group: Claire).

The ambiguity evident in how the term was defined was similarly echoed in the way female participants distanced themselves from the "slut" in terms of possessing "different morals" (women's group: Anne) and "different values" (women's group: Kelsey). The nature of these differences was not particularised.

3.2. Discussants' View of "the SlutWalk"

As noted earlier, one of the aims of the "SlutWalk" is to re-signify the word "slut". To contextualise this point, all discussants were given the example of the word "queer". It was regarded as an offensive word in the past; however, some members of non-heterosexual communities now refer to themselves as "queer" effectively

re-signifying the term. Discussants did not regard “slut” and “queer” as analogous. They viewed the latter in essentialist and agentic terms:

... if you're homosexual... that is what you are... you were born that way. But you weren't born a slut (women's group: Alex).

Given that “slut” and “queer” did not share “the same context” (men's group: Thor), it is not surprising that many believed the name, “SlutWalk”, would “have to be changed” (men's group: Thor)⁵ because it was “having a reverse effect” (women's group: Raelene). The title of the event “would stop people from... participating” (mixed group: Derek) because they would “not like to be associated with girls called sluts” (mixed group: Dave).

Limited support was evident for the “SlutWalk”. Most participants were unfamiliar with the event prior to watching the pre-discussion film, and found its purpose abstruse stating that they “didn't get it” (men's group: John) or “didn't know what it was about at all” (mixed group: Dave).

I don't really understand what they're trying to... like, just that it's okay to be a slut? Is that what they're walking for? (women's group: Elizabeth).

There was some clarification after watching the film, though several participants found the name unfitting for the content, calling it an “ambiguous title” (mixed group: Dave) and suggesting that they “[did not] assume it would be about sexual assault awareness” (men's group: John). Most participants thought the name was misleading or unclear because without any context it would seem that “they were walking for a different reason than what it actually means” (women's group: Alex). Many discussants, especially in the gender exclusive groups, thought the objectives of the event were not “clear enough to have... a whole walk” (women's group: Alex), suggesting the “SlutWalk” was a niche event that would “need to [become] a lot bigger to change the way people view sexuality” (men's group: Thor) and to engender public support. Those in the women's group, especially, were opposed to the “SlutWalk” on the grounds that it was “almost like a personal attack to the cop” (women's group: Raelene) who was just “trying to give good advice” (women's group: Alex).

What was particularly striking was the distance from which most participants held feminist activism about sexual assault awareness. Most participants “wouldn't judge somebody” (mixed group: Dave) for participating in the “SlutWalk”, but stated they would “probably not” (men's group: John) choose to join in. The main reason given for abstaining was that sexual assault was not an issue that had “really affected [them] personally” (men's group: Bob). In this way, sexual assault and a walk to promote awareness of it were framed as less important issues than others, such as cancer, which, “has a bigger impact on people”⁶ (men's group: John). The “SlutWalk”, then, was perceived as something that is not for the general public, but for those “who [have] a past with something that happened to them or a friend or close family member” (mixed group: Sarah) and who “believe in the cause” (women's group: Alex). It was also particularised as an event for “feminists” (men's group: Thor), who, paradoxically are not the sort of people who “really do dress like that [like a slut]... on a nightly basis” (men's group: Thor).

4. Discussion

The contradictions inherent in discussants' responses, especially those of female participants, denote the subtle and insidious way in which misogynist discourse operates publicly. The women in this study acknowledged the existence of the “slut” construct and recognized that a woman who carries the label is shunned. As well, they articulated the existence of a gendered double standard that affords men more sexual freedom than women. At the same time, they offered little resistance to the discourse surrounding the “slut” construct, relying on evolutionary explanations or contending “that's just how it is” (women's group: Anne). Despite the negativity that surrounds what it means to be a “slut”, female discussants almost universally denied that fear of the label played any sort of regulatory role with respect to their sexuality. Importantly, while most of the women in the study stated that they had been called a “slut” before, they all denied actually *being* one. By viewing themselves as individuals who could not be “sluts” because they do not engage in the sex-related behaviours that make one a “slut”—however, unclear those behaviours may be—or because they possess dissimilar “morals” or “values”, female

⁵Some discussants thought the name was novel and provocative: “a good way to catch the attention of the viewers” (mixed group: Derek).

⁶Perceived culpability also was raised as a potential explanation for why events focusing on illnesses such as cancer are more important than an event such as the “SlutWalk”: *...drawing from his example... the cancer thing... I think... the difference for that is, like, the SlutWalk... the woman who got affected by it... I guess she could have lowered her chances, in my opinion, [whereas] cancer you can't control* (men's group: John).

discussants were able to frame the “slut” in diametric terms.

The tendency to regard the “slut” as “Other” is consistent with the idea that the “slut” construct is a means by which women deflect negative attention away from the self and, in so doing, retain the possibility of being re-configured as “good girls” in the sexual realm (Attwood, 2007; Blackwell, 2004). Women’s complicity in the process of “othering” may be an example of the type of internalized misogyny that underlies women’s hostility toward those deemed “sluts” (Glick & Fiske, 1996; White, 2002). The distancing of the self from the “slut”, evidenced by the women in this study, may have been one reason accounting for its limited coercive or regulatory power. To put it simply, as these women were not “sluts,” they did not know what it felt like to *be* a “slut”. Their own distinction between being called a “slut” casually or sporadically and actually carrying that label suggests that none of them had been deemed a “slut” in the sense referred to by White (2002). Larissa, a participant in the mixed-gender group, admitted that “there’s always one girl that would beat you out... everybody called her the slut, so why would they care about you?” This distinction may help to explain why the women White (2002) interviewed expressed deep emotional scarring as a result of being “othered”, whereas the women in this study contended that the word has little power.

The confusion surrounding the operational definition of a “slut” is highlighted by the discourse participants used to describe her. The same term can apply to a woman who wears a miniskirt (a mildly “sluttish” behaviour, according to discussants) and one who breaks up someone’s marriage (an extremely “sluttish” behaviour). This broad application helps explain why there is little consensus on exactly who is and who is not a “slut”. The fact that the “slut” is indefinable is part of what makes it such an effective regulatory device. The ambiguity surrounding how to define a “slut” recalls White’s (White, 2002) assertion that the “slut” functions as a cultural myth that can be employed for a variety of purposes: acting as a cautionary tale, enforcing patriarchal values, and reinforcing a just world ideology.

Given the authors’ situated identities as feminists and proponents of sexual and gender freedom, with two of the authors also self-identifying as gay men, we were particularly struck by the discussants’ (apparent) lack of critical reflection and self-awareness. Gender homogeneous focus groups were conducted because it was assumed that men and women may talk about feminist politics differently depending on the composition of the group. However, there was little variability in response to the questions posed suggesting that, for many young people, feminist activism vis-à-vis sexual assault was not an issue they discussed or thought about routinely.

Rape culture is a social phenomenon that misrepresents both women’s and men’s sexuality by perpetuating the myths that women are complicit in their own sexual assault and men possess an inherently overwhelming sexual aggressiveness (Herman, 1989). Given how much is at stake in the societal representation of both masculinity and femininity, the lack of agency evidenced by participants was surprising. Female discussants did not express anger over gendered double standards, inequality, or victim-blaming, but rather seemed to evidence resignation. This seems to be indicative of a state of learned helplessness⁷ where discussants are unable to consider life as young women in the absence of “slut” discourse and, thus, contrasts strongly with much of the optimistic feminist scholarship surrounding the “SlutWalk” (e.g., Carr, 2013; McCormack & Prostran, 2012). The discussants in our study unanimously stated they would not participate in the “SlutWalk” suggesting they regard feminist political action of this sort as better suited to fringe groups than to the general public. Further, while all groups acknowledged that rape is “definitely not the [woman’s] fault” (men’s group: Thor)⁸, the women simultaneously minimised the police officer’s statement (“... it could have just been a slip of the tongue”: women’s group: Raelene) and appeared to agree with the officer’s central point (i.e., women “need to be careful how they convey themselves” [women’s group: Anne]). Given the reality that most women will either be or know someone who has been sexually assaulted (Ahrens et al., 2008), discussants’ claims that the issue does not affect them belie the fact that sexual assault is an issue that, in some way, touches all people.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted. First, focus groups were chosen with the goal of

⁷Learned helplessness refers to a perceived absence of control in situations where people (or animals) will eventually fail to respond, even if opportunities to improve one’s situation are available due to the belief that their behaviour and their situation are independent (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

⁸However, while acknowledging that victims were not to blame for sexual assault, some discussants contemporaneously noted that “sluts” make themselves more of a “target”:... *it’s not their fault, but they are kind of making themselves be more of a target when they act like that and they... dress like that* (men’s group: Thor).

observing the construction of meaning in a social context. However, in placing the focus on interaction between participants, this study may have inadvertently mitigated one of the key features of IPA, especially the detailed engagement with participants' lived experiences. By virtue of having multiple participants interviewed simultaneously, it was difficult to pointedly respond to each statement made by each individual in an effort to probe for more nuanced information. Second, although recruitment materials did not specifically use the term "SlutWalk", obtaining participants for this study was challenging. Since this study was conducted in a Canadian city that evidenced more conservative values, getting individuals to become involved in a discussion surrounding the "slut" discourse was difficult. As a result, the sample size for the male-only focus group was smaller than desired. Third, as with any self-report method, one must be cognisant that, to some degree, participants may be performing a persona in an effort to appeal to what they *perceive* the researcher wants, or to align with socially-appropriate norms. Participants also may act in a manner congruent with hegemonic masculinity and femininity (i.e., performing gender: e.g., Johnston & Morrison, 2007). In this case, due to the shame of carrying the "slut" label, it is possible that participants in a group setting would not want to admit to being recipients of this term.

To our knowledge, this is the first research study to focus specifically on how non-feminist university students conceptualise political action such as the "SlutWalk". As such, it offers a unique opportunity to advance knowledge in the area of public discourse surrounding the term "slut". Our findings suggest that discussants were unable to challenge the "slut" discourse suggesting that it remains entrenched among both men and women, which reinforces the necessity of feminist activism. However, the results also render the salient need for such activism to target more prototypic individuals (i.e., those outside the confines of feminist organisations, women and gender studies programmes, etc.).

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