THE POWER OF SLUT

The Power of ‘Slut’:
The Construction of ‘Slut’ and ‘Slut-Shaming’ in Contemporary Youth Culture

Cecilia Turnbull, BA

Child and Youth Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Faculty of Social Sciences, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

©
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 1

Abstract .................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: Hi I’m a Slut.................................................................................................. 1

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 1

Purpose of the study and research questions ....................................................................... 8

Theoretical Perspective ......................................................................................................... 10

Language and Power ............................................................................................................. 10

Panopticism and Internalized-Shame .................................................................................... 12

Discourse and Sexuality ........................................................................................................ 14

The Construction of Slut ....................................................................................................... 19

CHAPTER TWO: “What’s Love Got to do with it?” ............................................................... 24

Literature Review ................................................................................................................... 24

Defining Slut ........................................................................................................................... 24

Status and Class ...................................................................................................................... 29

Race and Internalized-Shame ............................................................................................... 32

The Ramifications of Race and Class in relation to Body Image ........................................ 36

Power and Resignification .................................................................................................... 39

And so what? ........................................................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology ........................................................................................ 44

Research Method and Paradigm ............................................................................................. 44

Method of Interviewing ......................................................................................................... 46
THE POWER OF SLUT

Sample and Recruitment ............................................................................................................. 48

Interview Questions and Questionnaire ...................................................................................... 49

Table 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ................................................................................................. 50

Table 2: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE .................................................................................... 51

Data Analysis ................................................................................................................................ 51

Consent, Ethics, and Other Possible Concerns ........................................................................... 53

Ethics Process ............................................................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER FOUR: Discussion .......................................................................................................... 57

So what is Slut? .............................................................................................................................. 57

But what does it all mean? ............................................................................................................. 61

Gender and Slut ............................................................................................................................ 70

Race and Slut ............................................................................................................................... 76

Class and Slut ............................................................................................................................... 81

Age and Slut ................................................................................................................................ 85

Slut-Shaming and Self-Respect .................................................................................................... 87

Respect and Self-esteem ................................................................................................................. 91

Resignification vs. Normalization ............................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER FIVE: Concluding Thoughts ......................................................................................... 100

Limitations and Future Research ............................................................................................... 100

Gender Fluidity and LGBTQ ....................................................................................................... 101

Religion ....................................................................................................................................... 102

‘Fuckboy’ and Male Culture ........................................................................................................ 103
Acknowledgements

There are many people to thank for finishing this thesis in one piece…well mostly. I would like to thank my family for nodding and smiling every time I brought up feminist poststructuralism; I thank my friends for their skeptical support; I would like to thank my wonderful committee members, Dr. Rebecca Raby and Dr. Jenny Janke, who were exceptional in their constructive feedback, readings, and advice, and most importantly I have to thank my primary adviser Dr. Shauna Pomerantz for her patience and compassion over the countless hours of edits, frustrations, and successes. This experience has been overwhelmingly amazing, and I feel fortunate to have worked with so many talented people. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
Abstract

My thesis employs a feminist poststructural framework to understand the meaning and use of the term ‘slut’ and its connection to ‘slut-shaming’ in contemporary youth culture, specifically in relation to the Niagara region. I argue that the term slut is used as a way to police women’s sexuality, and its use and meaning vary depending on gender, ‘race’ and class. The importance of this study is in connection to sexual violence against women, and the complex ways that derogatory language shapes how people view women in relation to sexual violence. Women and men help maintain and perpetuate the term’s harmful meaning, however, the literature suggests the term may have empowering aspects for women and it may be resignified or changed to have more positive meaning. This resignification differs based on a person’s gender, ‘race’, class, etc. and the intersections between them, with women from different cultures noting that the term cannot always be reclaimed based on historical and cultural associations (Armstrong et al., 2014; Mowatt et al., 2013). Findings from my interviews suggest conflicting notions over what the definition of a slut is and its connection to ‘shame’. Most participants felt it was primarily young, white women who used the term against each other, and while some used the term in a playful manner, they did not believe it could be reclaimed as something empowering.

---

1 ‘Women’ is being used as a more broad scope rather than to say girls, young women and then women, as adults and youth may, at times, refer to youth as young adults or young women and men.
Slut
(Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online)

1 chiefly British: a slovenly woman

2 a: a promiscuous woman; especially: PROSTITUTE
   b: a saucy girl: MINX

-sluttish \textit{adjective}\n
-sluttishly \textit{adverb}\n
-sluttishness \textit{noun}\n
-slutty \textit{adjective}\n
CHAPTER ONE: Hi I’m a Slut…

Introduction

“No now I know I’m going off, but [slut-shaming] is a form of black magic, because they’re sending curses at [girls]. The curse word is slut… ‘slut, slut, slut, whore, whore, whore’ over and over and over again…it is a psychological attack.” Dani, one of the male participants in my study, caused the words to ring in my mind. While not all people see the term slut as an insult or think of it as a destructive tool or practice, the repetition of the words in Dani’s quote suggest that ‘slut’ is a term that calls for action. The term slut stands out to me, because it is used frequently, yet has no definitive meaning and is shrouded in ambiguity. Dani’s words remind me of the consequence of language, and what makes this research hard for me is that I have witnessed its destructive nature as a punishment for expressing female sexuality. Women close to me have felt its painful effects: friends, family, myself.

In doing this research, I was reminded of the first time a friend told me she was raped. She used words like ‘dirty’ and ‘ashamed’ to describe how she felt about herself -the same terms we associate with the word slut. I wish I could say that was the only time a woman or man told me their experience of being sexually assaulted, that this was not a common occurrence in the lives of my friends, but it was just the first.

In the stories I have heard, the word slut, or more often, associated synonyms and meanings appear repeatedly. Slut permeates Western culture as a reminder that women have only the privilege of, and not simply the right to, sexual freedom. A landmark incident in Toronto exemplifies these shifting, complex, and incomprehensible borders. In 2011, Canadian police officer Michael Sanguinetti made this now infamous statement during a ‘personal safety’ visit to York University: “You know, I think we’re beating around the bush here… I’ve been told I’m
not supposed to say this – however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised” (Ringrose & Renold, 2012, p. 334). The inflammatory statement initiated an outcry from women appalled by the police officer’s blatant victim-blaming and ignorance regarding rape culture (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). What is of particular note is the officer’s use of the term slut. Sanguinetti does not specify what he classifies as a slut, or what it is to look like a slut. Rather, he employs a common sense understanding of the word. However, the term by definition has nothing to do with clothing; it is suggestive of promiscuous behaviour, and to be promiscuous is not indicative of a stylistic choice. It is imperative to look at the way this term is used as it perpetuates myths surrounding rape culture that suggest how a woman may dress is tantamount to ‘asking for it’.

Women from the Muslim community were especially angered by the officer’s comment, stating: “no-one should fall victim to harassment, like sexual harassment or any sort of intimidation whether it be from, like, a police officer for wearing a hoody, or if it’s from, like, someone on the street who doesn’t like the way a woman in a hijab or a niqab looks, like no one should be victimised for this” (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013, p. 213). As many women were similarly quoted as saying, it should not matter what a woman wears, or how she acts – nothing justifies sexual assault. Slut is not a baseless term, and the officer’s use of it was built on social values that imply that ‘immoral’ sexual behaviour is and should be punishable for women. This critique calls into question not only the way we treat women, but how we treat women in minority groups and those of differing socio-economic backgrounds. The critique highlights how a single term, such as slut, can have a powerful impact on people’s lives, and how language is linked to, and productive of, action.
Officer Sanguinetti’s inflammatory statement led to an international movement known as ‘SlutWalk’, in which people of all ages come together to march against slut-shaming and victim-blaming. The Toronto SlutWalk website offers numerous reasons why this movement has taken place. It chiefly argues that the Toronto Police Service, whose job it is to protect victims of crimes, “had put the responsibility of sexual assault where it didn’t belong and were continuing to spread myths and stereotypes about who is sexually assaulted and why, and this is nothing new” (“SlutWalk Toronto,” n.d.). Clearly, systematic sexual violence against women is rooted in our culture (Asencio, 1999; Mowatt et al., 2013). SlutWalk in the GTA had thousands of attendees of all genders, ‘races’, class locations, and physical abilities come together to support women’s right not to be blamed for being assaulted or harassed.

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines the term slut as, “a promiscuous woman, a slovenly woman, a saucy girl” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online), and some of the synonyms provided are: minx, bimbo, tramp, whore, and prostitute. One relatively unknown synonym is quean, meaning “one that is young or unmarried” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online). While this term will not be analyzed in my thesis, it helps shed light on how the term slut intersects with youth. However, according to Urban Dictionary, an online resource where the public can provide information on any given term or statement, the definition that was ‘upvoted’ the most was, “a woman with the morals of a man” (Urban Dictionary). Not only does this identify the sexual mores that men and women face, but it also illustrates the sexual double standard. Having sex is deemed ‘natural’ for men, but for women it is seen as risky behaviour if done the ‘wrong’ way, in too much quantity outside of an established relationship, for pleasure rather than procreation, or even if it is just perceived to be happening whether it is or not. The term slut is thus used to demean girls and women and their sexuality based on arbitrary links to
clothing, number of sexual partners, attitude, and even the way a woman does her hair. These links are based on deeper societal values relating to body image, gender, ‘race’, and class that have been normalized as part of the sexualisation of women, which occurs most predominantly within Western society (Armstrong et al., 2014; Attwood, 2007; Dow & Wood, 2014; Mowatt, French & Malebranche, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014).

The term slut is used in various contexts, with shifting meanings, and some girls and women are eager to transform this term from problematic to empowering, as depicted in these excerpts from Dow and Wood (2014) and Ringrose and Renold (2014). The first excerpt from Dow and Wood, shows an association with prostitutes and the word slut, and the attending quality of shame: “Women apparently feel that the new frontier of empowerment hinges on their ability to dress like brothel workers” (Dow & Wood, 2014, p. 22). This participant was suggesting that SlutWalks, and having girls call each other slut, perpetuates the sexualisation of women. In this next example, however, Natalia, interviewed by Ringrose and Renold, calls herself and her friend sluts as a way of challenging the term’s sexist meaning, making it something of a celebration: “She’s my whore and I’m her slut. Whatever. Get over it!” (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p. 774). Unfortunately, the predominant usage of the term slut has been negative and has led to a phenomenon known as ‘slut-shaming’. ‘Slut-shaming’ is when the term slut (and numerous synonyms) is used in a derogatory way that is meant to shame women and police their sexuality. This shaming and policing occurs through harassment and violence from both young men and women, making it an essential part of understanding youth culture (Armstrong et al., 2014; Dow & Wood, 2014; Lim & Fanghanel, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2012).
In this thesis, I focus on how youth use the term slut within their peer groups, exploring how the term helps to maintain the dichotomous views of sexuality placed on young men and women. However, while the term is typically injurious, literature also explores how young women fight back against this oppressive language and seek to reclaim the term as a positive force. For example, we have recently seen a collective resistance to slut-shaming vis-à-vis internationally organized ‘SlutWalks’. SlutWalks have now become a framework of resistance globally as women seek to reclaim the word slut so it does not have an intrinsic link to shame. As part of the protest, participants are encouraged to wear clothing that is revealing and provocative – to dress like a slut (Dow & Wood, 2014). This form of activism has not been an easy process and has been met with scholarly and popular backlash, because the walks still tend to portray women in a sexualized manner. Even some youth have a problem with the name SlutWalk. As one participant, Nadiyah, suggested, “even if a girl was to go out wearing a crop top and small shorts and heels – big, plastic heels and whatever it is you think – doesn’t make that woman a slut at all, so I don’t know why this is a ‘SlutWalk’” (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013, p. 213). The comment suggests that labelling oneself a slut only perpetuates the idea that wearing those types of clothes justifies being labelled a slut, and does not rectify the term’s problematic connection to provocative outfits.

An early goal of SlutWalk was to have women wearing their everyday clothing chanting the refrain ‘this is what a slut looks like’ as a way to mock the insinuation that girls who dress a certain way are ‘asking for it’ (Dow & Wood, 2014; Lim & Fanghanel, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). But at the same time the protesters argue that they should be able to wear whatever they want, because their bodies are not sexual objects and a body cannot ‘ask’ for something on its own. The conflict between whether or not the movement positively or
negatively influences women’s empowerment has created various off-shoots, including ‘Hijabs, Hoodies and Hotpants’ that target associations between violence and clothing, many of which are deeply rooted in oppressive stereotypes of ‘race’ and class (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013).

‘Race’ and class are crucial to this discussion of language, because such social contexts change how the term slut is mobilized. For example, at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) in the summer of 2013, Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke danced and sang his summer hit “Blurred Lines”. During the performance, Cyrus twerked ‘provocatively’, rubbing up against Thicke. Following the performance Thicke and Cyrus received criticism suggesting their performance was ‘disgusting’, racist, and sexually explicit (see Lewis, 2013; Pomerantz, 2013; Wade, 2013). It is important to take into consideration where this criticism was directed and who received most of the disapproval. The criticism was most heavily cast at Cyrus as the media centered on the idea that she had turned into a ‘bad girl’ because she wanted to shed her ‘good girl’ Hannah Montana persona, and did this most distinctively by appropriating hip-hop culture (Lewis, 2013).

I use this controversy as a backdrop to the literature, as it illustrates that how we define an individual’s sexuality is intrinsically linked to socially generated constructions of gender, ‘race’, and class. This example is powerfully illustrative of the sexual double standard when examining the gendered differences in criticism for each performer. It points to the importance of intersections between gender, ‘race’, and class, as Cyrus was accused of appropriating black culture and performing dance moves seen as too risqué for a young white girl (Lewis, 2013). Moreover, her upper class status played a larger part in how people expected her to perform, as she used to be a ‘good girl’ from a good home and, “Oh what would her father have to say about that!” (Buckland, 2013, n.p.).
However, while Cyrus took most of the heat for that performance, she was also protected from the fallout because of her celebrity status, and because she is a young, rich, white woman. Her status as a celebrity allowed her to break social conventions and come back from those criticisms a little shaken, but not ousted from her pop star status (Ares, 2010). This ability to come back from such a controversy – and even increase in popularity - suggests that “youth who posses [sic] differing amounts of social capital that is especially valued within the dominant society will be at a disadvantage in the assertion of their agency” (Ares, 2010, online). Girls and women who have less social status are not allowed the same freedoms or given the same latitude as Cyrus. Cyrus’s age was also a factor; others saw her as young and vulnerable in the music industry, and she was chastised because her actions were thought to be rebellious (Lewis, 2013; Newstex). As a youth, Cyrus is given certain freedom to explore her sexual subjectivity.

Cyrus is not the first celebrity to make a spectacle of her body. The difference in her performance is that it not only evokes the dichotomy of good girl/bad girl, or the ‘Madonna/Whore’ binary that suggests a woman can be either virginal or promiscuous (Armstrong et al., 2014; Attwood, 2007; Garcia, 2009), but also calls into question how Western culture perceives masculinity and maleness. These distinctions account for the backlash directed towards Cyrus rather than her older, male partner, Thicke, contributing to the belief that when men perform provocatively it is linked to sexual prowess and not something ‘disgusting’ or ‘unnatural’ (Armstrong et al., 2014; Garcia, 2009). Cyrus thus became the ‘good girl gone bad’, losing some respect once afforded to her as a Disney royal. This incident exemplifies how men continue to be positively hypersexualized, while women continue to be branded sluts for exhibiting sexual desire or even just that they have a sexuality (Armstrong et al., 2014; Attwood, 2007; Garcia, 2009; Lim & Fanghanel, 2013).
The controversy over the performance of Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke demonstrates the double standards of gender, sex, and sexuality that permeate youth culture in the West. Such double standards have a complex effect on youth in relation to the rewards and punishments assigned to gender, sex, and sexuality norms (Armstrong et al. 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). It is difficult to define these norms, as they are contextual, however, they are rooted in historical concepts of morality that place white, heterosexual, monogamous relationships above any other relationship.

**Purpose of the study and research questions:**

With this context as the backdrop for my study, the concept of ‘slut-shaming’ and the discourses that surround the term slut become both complex and malleable. It is not possible to assume slut is a baseless term that can be thrown into a conversation without impact. Slut has a distinct force and has become part of the fabric of our everyday culture. My thesis questions take on their own ambiguous shape, because they must incorporate the fluidity of the term slut and also the power and impact of ‘slut-shaming’. As injurious as the term slut is, it is also fluid and shifting, subject to resistance and re-appropriation, and necessarily complicated by intersections of gender, ‘race’, and class. My research questions thus ask: What is the discursive power of the term slut? What meanings and power does this term have in contemporary Canadian youth culture? And more specifically, what meaning and power does it have in relation to young women’s sexual subjectivity? In my literature review, I examine how the definition of slut has evolved over time, and the underlying discourses that surround the term. I also look at the resulting ‘slut-shaming’ that is, and always has been, common in Western culture. I aim to identify the components, such as gender, ‘race’, and class, with which the term slut is linked, as well as the deeper heteronormative understanding of sexuality that sustains its power.
Slut-shaming is potentially dangerous and can result in the justification of violence, specifically sexual harassment and sexual assault. It can be used to ‘take down’ women in positions of power, and also creates circumstances where girls and women do not see themselves as sexual beings, or subjects, that are capable of desire and embracing pleasure. If we refuse to take these issues seriously, they threaten to undermine the safety of young women (as well as men) and trivialize their rights. Daiute and Fine (2003) argue that gaining a youth perspective is necessary in order to think critically about how violence runs through young people’s lives, particularly in relation to intersecting identity categories, such as ‘race’, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality. While slut-shaming is embedded within youth culture, this does not mean youth are without agency, and as Daiute and Fine state, “youth critique the very institutions and practices that adults take for granted and question those behaviors, institutions, policies, and practices that seem most natural in mainstream adult society” (p. 3). Gaining the perspective of youth is key when examining the issue of ‘slut-shaming’ because it is largely (though not exclusively) happening within youth culture.

Youth culture is not a part of all societies, and like the concepts of ‘childhood’ and ‘teenagehood’, is contextual and typically appears where “significant realms of social autonomy for young people become regularized and expected features of the socializing process” (“Youth Culture”, 2004, n.p.). Youth, as defined by the UN, is a period in between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood (UN). It has been distinguished between fifteen and twenty-four years of age, but however it may be defined, the term ‘youth’ is shifting and fluid and cannot be rigidly placed within those age markers. Youth culture has been seen to create and maintain not just cultures to which youth subscribe and engage, but subcultures within youth culture, such as we see in contemporary times with punks, skateboarders, ‘hipster’s,’
‘valley girls,’ etcetera. Youth culture is the way adolescents live, including shared sets of norms, values, and practices (Hodkinson, 2007). These values can at times be misunderstood and often criticized based on fear, misunderstanding, and the policing of the status quo. The policing of gender, ‘race’, class, sexuality, and age play a large part in the construction and disparagement of youth culture and the discourses that young people practice and co-create (Ares, 2010; Hodkinson, 2007).

My thesis explores the attitudes of young people in relation to the slut label and the intersection between ‘race’, gender, and class. It highlights how youth perpetuate and maintain repressive cultural norms through their language and actions in co-construction with one another.

**Theoretical Perspective**

**Language and Power**

My thesis engages a feminist poststructural framework that enables me to examine links between slut, the concept of ‘slut-shaming’, and youth culture. Within this context, I will explore how language produces and reproduces ‘truth’, as well as the young female subject (Foucault, 1982). Feminist poststructuralism is a theoretical framework that seeks to identify underlying structures of oppression through the social construction of gender. My focus in this thesis is thus language and discourse, and how these elements entwine to formulate particular kinds of subjects with varying degrees of power. In this thesis, power is defined through a Foucauldian lens.

French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1982) defines power as relational, circulating, and intrinsically linked to knowledge: “what characterizes the power we are analyzing is that it brings into play relations between individuals (or between groups). For let us not deceive ourselves; if we speak of the structures of the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others” (p. 786). For Foucault, power is
productive and highlights the way people are able to construct meaning together, specifically through the production of knowledge, which has an inherent link to language.

Language is a system of signs, which, in turn, produces knowledge and the circulation of power. For example, Susan Ehrlich (2004) explores the discursive nature of language within the court system, and how the court system employs the same understandings of social norms as anywhere else. In fact, because social norms are embedded within social institutions, the court system not only employs, but also instigates and perpetuates these norms. Thus, the outcome of a case can be dictated by underlying discourses of gender, ‘race’ and class. In the case of class, the courts use language that is ‘white collar’ or highly educated (legalese, for instance), which excludes those who do not understand this speech (Ehrlich, 2004). This type of exclusion can also be seen when we examine the school system as a white androcentric institution. It is clear that the curricula within that system operate using a language that is often masculinized and common to those who are white, middle-class, and heterosexual - in other words those who are privileged. This language has the power to exclude marginalized groups in formal and informal ways. Language is thus continuously reproduced to further a system of oppression that works to keep this gap between those who are privileged and those who are marginalized. Institutions such as the school system, marginalize minority groups by continuing to use repressive speech that is not inclusive of multiple cultures or genders (Russo & Hassink, 2012; Lei, 2003). Language is then centered on maintaining binary oppositions to uphold and normalize present power structures.

Using a circulating Foucauldian understanding of power in this thesis, I focus on how language is employed and deployed in relation to young women’s sexuality vis-à-vis peer cultures. As power is formed and regulated through language, discourse takes shape (St. Pierre,
Discourses are systems of thought that construct subjects, actions, and beliefs. Discourses are social, historical, and cultural stories that create truth and enable or constrain what an individual can say or do (Foucault, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000). Discourse is an extension of language in that it is about language, but also how certain ways of thinking and talking take on the guise of truth and are crystalized into practices and effects. Discourse is invisible, as they are embedded in everyday actions, speech, behaviour, and institutionalized norms. They are then reinforced through repeated acts of surveillance and inculcated performativity (Butler, 1990). While the social realm operates through multiple ‘discursive fields’, a concept Foucault engages to mean the “competing ways of giving meaning to the world of organizing social institutions and processes” (Weedon, 1987, p. 35), there are some institutions that are given more weight than others for example, psychiatry and the law. Law especially contributes to the balance of power between men and women and other marginalized groups.

Panopticism and Internalized-Shame

Surveillance is a powerful force that works on individuals at different levels of subjectivity. This force maintains itself through social agents, such as peers or institutions, but also through internalized surveillance. Even when no one is present an individual may still follow social norms because these norms are engrained within them at the subconscious level. This subliminal force is reflected in Foucault’s (1995) concept of the Panopticon, a prison complex designed by Jeremy Bentham, in which the prison is an annular building with a tower at the center. One supervisor in this central tower watches over the inmates, who are isolated in individual cells. The guard can see all the inmates and survey what they do, but the inmates are not able to see the guard, never knowing if someone is actually watching them from the tower or not. The design was built to create a feeling of constant surveillance:
To induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault, 1995, p. 201)

Without knowing when a guard might be watching, the inmates survey themselves without the need for a guard. This concept is akin to the social pressure we may feel daily that propels us to act a certain way to please, at times, an unknown force or presence. I argue that surveillance of our behaviour, including our own constant self-surveillance, is based on discourses that reflect power relations and shape the behaviour in which we think we should engage, which reproduces the same discourses. These power imbalances come from the maintenance of behaviours that are deemed acceptable and others that are not, such as the pressure to look a certain way or to speak a certain way. These pressures come from discourses that have been repeatedly enforced by different structures and institutions. Take, for example, the school system that is dominated by a white androcentric, middle-class curriculum (Lei, 2003). The language we use is a part of a social system in which power is held through cultural norms and customs that favour androcentric views as well as capitalist ideals that withhold opportunities from various minority groups. We can think about this when talking about the term slut in which men are most often glorified for their sexual experiences and women are vilified, producing a double standard.

Femininity and masculinity are social constructions that people follow in order to conform to cultural norms, and these codes are engrained in our social world and thus performative. Butler’s (1999) concept of performativity focuses on the way language, cultural practices, and ingrained behaviours all create and reinforce gender norms. Performativity is an active practice, rather than something innate or natural: “gender is something that individuals do – in part
through linguistic choices – as opposed to something that individuals *are* or *have*.” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 304).

**Discourse and Sexuality**

Gender performativity is not simply a performance of gender, as if one is on a stage, but the discursive ‘doing’ of gender day-to-day, moment-to-moment. Butler (1999) describes performativity as something that happens even before we are born. A child is not naturally inclined toward gendered differences, but we create these differences and teach them to our children, (who in turn maintain and police them within their respective peer groups) whether consciously or subconsciously by what we wear, how we talk, and the way we interact with others. Gender is thus discursive and relies on relations between people to make and hold meaning. A term such as slut holds meaning because large numbers of people participate in its construction and perpetuation and, thus, its discursive production.

Foucault (1990) argues that sex has been put into discourse -that through historical events, circumstances, and rituals, society deems there to be a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way to behave sexually. These norms have been constructed through an active repression, not just of sex, but also of people as sexual beings. Foucault, in fact, is not suggesting that sexuality is repressed, but that we have imbued it with power to act as a form of repression. The repression of sexuality is a productive force that conflates sexual knowledge with power. Sexual knowledge is then both freedom and oppression depending on who uses it. This dichotomous repression is so heavily ensconced in our culture that in order to break away from the tradition of shaming one’s sexuality there must be “nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an interruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power” (Foucault, 1990, p. 5). In this argument, Foucault and I are in accord,
because to re-appropriate language to suit the needs of women, in this case the term slut, would be to offer a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power. This however, is not something easily achieved, as I discuss in chapter four. To ‘transgress laws’ is to work for the people who are at most risk. It is about lifting prohibitions that only serve to elevate one’s sexuality or gender over another, in this case the masculine over the feminine (or more specifically a certain type of masculine over a certain type of feminine).

Understanding how terms are used within particular social contexts can uncover deeper social structures that perpetuate heteronormative, androcentric ideals in Western society. To understand a term is to understand its history, power, and social weight within a given context. As Weedon (1987) explains, feminist poststructuralism seeks to understand power relations within the social realm, using poststructural concepts and themes, such as language, social processes, institutions, and subjectivity as a way to identify strategies that can lead to change. This drive for change is supported by St. Pierre (2000), who explores language through a poststructural lens and speaks about the importance of deconstruction, not as a means of tearing down, but of rebuilding. Feminist poststructuralism is thus about tracing and reinscribing language to understand a term like slut - it must be critically analyzed to unearth the discourses and practices that hold it in place.

**Feminist Poststructuralism and Intersectionality**

A central goal of feminist poststructuralism is change; it is the critical focus and dedicated reconstructing of power relations through language and discourse that enables the reworking of terms, concepts, and beliefs that maintain gender oppression (St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Analyzing how gender is constructed through language and discourse has potential to bring about strategies that might foster changes to the gender hierarchy and the status quo. As Weedon
(1987) suggests, “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense or ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (p. 21). It is through language – broadly defined – that we construct and interpret the world; and it is through language that we shape not only ourselves, but also those around us.

Feminist poststructuralism is made up of two theoretical traditions: feminism and poststructuralism. Feminism is concerned with the way women and girls are oppressed vis-à-vis multiple and intersecting power structures. Feminism works toward dismantling gender binaries between men and women (Butler, 1999; Lorber & Farrell, 1991). In Butler’s (1983) view, people ‘perform’ gender “as a strategy of survival” (p. 522) and this performance has consequences that are positive or punitive. This view also goes back to the idea of surveillance, which is part of these strategies; gender performativity is a dynamic force that is co-constructed between individuals (Foucault, 1995). At early ages, boys and girls look to each other to understand the consequences of their behaviour, so that the way someone behaves is either positively reinforced through praise or negatively through punishment, and this can happen in different forms: inclusion/exclusion, praise/slander, loving touch/abuse. Girls and boys survey each other and themselves for what they deem ‘appropriate’ behaviour, which will either help or harm their social status (Lorber & Farrell, 1991).

Changes in gender performativity can happen in various ways, such as through the deconstruction of language, as language is used to create stable meanings for man/woman, boy/girl, male/female, and masculinity/femininity, which in turn have the effect of stabilizing gender norms. Butler (1999) articulates that ‘race’ and gender are so intricately linked that they must be read through overlapping lenses, and that the sexualization of racialized gender norms
“illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis” (p. 95). Hill Collins (2012) examines the importance of intersectionality within the discussion of ‘race’ and power. She analyzes how the intersection between gender, ‘race’, class and other such aspects is essential to building a better understanding of certain theoretical perspectives. Hill Collins highlights the idea of ‘community’ and that one way to identify with the aspects of community living and the “social inequalities of everyday life” (p. 445) is to examine intersectionality. ‘Race’ cannot be discussed separately from social class and gender as that would neglect the differences in the social and gendered divisions of labour and lifestyle.

The concept of intersectionality is further supported by Twine and Steinbugler (2006), who look at interracial intimacy and racial literacy through the intersection between gender and ‘race’ and how individuals learn to decipher racial codes. Their study found that awareness differed across the families they interviewed; for example, the relationship between Maureen who is white, and her partner Leslie, who is black. The difficulties this couple faced are twofold, as they are an interracial and homosexual couple, creating a complex dynamic oppression. They were already working within a pre-existing minority (either as interracial or lesbian) and were then placed within a further category by adding either homosexuality or interracial coupling (Twine & Steinbugler, 2006).

With the poststructural shift to deconstructing gender, feminism is concerned with all power inequalities and hierarchies. People are persecuted through rigid constructions of intersecting identity categories, such as, women and men of colour, working-class or impoverished women and men, and women and men who are marginalized in other ways regarding sexuality, nationhood, language, age, etcetera. (Mowatt et al., 2013). Certain feminisms are also focused on the pressures and problematic discourses that structure
masculinity and femininity as binary, unitary, and incontrovertibly ‘natural’ identities, preventing men from expressing and thus positively developing emotions or traits that are deemed ‘feminine’ or ‘girly’ (Ascensio, 1999; Flood, 2013; Weedon, 1987).

The limitations that gender places on people prevent social change. These limitations can imprison us in rules or norms of gender, closing us off from critical insights that enable us to question the system of power that benefits some and disadvantages others. In gaining this critical insight we are able to see how gender is dynamic and is neither positive nor negative, but constructed through discourses that have powerful effects. The term slut is a powerful example of how language constructs and maintains oppressive truths about gender that go unchallenged in peer youth cultures. When used a certain way and by certain people, slut reduces young women to sexual objects rather than elevating them to sexual subjects by confining, policing, and negatively constructing their sexual identity (Attwood, 2007; Dow & Wood, 2014). Interestingly in current practices, the term’s use is supposedly playful, and meant to empower women’s sexuality through its positive and fun usage between women (Raby, 2009; Ringrose & Renold 2014). As I mentioned above, the way Natalia and her friend call each other ‘sluts’ is an act of resilience (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). However, through a feminist poststructural lens, slut can be analyzed as part of dominant structures of gender oppression that engage a “tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders” (Butler, 1983, p. 522). The construction of gender is maintained through social compulsions and one’s own beliefs (Butler, 1990). If we think back to the concepts of panopticism and surveillance, our behaviours are monitored from the day we are born, or even before. These behaviours are based on the interactions with our parents, peers, and society-at-large. Our behaviour is discursively shaped, with and without thought, it is something we do while thinking, but it is also beyond surface
thought it is an action and a doing that feels ‘innate’. A feminist poststructural framework emphasizes the social construction of gender as well as ‘race’, sexuality and class, and how subjectivity is contingent upon intersectional contexts among these constructions.

The Construction of Slut

In examining the intersectionality of youth subjectivity, it is important to investigate the various institutional contexts that shape gender, ‘race’, and class, such as the school and media. This is the kind of analysis upon which poststructuralism is based; it is a theoretical framework that seeks to explore the structure of social institutions and their maintenance through language (Weedon, 1987). Language constructs truth, and Foucault (1990) would argue that the way we use it shapes reality. It is not a mere copy of what we see, but in fact constructs what we see and how we perceive it. It can be deceptive, as Foucault (1990) examines in his writing on the history of sexuality, in that the idea of repression is claimed to be ‘freedom’ from sexual desire. Foucault argues for the right to “sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to speak about it” (p. 6). The last line is crucial to my thesis, because it is not just the act of sex that some women are fighting for, but the ability to talk openly and critically about sexuality and how it affects sexual identity (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013).

Girls and women are imbricated in the production of knowledge; they use language that causes oppression, and are also the victims of it. They have the ability to produce knowledge and maintain status, while also using knowledge to tear down others, an important practice that will be discussed further in chapters two and four. It is important that the discussion of sexuality incorporate the language used by and against women to address the social codes and structures that surround them. If we examine these structures in connection to panopticism, we can consider shame as internalized surveillance, and see that it is active in the way women police each other’s
behaviour. Gender norms are engrained in young women’s everyday lives, and if anyone forgets
these social codes, a simple utterance of slut reminds them that they are always being watched.
Power circulates through knowledge and language and thus the term slut is embedded within
discourses that must be understood in relation to power. I explore how the term manifests within
youth culture, though it is constructed and circulated well beyond, and what criteria, if any, are
needed for its use. In so doing, I seek to find underlying themes in the language that have been
constructed to suit specific institutional needs. “Meanings do not exist prior to their articulation
in language and language is not an abstract system, but it is always socially and historically
located in discourses” (Weedon, 1987, p. 41). Without language, there is no meaning attributed
to things and people; it is through language that meaning and knowledge about a subject are
established, and words are rooted in societal discourses that represent underlying politics within
that social system. Specifically, for terms such as slut, meaning is appropriated as a strategy of
oppression (Tanenbaum, 2000).

While it may seem as though power is an omnipresent entity, something outside of a
person’s control that leaves little room for agency, many scholars would disagree, as is evident in
Dow and Wood’s (2014) analysis of the ‘SlutWalk’ movement. Through a poststructural lens,
agency is not the sign of a centred, rational, and autonomous individual, but is rather connected
to subjectivity and the imbrication of a subject within broader socio-cultural systems (St. Pierre,
2000). A subject must understand how they have been subjected in order to enact discursive
agency in a situation (Butler, 1997). While feminist scholar Jessica Valenti pronounced that the
SlutWalk is “the future of feminism… the most successful feminist action of the past 20 years”
(Dow & Wood, 2014, p. 22), other feminists felt it did not adequately account for different
‘races’, cultures, and classes. But perhaps it is not the actions of these youth that matter so much
as the conversation they invoke (Pomerantz, 2013). The label slut is not just applied to a girl because she sleeps around, but a girl who displays sexuality that challenges the gender binary. The way one utilizes the term is dynamic and changes based on the speaker’s needs. A young woman may be labeled a slut based on her status in the school, her class, her ‘race’, or in comparison to other young women, and yet other more positive possibilities abound, where young women might use the term to their advantage (Raby, 2009).

Butler (1999) examines subversive citation through drag: by “imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (p. 112). Drag implicitly states that appearance is an illusion and that a person in drag is able to create dissonance between sex and gender, and also gender and performance, so that the three appear within one body as unified. Such ‘gender trouble’ is a way of mocking the unity of sex and gender and suggesting that such unity is always performative, making it a ‘gender parody’ (Butler 1999). In this parody, there is a loss of what is seen as ‘the normal’ and ‘normal’ is thus revealed to be a failed copy and an ideal that no one can attain. Butler (1999) states that “if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (p. 111). Thus, discourse is peeled back to reveal multi-layers and just as the term slut is a performance inscribed upon the female body, it shows that how we make meaning is always contextual.

My study explores these layers within youth culture. As slut is a dynamic term that shifts in meaning based on context, it calls for a critical lens that speaks to the concept of gender specifically, but also the intersection between gender, sexuality, ‘race’, and class. It is imperative when examining socio-cultural phenomena to analyze the language that produces it, as language
holds recursive power, and through this power produces and reproduces meaning and identity. The term slut is ideal for feminist poststructural analysis if we are to understand its power in youth culture. It is also critical in this discussion to think about the intersections between ‘race’, class, and gender, and the ways some benefit from the system more than others.
Slut
(Urban Dictionary)

Top Definition

A woman with the morals of a man
Defining Slut

In this literature review, I explore how the term slut is maintained within Western youth culture, and how this gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed term creates forms of social exclusion and power. I look at what needs, such as status, are met through the application of this term, and for what purpose. I also explore how the word slut, in combination with the act of ‘slut-shaming’, has led to the problematic devaluing of women’s sexual agency to the point that it has also become a form of internalized shaming. The literature review addresses how the term slut is rooted in constructions of gender, ‘race’, and class. I discuss underlying themes in the language, highlighting how the term slut is used to maintain power imbalances that suit Western culture’s gender hierarchy.

To understand the concept of ‘slut-shaming’ it is important to look at how the term slut has been defined, and in order to do that the term itself must be broken into its two underlying terms: ‘slut’ and ‘shame’. What is clear in the attempts to categorize someone as a slut is that the definition is always ambiguous. Historically, the term slut or ‘sluttish’ was used in the fourteenth century, as a reference to both men and women being dirty or untidy (Attwood, 2007). It has since been reformed and associated with women exclusively as a means of degradation. Consequently, the term is “for women who did not accept the double standard of society” (Attwood, 2007, p. 233). Slut is a product of the ‘Madonna/Whore’ binary that reduces women’s subjectivity to a sexual value (Attwood, 2007; Asencio, 1999). Virginity is seen as an ever-present entity that, once removed, leaves a woman tainted and her power or status significantly reduced, and the value of her status is also dependent on her ‘race’ and class. Labelling a woman a slut has a significant influence on her subjectivity. This influence can impact both her
reputation and the way she thinks about herself. Jessica Valenti (2009) explores how this influence shapes a person’s subjectivity in her work on ‘The Purity Myth’, which examined how girls’ and women’s reputation and self-esteem are closely linked to their sexuality. An individual’s subjectivity is fluid, “opened up to spatial and temporal mutability, plurality and fragmentation, social and psychic manifestation, and the bounded politics of inclusion and exclusion” (Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p. 460).

A thought provoking theory is that terms, such as slut, are used as strategies by youth themselves. Currier (2013) explores the term ‘hookup’ and discusses the concept of strategic ambiguity. This concept analyzes the intentionality in how youth use this term as a protective measure for their social, as well as sexual, identity. Youth oriented terms, such as ‘hook-up’ hold different meanings for different genders and ultimately have no definitive meaning. Currier argues that ‘hookup’ implies an increase in sexual activity for men by using it to mean intercourse, and downplays sexual activity for women, as it is used to mean anything but sex. It allows both genders to “conform and preserve” their prescribed gender roles (p. 704).

Currier’s (2013) argument offers an innovative account of the performance of gender by emphasizing language as a code for youth to invest with hidden meanings. The author’s poststructural view plays an important role in how the discourses are deconstructed throughout the text. Each discourse is peeled back to reveal multi-layers, and Currier is constantly pointing these out. For instance, she says, “there are three patterns...” (p. 706); “The following examination is grounded in two findings...” (p. 711). It is never stated that there is one definitive conclusion or meaning to the term ‘hookup’, because the author’s argument is based on an understanding that youth creatively navigate through different realms of context and connotation. They strategically use terms that can elevate their own reputation, such as ‘hookup’ (Currier,
2013), while at the same time using terms that can devalue the status of others, such as ‘skank’ and slut. This changes the way the criteria or aspects attached to being a slut are understood. A young woman may be labeled a slut based on her status in school or her status in comparison to other young women. The way one utilizes the term is dynamic and changes based on the person’s specific goals (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong and Steeley, 2014).

While I agree with Currier’s argument, I feel she underestimates the ingenious quality of the participants’ ‘strategic ambiguity’. While there is validity to the notion that men and women mainly conform to their own ‘binary codes’ when using the term ‘hookup’, they also cleverly manipulated language to benefit their own social and sexual status. Armstrong et al. (2014) make a similar connection stating, “High-status women employ slut discourse to assert class advantage, defining their styles of femininity and approaches to sexuality as classy rather than trashy. Low-status women express class resentment—deriding rich, bitchy sluts for their wealth, exclusivity, and participation in casual sexual activity. For high-status women—whose definitions prevail in the dominant social scene—slut discourse enables, rather than constrains, sexual experimentation. In contrast, low-status women are vulnerable to public shaming” (p. 101). In this understanding women are active agents in ‘slut-shaming’ to gain or maintain social status. Currier mentions this complexity, but does not explore the impact of that agency. Youth construct and maintain their own culture through such terms, and we see the same aspects in the term slut as it holds elements of both celebration and injury (Armstrong et al., 2014; Attwood, 2007; Ringrose & Renold, 2012) based on the context in which it is used. Incredibly, what young people have done is create a set of rules to follow, which is participating in the emphasized roles of masculinity and femininity, and then contrary to their own rules, they have a term that allows them to navigate boundaries without ruining their reputation. While fraught with gender
stereotypes, what this complexity does show is that youth culture works at a deeper level than we might be observing or addressing.

“She was the one with the bad reputation, the one labeled the slut” opens Dorfman’s (2006) film - Sluts: The Documentary. The documentary reiterates the idea that a girl cannot be both ‘bad’ and ‘good’; she must fall under a singular category of femininity and morality. The contradiction becomes visible when many of the women interviewed explain how they had never even had sex for the first time when they were labeled a slut, an observation also found by Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong and Steeley (2014) and Leora Tanenbaum (2000). The derogatory label was used as a way to dictate social order -and whoever was on the top of the popularity hierarchy delegated how and when the term would be used. Wendy’s experience stands out. She was raised in a group home and when she entered her new grade seven class, the other students started calling her a slut. She said she faced a lot of difficulty, both at school and at home, because while the students in her class called her a slut, the girls she lived with at home called her a prude, as she was the only one who had not slept with someone. Sex columnist, Dan Savage, explains, “The reality is high school is horrifying and kids are cruel and hierarchies are going to emerge and it’s horrifying” (Dorfman, 2006). I would argue against this idea that ‘kids are cruel’ and instead approach high school as an institution that fosters ideals that construct the aggression and cruelty we see in youth and adolescence, and arguably more so towards those of different racial and class backgrounds (Lei, 2003; Pascoe, 2007).

Tanenbaum (2000) discusses her experience of having the label slut travel with her for years. It is not just an insult, but a brand with which to identify that person and often times that person begins to identify themselves in that way too. In her book “Slut!” Tanenbaum interprets several layers that make up what it means to be a slut and its ties to historical contexts, starting in
the 1950’s, with the term ‘tramp’. The ‘good girl’ or ‘prudish’ person, as well as those who are raped, are all shamed alike. To be a slut is to be classified as an outsider it is another way of ‘othering’ that is quite common for ‘race’, class, and gender minorities, and it is a strategy for maintaining specific power hierarchies (Tanenbaum, 2000). ‘Othering’ prevents women from speaking out about abuse and sexual assault, and instead blames them for the perpetrators’ actions. Girls and women are often labeled liars, or ‘asking for it’ even by authority figures, such as police (Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Tananbaum, 2000). Officer Sanguinetti’s statement serves as a reminder of how deeply rooted blaming the victim is in Western society, and the material consequences that come with that blame.

“Slut is a pervasive insult applied to a broad spectrum of American adolescent girls from the girl who brags about her one-night stands to the girl who has never even kissed a boy to the girl who has been raped” (Tananbaum, 2000, p. 15). The term is an insult that shifts in conjunction with the person using it and also the person being called a slut. In this way, some girls, as examined by Shauna Pomerantz (2008), may be unfazed by the term, or it has little to no impact on their social status because they are situated within a peer group that protects them. Other girls resolve to make the term their own and wield it as a weapon, as we saw with Natalia and Sadie who adopted the term slut as their nicknames for each other (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). However, there is always a cost if the girl falls out of the protective circle or does not have the resilience to shrug off the insult, then that girl becomes a target of further derision and aggression.

While men can face the same pressure to exact hegemonic masculinity that women do with emphasized femininity, male sexuality is built mainly around their physique (Tanenbaum, 2000). While a boy can work out to build muscle and look better, though height may still be
problematic, he is able to maintain popularity through this physical change. This is different in the case of a male being called a fag as shown in Pascoe’s (2007) study of heterosexism in high school. In the instance of being called a fag, a male is being called out as a homosexual. However, I would agree with Pascoe (2007) in suggesting that it is not just homosexuality that this label implies but the stereotypical behaviours of homosexual males that deems them feminine, an idea tantamount to Pascoe’s argument that ‘Fag’ is a tactic to regulate masculinity. In the case of girls who are labeled slut, “her social difference defines everything about her. She represents soiled femininity” (Tanenbaum, 2000, p. 15). This stigma is not easily erased, if at all. There are underlying values placed on ‘race’, class, gender, and the sexualization of women that help to perpetuate this terminology. Women police each other with the term and men are used as ‘policers’, as well (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). Sexual oppression is thus evident through the term slut, and the power relations between men and women are made clear.

**Status and Class**

Gender intersects with a number of socio-cultural features in the naming of a slut, such as social status or popularity (the position or rank that a person or group holds) which is largely contextual, which plays a distinct role in the term’s construction. A slut is a girl who is seen as trampy, dirty, and someone who has not learned the etiquette of the middle-class, marking them as ‘lower-class’ (Tanenbaum, 2000). A slut is deemed a ‘bad girl’ and associated with a living style that is poor or trashy. Armstrong et al. (2014) discuss how the individuals in their study from different class backgrounds and social circles worked to differentiate themselves from other groups. Middle-class people tend to view working-class people as having less taste and a vulgar attitude, and conversely, those in the working-class “perceive the affluent as superficial and lacking integrity” (Armstrong et al., 2014, p. 103). Looking at this gap between classes, it is
interesting to see the consequences for each class, and how slut-shaming may injure a woman with upper-class status differently than someone from a working-class family, or not at all because of her status. Comparatively teenagers from working-class backgrounds may label themselves in certain ways because they are aware that they are relatively poor. Jeffrey Victor (2004) explores the effects of derogatory labelling on poor youth in Jamestown, New York, “When poor teenagers are aware of being labeled ‘lowerclass’, it causes them to feel like members of an oppressed minority. (Thus, some of the girls called themselves ‘wiggers’, meaning white niggers.)” (Victor, 2004, p. 73) Not only do we see an awareness of class in this observation, but also the intersection of class and ‘race’ in the example of girls calling themselves ‘wiggers’, thus associating themselves with black people, who are often assumed to be of lower class based on their ‘race’.

Class is exceptionally important in the process of labelling. As I have shown, using the term slut changes contextually depending on who uses the term, and what becomes apparent is that class is not just a question of rich or poor, it is also about popularity or social status, ‘race’, and gender, and the perception of who is believed to be in power. Looking back at Victor’s study, what becomes clear is that the label slut is still seen as a ‘lower-class’ identifier: “many of the girls reported being labeled in gossip as ‘sluts.’… most of the girls reported having experienced derogatory social class labeling, in such forms as being referred to as ‘white trash,’ ‘welfare kids,’ or simply ‘lower-class kids’” (p. 74) However, it was after associating with African-American peers that these white girls faced further scrutiny. One of the participants said that her and her friends were considered ‘white-trash’, “the white trash on the wrong side of the creek. Their parents would say you can’t be friends with these kids, because they aren’t allowed
to go to our house. They were like, ‘that girl, she runs around with black people, she’s just a nasty slut’” (p. 75).

To avoid being labelled in such a way, these girls would avoid hanging out with anyone of colour in the hopes that they would not be seen as ‘lower-class’ or lower than their current status. Some of the participants also talked about their experience of AIDS programs in their school and how students of ‘lower-class’ who were poor or of a racial minority were largely stigmatized for being the cause of the epidemic. Girls did not want to participate in these AIDS programs for fear that they would be harshly judged, effectively silencing them or branding them ‘sluts’ or ‘bad kids’ (Victor, 2004). I highlight this study because it shows the dangerous consequence of labelling, as the girls in Victor’s study felt so marginalized that they would not seek out important health information, and were instead criticized for being ‘the problem’. From avoiding certain groups of people to avoiding health programs for fear of labels, the idea of surveillance is once again apparent. Teachers survey students and peers survey each other, keeping everyone in check, and once the social order is established those of the minority monitor themselves. Self-surveillance is soon internalized, and while these girls may not see themselves as sluts, they are quick to avoid any person or activity that could label them as such.

Internalized shame is something I want to examine closely in connection to slut-shaming, because it is not just a question of men and women insulting women, but women’s internalization of shame. This internal dialogue is influenced by the things we see and do in our daily life, and that shape our perspective of the world and ourselves. The process of thinking is something we do without always being consciously aware of it, and is something filled with cultural and historical context (Weedon, 1987). It is when individuals describe themselves as feeling ashamed or other similarly negative words that terms like slut can influence our
subjectivity at a deeper level. This internalized shame can lead to depression, anxiety, body-dysmorphia, and other mental disorders that are a significant part of the increase in teen suicide (Murnen et al., 2003; Kubik, Bourassa, & Hampton, 2009). Murnen et al. (2003) explain that “the ubiquitous objectification of women in our culture encourages body dissatisfaction, eating problems, and other mental health concerns among girls and women” (p. 427). This objectification is thus often linked to the overwhelming representation of women as objects in media, and this representation changes around the label slut as it applies to media texts.

The representation of women is again closely linked to the intersection between class and ‘race’, and it is not to be taken lightly. Trivializing the influence of labels like slut and, in turn ‘slut-shaming’, neglects the sexual violence that women, and especially women of colour face every day.

**Race and Internalized-Shame**

Joy Lei (2003) examines the stereotypes of black girls and Asian boys and looks at how black girls are labeled ‘loud’ while Asian boys are labeled ‘quiet’ in high schools. Lei explores the dominating forces at play that work to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of different cultures. Youth often internalize their differences as problematic and either attempt to conform to a system they will never truly fit into, or rebel against it, which inevitably puts them at a disadvantage (Lei, 2003). There is a complex “relationship between identities at the interpersonal level and discourses of knowledge at a structural level” (Lei, 2003, p. 158), and this structural knowledge plays a part in an individual’s place in the pecking order of the institution. This system is discursive and again creates ‘othering’ for individuals that are not white (Lei, 2003; Tanenbaum, 2000). Racial stereotypes, much like the identity of ‘the slut’ are used as a tool of oppression to suit the needs of Western society in order to maintain a system built on the gap
between ‘races’, classes, and genders (Foucault, 1990). If the system is maintained with a
‘proper’ social order or hierarchy, those who are oppressed will begin to perpetuate this
oppression among themselves by labeling *themselves*, for example as ‘loud black girls’ or ‘quiet
Asian boys’ (Lei, 2003). We identify ourselves in response to social realms and systems, again
linking to the concept of Panopticism (Foucault, 1995).

This internalized oppression is similar to the ideas that Foucault (1990) touches on in his
work on sexuality, stating that repression is “an injunction to silence, an affirmation of
nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things,
nothing to see, and nothing to know” (p. 4). Repression seeks to nullify the operative nature of
change, and while this is impossible as change is nature, it expresses the idea that innovation is
not real, that we do not need to look forward to new ways of thinking, but reaffirm the old ways.
I do not suggest that all innovation is positive, but simply that the allowance for innovation is
often criticized while traditional views are upheld without need for critical questions. *All* views,
whether new or old, need attending to, and it is crucial to examine and discuss change instead of
running from it. Instead of being critical thinkers, youth are meant to uphold traditional ways of
thinking, that for some is easy and gives them status, and for others places them at the bottom of
the hierarchy, where they are expected to conform. This system has been ingrained and
perpetuated among youth, making it almost impossible for those outside the system to rise above
it, or even be a part of it (Lei, 2003).

Women of colour, especially African-American and Aboriginal women, are exoticized
and labeled promiscuous based on their culture, style, and the colour of their skin (Kubik et al.,
2009; Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Mowatt, French, & Malebranche, 2013). They are seen as sexy
but dangerous, and are depicted as being more aggressively sexual than other ‘races’ (Kubik et
al., 2009; Barron & Lacombe, 2005; Mowatt et al., 2013). An example of this depiction is how historically, black women were labeled ‘The Jezebel’, an image that stereotypes black women as hypersexual and ready for sex, linked heavily to slavery and the justification of assault against black women (Mowatt et al. 2013). The term emphasizes the idea of black women as animalistic, dangerous, and promiscuous, and this construction creates an image of a woman who cannot be sexually tamed or satisfied. This construction also serves as a way to commodify women of colour and sexually exploits not only their bodies, but also their culture. In fact, some black women had issues with the SlutWalk because it “ignored the historical legacy of sexual violence and racism that intertwined for Black women who do not have the privilege to… call themselves slut” (Mowatt et al., 2013, p. 650). In other words, choosing to call oneself slut would be playing on representations that have been and continue to be destructive to women of colour. This is not to say that black women are against desire or pleasure, but that for young women, and again for those of colour, they are under far greater scrutiny for their sexual actions, and thus incredibly aware of the problematic associations between women of colour and sexual deviance.

This negative link between ‘race’ and aggressive sexuality is similar for Aboriginal women: “when looking at the impact of racism, sexism and colonization on Aboriginal women, gaps exist between Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men as well as non-Aboriginal men and women, but also among and between Aboriginal women themselves” (Kubik et al., 2009, p. 24). Once again, this statement exemplifies the interaction between ‘race’ and class. Kubik et al. (2009) discuss how an Aboriginal woman’s identification as Métis or status Indian changes the way that woman will be treated in terms of employment and respect. Aboriginal women also face their own brand of racial stereotyping that impacts victimization, “A factor that leads to sexual victimization of First Nation women is the continued dominance of negative stereotypes of First
Nations women as ‘squaw’, ‘princess’, or ‘sexually promiscuous’ which were historically perpetuated by European colonizers” as a way to undermine the power they held within indigenous cultures (Kubik et al. 2009, p. 26). Stigmatizing and marginalizing women has an impact on how we perceive these women, and while Aboriginal women face class- and ‘race’ – based structural barriers, such as poverty, drug use, and sex work that would put them at greater risk for violence, it is also the neglect of these women that must be questioned. The frequency of unsolved missing persons and murder cases involving Aboriginal women, many of whom were in the sex trade, demonstrates deeply rooted racism in Canada from those in a position to help as “violence towards Aboriginal women is often met with official indifference and systematic prejudice by police forces, government and society in general” (Kubik et al., 2009)

Not only skin-colour, but cultural distinctions in style can be identifiers that signify ‘race’ and class; we can think back to the example of Miley Cyrus appropriating black culture by dancing and dressing in a way that was associated with black women. Girls are separated into categories that they choose to identify with for various reasons; some perform willingly, to fit in or express pride in their own race and culture, or use it as a way to rebel against their social surroundings and shift the circulating discourses. In Rebecca Raby’s (2009) study on school conduct codes, she examines the ‘active negotiation’ that girls go through in their daily demonstration of style and clothing. Raby addresses how the codes enforced by the school itself reinforce gendered stereotypes, something also explored by Louisa Allen (2009) who looked at the ‘5 centimeter rule’ in schools, a policy by which the students were not allowed to be within 5 centimeters of each other to prevent unwanted touching. Both of these studies show how students navigate derogatory comments, as well as their own sexual agency through the use of style. Style is a large part of an individual’s subjectivity, and how they want to represent themselves to the
The way someone dresses and acts can change daily based on context and goals. Raby (2009) did find that there were moments when girls condemned other girls for dressing like sluts, and most of the participants in the study felt they were not sluts and did not dress like sluts, but some were still reprimanded by the school for dressing outside what the school deemed acceptable. For example, one of the participants was sent to the office for wearing a headscarf, which she defended as it was for religious reasons (Raby, 2009). Certain styles, like certain ethnicities, are seen as provocative and dangerous, and deemed ‘slutty’, making those who identify with that style also ‘slutty’ (Pomerantz, 2008).

While black and Aboriginal women are hypersexualized, the reverse is also common, as with Muslim women, who are often seen as ‘backwards’ as opposed to the ‘progressive’ sexuality of the West. They are seen as sexually oppressed based on their clothing. Jason Lim and Alexandra Fanghanel (2013) conducted interviews with Muslim youth who participated in the 2011 UK SlutWalk: “here in the West we laugh a lot at Saudi [Arabia] and how they treat rape victims how they have like, a blame culture… but really, when you think about it, mostly… there is not much of a difference here” (p. 211). Muslim women who dress so that minimal skin is showing are not exempt from rape.

**The Ramifications of Race and Class in Terms of Body Image**

When women who do dress in revealing clothing are raped they are labeled as ‘sluts’ and ‘deserving’ of their attack. “Victim blaming is steeped in the cultural belief that women are the bearers of morality, and essentialised understandings that this morality is held within the female body” (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Being the ‘bearers of morality’ is a difficult undertaking for women, considering how media suggest women are meant to be submissive sexual partners ready for sex whenever a man wants it (Malson et al., 2011). As discussed, black and Aboriginal
women face a distinct disadvantage because they are already labelled as ‘promiscuous’ due to historical context, they are more likely to be victim-blamed or overlooked altogether. Being exoticized distinguishes their specific body image as ‘up for it’ or ‘asking for it’.

It is important to note how factors of style and body image are also strategic for girls of different racial and class backgrounds. Pomerantz (2008) discusses the subversive power of language as a way to reproduce certain types of identities. Based on her research, she states, “Though girls did not commonly use the word identity, the word image was constantly invoked as a way of describing a girl’s school identity” (p. 124). In her ethnographic study, Pomerantz makes an intriguing point about the participants’ separation between school identities and other kinds of identities, such as those at home or elsewhere. This distinction is important because it shows the ways in which youth adapt and shift in their identity performance, and for whom they perform. For example, in one of Pomerantz’s interviews a young woman with a pierced tongue discussed how she was perceived as being ‘easy’ or sexually open. The belief about this young woman was held by other young women, and revolved around the notion that her tongue piercing was a tool used primarily for sexual pleasure (Pomerantz, 2008).

One participant in Lim and Fanghanel’s research made an interesting statement about clothing in this regard, suggesting that “blaming a woman for what she is wearing and why she got raped is a ‘rape myth’, and so is, like, [asking] why she walked by herself in a dark alley” (Lim & Fanghanel, 2014, p. 211). In this statement, we see that women are stigmatized for what they wear, which is then used to control their movement in the public sphere. What is apparent in exploring ‘slut-shaming’ is the discursive link between rape culture and rape, which is most frequently associated with young ‘promiscuous’ women. The ideas surrounding rape are based on societal assumptions of what a slut is, because the questions asked of rape victims deal strictly
with a woman’s appearance and reputation: “what were you wearing?”, “have you been drinking?”; “where were you when it happened” (Dorfman, 2006)? The last question implies that the setting of the sexual assault is significant, in that those attacked by strangers in their own home are considered a ‘good’ victim while being in a public setting with someone the person knows makes them a ‘deserving’ victim (Madriz, 1997). While the rape shield laws prohibit any person being undermined based on reputation, intoxication, and dress, rape victims are still stigmatized for making those choices and behaving in a risky manner, like a ‘bad-girl’ (Armstrong et al. 2014; Asencio, 1999; Barron & Lacombe, 2005). This aggression forces women into an uncomfortable spot between being labelled a ‘prude’ or ‘virgin’ and being a ‘whore’ or ‘slut’. It also perpetuates rape culture through the idea that forcing a woman into bed is still acceptable, especially if she looks like she is ‘asking for it’.

As a number of Pomerantz’s (2008) participants note, there is a fine line between ‘sexy’ and ‘slutty’, and there is often a repetitive manoeuvring back and forth between the two. These constant shifts limit and presumably facilitate young women’s ability to gain social standing within that identified group, “such as conventional sexiness and the kind of power that came with regulating femininity within the school” (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 97). These expectations are grounded in concepts that are difficult to define because of their dichotomous nature, i.e. the differences between ‘sexy’ and ‘slutty’, because they are so closely related to each other. Michael Flood (2013) notes that for girls in high school “it can be hard to ‘get the balance right’ or to ‘draw the line’ between being ‘sexy’ and being a ‘slut’” (p. 96). The criteria for both are constantly shifting and incredibly ambiguous. Even media portrayals of ‘sexy’ could be classified as ‘slutty’ based on the amount of skin shown, the size of the woman, and her performed identity to the audience as either sexually available or unavailable, as we see with pop
star Miley Cyrus. Pomerantz (2008) makes an important point that while style can be a way to negotiate and form new identities for youth, it can also be a constraint. This constraint places women into categories that are difficult to get out of -they become non-negotiable aspects of their subjectivity.

Power and Resignification

From these constraints of subjectivity, women seek to resignify terms such as slut. Resignification is a concept theorized by Butler (1999) to examine how a term of injurious quality might be changed to one of celebration. For example, in Victor’s (2004) study of derogatory labelling, he theorizes that young girls have lower self-esteem from being labelled slut. However, he found that the girls’ self-esteem, at least for most, remained intact due to their own beliefs about themselves. As one participant noted, “I like who I am no matter what people say” (p. 81), a sentiment for many of the other participants as well. Others displayed concern for their bodies, such as weight, but did not feel this should define who they were as individuals. They called each other ‘sluts’ in a way to reclaim the term, to make it theirs so that by using it, others could not hurt them (Victor, 2004). However, what some of the girls had that others did not was a supportive peer group and family.

The girls in Victor’s study were able to use the term as a positive celebration of who they were (see also Ringrose and Renold, 2012). Reclaiming the term is important to these girls for many reasons, and I would suggest that it is a way of protecting themselves against the negative ramifications of slut. For the girls in Victor’s study, it allowed them to accept and take pride in their status, because they were aware of the way others, such as teachers, treated them due to this negative labelling. Instead of letting those labels control their behaviour they chose to see it as not something connected to shame.
This reclamation of the term was exactly what the ‘SlutWalk’ movement aimed to accomplish. The point of the movement was to find a way to take back the term slut and turn it into something positive, or at least something that cannot be used in the idea of ‘acceptable’ rape. While some feminist scholars, such as Ringrose and Renold (2012), feel that these walks are negotiating positive social change and agency for women, they also admit there is a danger in “the very slippery and recuperative tendency around slut in the adolescent peer group. Depending on the stability of positioning within the popularity power dynamics of the group, slut can slip back easily into injury” (p. 337). This slippage occurred with their interviewees, Natasha, who had embraced the term slut until her boyfriend broke up with her for another girl, leaving her vulnerable to slut-shaming. Morrison et al. (2014) study on the term slut also found that most youth did not feel that the term could be resignified, and felt that the SlutWalk was not overly effective; most participants stated they would not have taken part in the movement.

There is a fine line when dealing with status and slut-shaming. A girl or woman may be able to combat the term’s negativity, but must first have support for reclaiming the term, such as from within their peer group. The term’s ambiguity can be appropriated to suit someone’s needs as long as they have that support, and I would also suggest, as long as they know how to navigate the hidden meanings within the term. We saw this in Currier’s (2013) study, and how using the term ‘hookup’ actually helped youth navigate the turbulent waters of their sexual reputation. As one male participant expressed, “I guess it is in the eye of the beholder… If I met a girl at the bar and even if we didn’t have sex, we just went to her place and made out for an hour and then left, then I would consider that . . . yeah, we hooked up” (p. 712). The term was able to mean whatever an individual needed it to in order to maintain status.
Resignification is not an easy task and comes up against a range of issues, mainly that while trying to get away from traditional perspectives of women “as passive sexual objects… post-feminist femininities are also problematically hyper-(hetero)sexualized – conventionally sexually attractive, provocative and always ‘up for it’” (Malson et al., 2011, p. 77). The problem is that by trying to alleviate sexualization and stereotypes, the resignification may only manage to seem like an appropriation of stereotypes common for men, such as always being sexually available (Malson et al., 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2012). This ‘up for it’ view of women (most historically the black woman labeled ‘The Jezebel’ or Aboriginal woman as the ‘squaw’ puts pressure on girls who are not sexually active to be knowledgeable or experienced about sex, the same pressure which is placed on men (Dorfman, 2006; Renold & Ringrose, 2012; Tanenbaum, 2000). These new views do not reform the term slut, and this issue is something many girls struggle with when entering into movements like the ‘SlutWalk’.

Dow and Wood (2014) examined the controversies of ‘SlutWalk’ and found that among some feminists this movement was “ridiculed as women’s internalization of their own pornification” (p. 22). However, ‘SlutWalk’ is also a challenge against sexist actions and perceptions, because women have the power to wear what they want and be who they are. Resignification strongly hinges on a girl’s status or class within school (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Even in new post-feminist advertisements trying to reform women’s sexual expression, “they seem to offer choice, autonomy and an escape from more traditional femininities, but only through the production of subjectivities that must be reflexively and endlessly worked upon as both subjects and objects of commodification and consumption” (Malson et al., 2011, p. 76). The reality of this resistance is that being sexual is allowed as long it fits the right criteria.
Much of the discussion on ‘slut-shaming’ can be contextualized by the understanding of language as an element of power and truth (Foucault, 1990). Youth co-create meaning through language, it is used as a way to construct truth. The sexual repression of youth and, specifically women, is a product of this truth. It is what makes poststructuralism crucial in the conversation on sexuality, as language is the main site of power and repression, (Foucault, 1990). Repression is linked to power, knowledge and sexuality, and with this connection, there is a clear separation between sex and pleasure or that there are those who take pleasure and those who do not.

Reflecting on Currier’s (2013) research, many of the participants felt that the act of ‘hooking up’ was such a common practice that not being a part of it meant that person would be lacking in experience or knowledge. The term ‘hookup’ signifies power, and youth are able to use it as a way to gain status and influence the status of others through comparison. By uncovering new perspectives on a term or idea, youth are able to discuss sexuality in a way that may change its dichotomous nature. However, the trouble with these terms is that they still fall under certain gender norms, and while they can be ambiguous, the main agenda for ‘hookup’ is to maintain dominant norms so that women are not seen as ‘sluts’ and men are seen as hypersexual.

And so what?

Foucault’s (1990) work on sexual repression has created the central theme for my research. He argues that it is not about whether a person decides to have sex or not, it is “to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (p. 31). It is about how sex has become part of a discourse rooted in heteronormative ideals.
My question on the manifestation of ‘slut-shaming’ is not something new; however, the term slut as a phenomenon is relatively recent. It has become more popular than other similar terms, such as ‘whore’, ‘tramp’ and ‘skank’, because it encompasses them all, and holds historical significance. I focused on this significance when examining the term slut and expanded on what the literature suggested while also presenting new understandings and comparisons of the term slut, such as ‘fuckboy’ which is discussed in chapter four. The term slut shifts from individual to individual and is remarkably powerful in its influence on young women’s subjectivities. This word’s lasting effects have haunted girls and it is something that follows them even when those who labeled them are long gone. In conducting this research, I have been able to better understand the power that the term slut holds over women’s sexuality, and also the significance of intersectionality between gender, ‘race’, and class. ‘Slut-shaming’ is pervasive within youth culture and Western society, and the links it has to rape culture and internalized shame must not be ignored.
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

“If the concept of ‘slut’ didn’t exist, then nobody would be like ‘she was dressing like a slut.’”
(Max)

Research Method and Paradigm

Qualitative research focuses on the qualities of everyday life – qualities that cannot just be measured, but must be observed and learned from research participants. Qualitative research thus explores social phenomenon and the social rules and codes that underlie our everyday routines as they are rooted in historical and cultural circumstances (Creswell, 2007; Esterberg, 2002). This type of research seeks to understand social processes in context (Esterberg, 2002) by paying attention to the subjective nature of human life. As well, it is not just the subjectivities of those being researched that matter, but the researcher herself, who is a part of the research process. This way of looking at subjectivity is different from quantitative research, which aims for objectivity and the critical separation of the researcher from the study so that bias can be eliminated as much as possible (Creswell, 2007; Esterberg, 2002). In qualitative research, the methodology necessitates an open researcher who relays her opinions and biases in order to bring reflexivity to the study. Reflexivity is the ability to reflect on one’s own social and cultural position in the research process, and how one’s particular paradigm or worldview plays a role in the methodology one chooses to perform (Esterberg, 2002).

Qualitative research aims to find meaning within social events – not to prove something per se, but to share the lived experiences of various groups of people, to gain insight into those experiences as they pertain to specific social events, and to bring attention to unfamiliar topics, or expand on subjects in a new way (Creswell, 2007). For instance, poststructural qualitative research is useful in discussing language and the underlying discourses embedded in cultures in order to critique social phenomenon. Conversely, quantitative research is very useful for giving
clear concise data that can show significant effects across a large population or sample. Quantitative research aims to locate patterns using algorithms, but what it does not contain are the voices of participants due to the size of the studies. Instead, quantitative researchers view statistics as a representative ‘truth’. This difference does not negate the tremendous detail one can bring forth using statistics, but such statistics do not account for the researcher’s subjectivity, participants’ voices, and overgeneralizations.

Qualitative researchers are more concerned with understanding participants’ stories and experiences, as they try to make connections between the data, the literature, and theoretical framework (Creswell, 2007; Esterberg, 2002). For example, in my own work looking at the term slut, I wanted to explore how youth use, maintain, and perpetuate the use of this term and engage in a dialogue with the literature while also expanding upon current empirical and theoretical frameworks for this topic. Lastly, I wanted to incorporate my own lived experience alongside the experiences of the people I interviewed.

A researcher’s worldview is an important aspect of the way they will proceed with their methodology. It not only shapes methodological choices, but the way a researcher will interpret the relationships found in the data (Esterberg, 2002). Employing a feminist poststructural framework means that my worldview includes challenging ‘truths’, focusing on language as power, and seeking out how discourses operate within a given society or culture, i.e. youth culture (St. Pierre, 2000). My approach thus focuses on institutional and structural power lurking beneath words and symbols (Esterberg, 2002). I explore language as a perceived structure used between people, but also as a source of power and oppression when looking at derogatory terms like slut. My approach to qualitative research is, therefore, based on context and meaning, and the way a person chooses to interpret meaning is based on various individual and social factors,
such as gender, ‘race’, and class. Feminist poststructuralism is the most appropriate choice for this study as it deals with the intersectionality of language and power, and gender ‘race’ and class in relation to the term slut.

Method of Interviewing

I utilized a semi-structured interview approach, as my goal was to explore the topic openly with participants, allowing for expression of their “opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). This goal connects directly with my feminist poststructural framework, as it seeks to uncover hidden structures within language while actively engaging the voices of the interviewee (Bryman, 2012). Rather than view interview data as unmediated access to an interviewee’s ‘real’ life experience, I sought to contextualize it within broader socio-cultural frameworks. While the researcher begins a semi-structured interview by entering into a conversation shaped by a set of questions, the participant can also shape the structure of the interview with their responses (Creswell, 2007; Esterberg, 2002). I believe participants’ insights are best revealed through the more conversational tone that semi-structured interviews offer. Many feminist scholars prefer this method, as it is helpful in interviewing women and those of marginalized groups (Bryman, 2012; Esterberg, 2002).

A semi-structured approach for interviewing worked best for my study, as it gives structure to the interview so that I can zero in on the particular phenomenon I am trying to look at. However, it is also open enough that the interview can move in a direction that is comfortable for the participant and possibly explore more topics then I had initially thought of. I sought to create an open environment where my own views are present, but not overbearing in light of the discussion. I cannot separate myself from my opinions on the subject, but it is a matter of knowing when and how to acknowledge them in the interview process, as well as after, in the
analysis of the data. I believe a researcher must display openness, especially in relation to this topic, in order to create a comfortable environment.

In the semi-structured interviews done by Lim and Fanghanel (2012), the authors facilitated the participants to speak openly about their feelings on the SlutWalk movement, generating fascinating answers about the challenges of SlutWalk, but also about how empowering it was to engage in a form of unified support. The interviewer was hardly present in the article, mainly displaying the voices of the participants. This methodological choice placed the power in the hands of the young people rather than the interviewer. As well, in their group interviews, the interviewers created a nice dynamic of back and forth between participants that may not have happened within an individual interview or a more rigid structure of interviewing. While group settings can be dynamic and help build on participants’ individual answers, it can also have complications, such as, individuals feeling overshadowed or shy, and can create problems in transcribing if someone talks over another person, or people are talking at the same time.

An open interview is a great way for participants to be completely conversational and tell their story of the topic with no real need for linearity. However, while I appreciate this kind of questioning, it is much more difficult to code open conversation as the participant has free range over what they want to bring up. Without some kind of structure too, such as a flexible interview schedule, it can be complicated to collect data on certain topics without asking leading questions, or it may be difficult to get to subject areas that need to be broached because it is not where the conversation leads. As I am looking at the relationship between language and power, I wanted to ask certain questions to engage my participants in the discussion, but leave room for them to interpret and offer insight beyond the initial question.
Sample and Recruitment

I interviewed ten Brock University students, seven females and three males, with the majority self-identifying as heterosexual and white or white European, and one female identifying as mixed race, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Recruitment took place through posters (Appendix G) around campus that included information about the study and my email. I recruited participants within this age range because they offered a retrospective insight dealing with experiences in high school as well as university, which offered different contexts in which the term slut is used. Admittedly, it would have been interesting to choose an age group in high school. However, obtaining ethical approval for participants younger than eighteen may have taken more time, due to needing consent from parents and other possible gatekeepers, as would arranging interview locations/times and obtaining consent from parents/guardians.

Participants over the age of twenty-one also offer a unique perspective because they are at a different social and educational level than someone just entering university. They offer a retrospective look at the concepts and experiences that they went through in their first years at university, and whether the experiences at their age are different or the same. In fact, these varying perspectives played a part in how my participants viewed the term slut and its use. For instance, see chapter four and Amy’s reference to first year university compared to high school.

Once a Brock student contacted me, I sent out a letter of invitation (Appendix A) to explain what the research was about and why they were being asked to participate. If they were interested in being a part of the study, I arranged a date and time that was convenient for them, using a bookable space on the Brock campus to hold the interview.

Recruiting through posters on campus is not the most effective way to ensure variety of participants. However, I placed them strategically in areas of the school I felt might attract
various people from different genders, ‘races’ and classes, i.e. international students building, high traffic areas within the school, close to departments that could offer diversity such as Women and Gender Studies and Popular Culture. While snowballing may have occurred, as some of my participants said they were going to talk to their friends about the study, I tried to reach out to a multi-faceted group of individuals who could offer different insights based on their backgrounds and different experiences. I wanted diversity in my sample for many reasons. As Hill Collins (2012) and other critical race theorists suggest, ‘race’ does not exist outside of gender and vice versa (Creswell, 2007). As illustrated in my literature review, there is a significant difference in the way white middle-class women experience ‘slut-shaming’ than women of different ethnicities who are also middle-class. The way people use language changes from subject to subject, and is dependent on the peer groups they choose to hang out with.

It is a concern that I was not able to access much diversity at Brock University. In light of that issue, and taking advantage of my semi-structured interview style, I approached the subject of ‘race’ and class as they came up in the interviews, asking whether the participants felt ‘race’ or class had an influence on the way the term slut was used. I was able to gain insight vis-à-vis these second hand stories, which offered interesting perspectives.

**Interview Questions and Questionnaire**

Below is the semi-structured interview schedule that I used during interviews, as well as the short demographic questionnaire. Due to the structure of the interviews, I gave participants some flexibility to direct the flow of the interview and the questions asked. While this schedule is in chronological order, the flow of the interview presented breaks from that order. The questionnaire is to provide context for the data, such as education, family life, social and class,
etc. that informs a participant’s perspective on the subject. As I had up to an hour for the interview I was able to get through all the questions with each participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Questions (icebreakers):</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you enjoy doing in your personal time? (Hobbies)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe yourself?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would others describe you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you wish others would describe you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do your parents do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any siblings?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you go to high school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you do anything outside of school (High school and University): extracurricular, part-time job, volunteering?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you apart of any social groups or cliques?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General questions about slut:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you define the term slut?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever come across the concept of slut-shaming? If so, how would you define this concept?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, what are some characteristics that define being ‘slutty’?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, what are terms that you would deem synonymous with the term slut?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, what is the opposite of a slut?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are some characteristics that define not being slutty?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General usage of the term slut:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is this term most often used? (contextually)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is this term most often used? (contextually)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is this term directed towards most frequently? (in terms of gender, ‘race’, and class)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that being called a slut can have an impact on a person’s reputation or self-esteem?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the term slut apply to both men and women, can it be used interchangeably or does it hold more weight for one over the other?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you consider the term slut to be harmful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you consider the term slut to be positive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you believe it is harmful, do you believe it can be changed for a more positive use? (Reclaimed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story-telling:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever been called a slut? What were the circumstances in which you were called a slut? How did you feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever called someone a slut? What was the context and nature of the term? How did you feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever referred to yourself as a slut? What was the context and nature of the term? How did you feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forms of resistance:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[Table 2] DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your full name?
2. How old are you?
3. What grade are you in?
4. What extracurricular activities (including sports) are you involved in?
5. Do you have a part-time job? If so, what is it and how many hours do you work per week?
6. Do your parent/s or guardians work? If so, what do they do?
7. What level of education do your parents have (high school, college, university)?
8. What is your cultural background?
9. What gender do you identify with?
10. How would you describe your ‘style’?
11. What interest do you have in this research study?
12. How would you define the term slut? (Repetition of this question allowed for a more time to think about the term for later on in the interview)
13. How would you define the opposite of a slut?

Data Analysis

I used a discourse analysis in order to analyse my interview data. There are multiple ways of defining and using discourse analysis, especially in the analysis of language (Hodges, Kuper & Reeves, 2008; Putnam, 2010). For example, Linda Putnam (2010) looks at discourse analysis in relation to negotiation tactics, and examines how factors of negotiation, such as strategy, relational development, identity management, emotional expression, issue development, and framing, are linked to language and how it is used within negotiation. Though Putnam uses discourse analysis to look at negotiation, many of the negotiation factors are transferable to my own study, such as relational development, identity management and emotional expression, as they look at how an individual uses language to maintain or alter their subjectivity. Discourse analysis is helpful in the examination of language in relation to shifts in identity, which makes it
particular useful for my research as I am analyzing how slut is steeped in challenging discourses that negatively frame a woman’s sexual subjectivity. While this technique is useful to my study, I focused on critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is used most often in education and the social sciences. CDA is primarily interested in power, specifically taking on a Foucauldian perspective in relation to how discourses systematically construct our social world (Hodges et al., 2008). “Discourse analysis at this level involves not only the examination of text and the social uses of language but also the study of the ways in which the very existence of specific institutions and of roles for individuals to play are made possible by ways of thinking and speaking” (Hodges et al., 2008, p. 570).

In my study, I analyzed previous literature in conjunction with my own interviews, and I was able to examine the discourses surrounding the term slut more closely. In exploring the institutions that are part of the discourses that surround slut, which were mainly the school system and media, I was able to see what extensive influence participants’ felt media and school had on the way this term was used. Discourse analysis was perfectly suited to my study of the term slut because it focuses on power in language as a tool of social institutions, and this focus helped me interpret my data looking specifically at youth culture shaping the subjectivity of a young woman’s sexual identity.

Michelle Lazar (2007) suggests a feminist CDA approach that “aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” (p. 141). This approach would be useful in the examination of gender in combination with language and power, however the research does not suggest how this analysis works in conjunction with ‘race’ and class. CDA looks at subjectivity, including gender, ‘race’, and class, and the institutions and structures that
shape subjectivity based on social codes and values (Hodges et al., 2008). I believe this form of analysis has given me a solid understanding of how the word slut is constructed and maintained in youth culture as a means of policing women. Social institutions play a large role in the moderation of power and how power is delegated. Not all terms hold the same weight as a word like slut, and not all terms are as ambiguous and adaptive to suit youth needs. It is important to analyze this adaptability through a lens that considers the fluidity of language and subjectivity, and the underlying structures that co-create power.

Using CDA as the framework for my data analysis, I performed the process of coding before, during, and after my interviews. What I mean by coding before the interview is that I used my interview schedule as a tool to create coding steps that helped me interpret and code the data after I collected it. For example, asking demographic questions allowed me to create categories for the participants depending on the area they live in, their parents’ background etc. During the interviews, I performed open-coding, which is coding data into major categories that arise (Creswell, 2007). This was done during interviews, where I would write down possible themes as they emerged in my field notes. Finally, after transcribing and sorting through the data, I began selective coding that developed deeper story lines across the data that described “the interrelationship of categories” (Creswell, 2007, p. 65). The themes that emerged dealt with the intersectionality between gender, ‘race’, and class, as well as rape culture and media involvement in young people’s lives. The participants had different perspectives depending on their lifestyles and backgrounds.

**Consent, Ethics and Other Possible Concerns**

At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix B) with the participants so they could ask any questions, and then I had them sign it. This discussion also
entailed a reminder that they may refuse to answer any questions and may leave the study without penalty at any time, and also about the services available should any difficult feelings surface. I handed out a short demographic questionnaire (Table 2) to the interviewees, including questions about the age, gender, and cultural background of each participant. The participants were then asked a series of semi-structured interview questions (Table 1). Each interview contained fifteen to twenty questions within a timeframe of about forty-five to sixty minutes. I recorded the interviews using audio recording equipment borrowed from the department of Child and Youth Studies. After the interview was over I provided the participants with a feedback form (Appendix C) that contained information on counselling agencies and clinics. I informed the participants that if they experience any psychological issues after the interview to please contact these agencies. Once my thesis is completed, my participants will be contacted if they requested an executive summary of my findings. I assigned each participant a pseudonym throughout all written documents.

I retained all personal identifiers from the questionnaire in a locked drawer. I will keep these documents until my thesis is completed so that I ensure I have linked the correct quotations to the correct person, and also to send participants an executive summary if they provided me with their emails. I will shred all identifying documentation shortly after my MA program is over. All specific locations, friends’ names, and any other identifying features in the interview were changed as well. Any specifics about the participants that identified them was changed, such as unusual hobbies or part-time jobs.

When my participants disclosed experiences of abuse, I asked them if they felt comfortable enough to continue, and made sure they were aware of the services available to them, such as on the feedback form provided. I offered support in the best way that I could and
was aware of the social and physical cues that the participants were giving off (erratic behaviour, nervous, uncomfortable etc.). It was important to be aware of the participants’ mental state before, during, and after the interview, and while I supported them and directed them to available services, I was respectful of what they said was best for them.

Benefits to participating in this research included participants gaining insight into their experiences and opening a space for participants to discuss their opinions and views on a much debated and talked about topic in contemporary Canadian society. The participants also gained insight into how research is done vis-à-vis the interview process, and after all my interviews my participants did express how much they had enjoyed the experience. Given the overwhelming use of the term slut in youth culture, as well as mainstream media and popular culture, the benefits of the research to society are greater awareness of how the term is understood and used, as well as forms of resistance in which young people may be engaged to counter-act its harmful effects. The term slut is an omnipresent part of the sexual double standard and sexism in youth culture. As such, my research will contribute to a feminist and anti-oppressive social justice agenda.

**Ethics Process**

I think it is worth noting the difficulties I experienced in order to obtain ethical clearance for my study. I came across many obstacles when applying for ethics due to the nature of my study. REB at Brock University requested that I attend a full board review to defend my ethics request. While the review was optional, I chose to participate though was surprised by what the review entailed. I was asked to defend my research in front of at least fifteen members. I was asked multiple questions pertaining to the clarity of my thesis, the nature of my research, and my choice of methodology and theory.
They asked me to define my feminist poststructural framework, and what I wanted to say was, “How long do you have?!?” I was not aware that feminist poststructuralism was an ethical concern. They then asked me what the words ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive’ meant, which I felt I could have answered more descriptively through email. Throughout the meeting, it felt extremely interrogative with fifteen faces (but only one speaker) staring at me. And finally, when it was over, I was practically shoo-shooed out the door. The worst part was that the meeting was not even to grant me ethical clearance. I then had to answer four pages of ethical corrections. I asked them at the end why I had been called in, and they said it was due to my subject matter and the initially proposed group interviews, as if no other researcher had ever done such a topic in this style of interviewing.

My adviser can attest to my grievances, because we had an hour conversation afterward in order to address their questions without sounding as if I was infuriated. The process put a huge damper on writing my thesis, and I felt demotivated and drained. What I choose to take from it, is that not only is my subject controversial, but it is obviously a topic worth writing about if it generated this much friction. I am dealing with a topic that fueled so much fear that it needed a full board to analyze the risk of doing the research. At the same time, it also showed the lack of knowledge that the REB has in terms of qualitative research, and that is something that needs to be rectified. We are a department that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative fields, and it is insulting that the REB has little to no understanding of the work we do. It is not as if qualitative research is exceptionally new, and even mixed-methods is becoming quite common in psychological research. It is time the REB managed this gap in the reviewing of social science work.
CHAPTER FOUR: Discussion

“...how we view the word slut like, just by using the word slut we are creating something bigger than that word. It has that ripple effect on everything and everyone.” (Erika)

So what is slut?

When I began my interviews, I had some idea of the stories that could emerge around the term slut and the concept of slut-shaming, but its discursive power and the meaning behind it was not so easy to recognize. Whenever I brought up my thesis topic, everyone I talked to had a story and indeed felt very strongly about my subject of interest. Young women and men, it would appear, have a lot to say on the subject of sexuality, and specifically women’s sexuality (Raby, 2009; Pomerantz, 2007; Allen, 2008, 2009). In my conversations with people, some would immediately connect the term slut to rape culture, and others felt it was a term that simply stated the truth about contemporary Canadian young women, which was that they should ‘stop dressing like sluts’. Many would link the idea of slut to dress, a common occurrence in most of the literature. As Raby (2009) examined with her participants who discussed how different types of dress are or are not acceptable, many of my participants brought up style and dress as well:

I would say like how they look, just wearing like risky clothing and like, provocative and um, I don’t know, hooking up with a bunch of guys haha is the basic stuff, that’s how I would see it. (Theresa, female, 19)

…Back when I used it [the term slut], characteristics usually, like I remember in grade eight, when Facebook was so big just, like things on, pics that girls would post like with the duckface, or like they’re wearing this thing or this thing, it’s how you present yourself. (Amy, female, 18)

Like if you got big boobs they’re gunna (sic) be out in most things you wear right away. That’s seen as more slutty as opposed to someone who has a smaller chest they can wear the same thing and it’s like, girls will be like oh that looks so sexy on you, like your like whatever, and they wouldn’t be like deemed this slut figure. Whereas I think the second you have like ass, tits, legs you’re screwed, like you’re screwed. (Erika, female, 23)

2 Pseudonyms were given to protect the identity of the participants. They were randomly chosen.
I describe it very much in the sense like the stereotypical they dress provocatively, they’re kind of promiscuous, however I don’t take the stereotype seriously anymore. (Max, female, 19)

Within these exchanges are the links to bigger issues surrounding the idea of women’s sexuality. In my personal conversations, as well as my interviews, it generally comes down to the idea of context and respect. Context is defined as “the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning” and “the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs: environment, setting <the historical context of the war>” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online), and respect, defined in many ways, such as holding a person, place, thing or idea in esteem, or an act of giving particular attention or consideration to something (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary Online). The difficulty in understanding these terms is that they interconnect: the respect we hold can change based on context, for example, and respect can change around subtle differences, such as wearing underwear in public rather than a swimsuit. Opinions can be altered based on a simple change of perspective.

Clothing is generally just the trigger in talking about how women do or do not respect themselves, which is often dependent on their sexuality, or, more often than not, the number of sexual partners they have. When asked to define the term slut, my participants stayed pretty close to this definition, with the addition of considering a slut as someone outside of a monogamous relationship:

I would say, a person either man or woman, who has like, an excessive amount of partners with the intention of not carrying any type of relationship with them in the future. (Raina, female, 19)

... Basically it would be a girl sleeping with a lot of guys, and it would be more hooking up with them, not just having a long term relationship and sleeping with them, it would be more like one night stands. (Sam, male, 19)

It’s a very gendered definition, is there a real definition for slut? I’m not sure, but there are characteristics. Um I think it’s more associated with girls or females who are more promiscuous, yeah promiscuous meaning that they have a lot of partners
um, in, um when they’re not in a relationship so, monogamy, not monogamous.
(Veronica, female, 24)

We [my friends and I] didn’t really put it in perspective of what she was wearing, but if she, a girl was uh um, sleeping around um, and then we would jokingly say ‘oh she’s a slew’. (Brendan, male, 22)

However most of my participants felt that they did not necessarily agree with this definition, and some blatantly stated that they felt the term slut was a hostile term before even suggesting stereotypes associated with it, framing much of what the literature on SlutWalk has suggested about the term and its effects (Ringose & Renold, 2012):

It is a weapon, it is a slur, it is used to, it’s in an arsenal of terms that are used to control women and define them by their sexuality. (Fran, female, 21)

It’s degrading it’s sexist, um it’s used when somebody’s power is questioned, and it’s usually, uh no you know what I can’t say it’s one or the other sex that uses it, I definitely think it’s probably even, because men use it as a way to, in my opinion, to put women down, but the same with women right? Because it’s just like, you know slut is associated with female, and being called a female in society is a negative thing so when you’re calling someone a slut it’s obviously very negative and it’s just, ties into that whole, well you’re a girl you’re a slut you’re doing something wrong, like that kind of thing (Amy)

Amy also suggests that being seen as a female in our society is generally negative, something that was implicit in many of my participants’ thoughts when they discussed the gendered differences they felt the term had. She expressed a power imbalance that jibes with many scholars, such as Tanenbaum (2000), who felt that the term slut created an ‘othering’ effect meant to maintain the hegemonic system that placed women below men. This hierarchy was also something suggested by Max, in relation to being called a ‘boy in a girl’s body’ by her peers and guys she dated.

I asked if she took the comment as a compliment, “No, like when I was younger, like it’s all over our society how boys are better, so when I was younger I was like, ‘Yeah! This is I guess
better than being called a girly girl’, and then I got older and I was like, ‘No, there’s nothing wrong with being a girl, there’s nothing wrong with that so just, I’d be fine being called a girl.’ ”

Two of my participants said specifically that they believed context was a main factor in determining when and why someone is called a slut:

It’s not a nice term, I think it’s degrading, I think the term slut is degrading, um. But it’s, I think it depends also on how they’re saying, how somebody’s saying it and what context it’s in. I mean if one of your friends goes, ‘Oh you were such a slut on the weekend’, um, but that was like a onetime thing, or are they identifying you as a slut in general and that’s your label so that’s interesting, never thought of that actually. (Veronica)

I would define it, it’s kind of to me I have different versions of slut depending on the context, but like overall I would say someone who sleeps, like has a lot of sexual partners, um, an then, also though someone who dresses provocatively. (Erika)

Interestingly one of my participants, while stating that she had changed her way of understanding the term slut from elementary school to now, considered a different meaning, but one that can be implicitly linked to the characteristics of a slut my participants talked about:

Like [in] middle school high school was very much like uh, plastic, vapid shallow, stuff like that, didn’t really, airhead, didn’t really have a lot of stuff going on up there. Um now I just see it as an insult a weapon, to use things that you are unfortunately going to have to transcribe, things like cunt, cumdumpster, personal favourite (sarcastic tone), stuff like that very devaluing, not that what I thought, what I took as the definition wasn’t, but a lot more violent, a lot more there will never be any more hope for you. With my idea of an airhead, there was still, you can still fill with knowledge. Slut is an object, she doesn’t, she’s not even a she, she’s an it, it doesn’t think, it just does its role. Pleases others, that’s what it exists for. (Fran)

I found Fran’s understanding of slut to be a very power definition, as the past informed the present. Fran’s encounters in high school with the girls she called ‘vapid’ and ‘shallow’, she later suggested, were filled with jealously, as those girls were able to make friends easily and were generally popular. Class, as I will discuss more deeply throughout my analysis, plays a large role in how girls and boys present themselves. What makes a person popular is not always being informed, or at least for girls it can mean acting like ‘airheads’, or ignoring certain situations
perhaps to make them more attractive to men, and to also seem more passive or unintelligent for the same reasons (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015).

A slut, who many of my participants suggested was a woman with no self-respect, seems related to the idea of a shallow, vapid girl who is seeking the approval of her peers over her own self-worth. As an ‘it’, as Fran describes, young woman can be constructed as an object, because she is not someone who can think for herself and make informed decisions - she is ‘othered’ for her sexuality. In this definition we see the role of respect in characterizing a slut, and the restraints that are placed on a woman’s sexual exploration (Pomerantz, 2008). Thinking on Fran’s conception of the term slut, I came up with a new definition I felt fit with my participants’ definitions: if a woman chooses to have sex with multiple partners outside of a monogamous relationship, she is making a misguided decision based on a need for approval and low self-worth, not linked to her own sexual desire, and is disrespecting herself. This definition helped to remind me of the ways in which slut can alter based on context.

But what does it all mean?

I started chapters one and two by looking at the different definitions of the term slut as a way to emphasize the ambiguity of the term in its practical application and use. However, how participants viewed someone who was a slut or seen as slutty were very different from academic definitions. This discrepancy highlights how the synonyms attached to the word slut are not always what might be expected.

I don’t really know, I would just say like ‘whore’, ‘slut’ and I know there’s others I’m blanking on them right now, but pretty much anything relating to how you dress or your sex life. (Max)

Slut… um provocative? Um… risky… maybe like hot… um… carefree… um… yeah, just yeah, that type of personality like putting yourself out there and not really caring, like. I would say it’s like somebody who puts themselves out there in maybe a disrespectful or like, um, like risky kind of way, whether it’s like how they dress or through how they act with maybe guys. (Theresa)
Ones like whore, uh, what else, there’s whore, prostitute. These are just psychological things that are conjured up by association because I’ve spoken with some prostitutes and they are noble women. (Dani)

So again, like promiscuous um, flirty, um… like very almost outgoing, you’d have to be outgoing I think, I don’t know I think there’s a lot of other words but I just can’t think of any. (Veronica)

It’s kind of a hard question, cause to me a whore doesn’t really mean the same thing as slut. I would just like… if someone’s a whore, like to me a whore would be more someone who’s like cheating on someone I guess, like I’d call them more likely, like that would have been more likely to say, like that’s so whorish, you’re a whore as opposed to a slut, slut’s almost more like flirty and friendly… It’s like, like kinda that context depending on how serious it is. Cause to me like whore is a real bad word, but like slut has become normalized, when you think about it like, people, it’s used so often that it’s like just like a normal sort of the normal use of language, so like, I don’t even realize sometimes I said it until afterwards. (Erika)

The idea of being ‘carefree’, outgoing or a risk-taker seems to be counterintuitive to the discourses around slut as an invariably negative term, especially if we think of self-esteem or reputation. However, these words are also coupled with ‘whore’, ‘promiscuous’, ‘prostitute’, and the idea that women who are sluts do not respect themselves. Respect is crucial here, because when exploring these oppressive characteristics it is clear that a word can hold meaning based on shifting contexts, and thus the power it holds is unimaginable, because it can adapt and maintain itself by becoming normalized thought and behaviour.

In different contexts being outgoing, carefree, or even a risk-taker are highly respectable traits. On the one side, when asked how they would like others to identify them, most of my participants wanted to be seen as open, caring, and outgoing and a few even said that their friends would most definitely see them as risk-takers, which they felt was a positive. Conversely, however, being seen as promiscuous or as a prostitute, are signifiers of women who do not respect themselves because they are not following societal norms of ‘good girl’ femininity (Garcia, 2009). In fact, being a risk-taker is often seen as a more masculine trait. One participant, Veronica, even suggested that “maybe it’s the girls that are more confident and opinionated,
maybe it’s someone who goes up to a guy at the bar and goes I think you’re attractive, I wonder if that makes her a slut?” This idea contrasts with Theresa, who suggested:

You could say that they’re more, like they’re confident because they’re like- putting themselves out there and like getting all this attention, but then I, you could also say that they’re not confident because they feel like they have to do that to get attention from other people like, that’s kind [of] where their self-worth comes from.

Again we see the interplay between context and respect, as it is seen as respectable for men, and indeed encouraged for men to sleep with women (Katz, 1999; Pascoe, 2007). But, it is seen as problematic for women to act the way men do, which means slut changes based on gendered assumptions. After having talked about slut and how it is characterized, and what the opposite is, Max suggested that “there is a very fine line, um and honestly I think it depends on day-to-day events, person-to-person, like it just depends on so many different variables, that’s why slut is such a difficult thing because there’s so many variables that interchange.” This statement was also in regards to whether someone is sexy or slutty, another area in which Max had concerns:

I would just say dressing provocatively, but at the same time, dressing provocatively is almost an unfair term because they consider short shorts and a tank top or a bikini as something slutty, but what else do you want us to wear in the summer? It’s hot also, yes I wear short shorts but if my butt’s covered the whole time is [it] still provocative? Cause then it comes into all those questions like what’s provocative what isn’t provocative?

Many of my participants had trouble with characterizing a slut, some going back and forth in their ideas, others only being able to reflect on it after thinking about what the opposite might be, such as Amy:

Like back when I used it [the term slut], characteristics usually, like I remember in grade eight, when FB was so big just, like things on, pics that girls would post like with the duckface, or like they’re wearing this thing or this thing, it’s how you present yourself, it’s how the person called a slut is presenting themselves, and if you have any knowledge of their sexual history really. I think that’s the, those are the characteristics… Sometimes it’s physical, and then, like physical in how you present yourself and then sometimes it’s sexual. Yeah like slut, the first time it was introduced to me, it was somebody who sleeps with a lot of guys, that’s how it was defined for me and then it became more how you look, like, ‘oh she looks really
slutty’, like, ‘she’s wearing like her bums out, her boobs are out’ and things like that, but um, I dunno just the word just had so many different, it just has a million definitions, but it’s always for women, it’s always a female attack when its used.

This statement is interesting because it suggests that dressing a certain way is a presumption of a person’s sexual history, while also being clearly directed at women. Amy felt that at her age, in first year university, the term was seldom used, which I found intriguing so I asked if she felt that the discourses surrounding slut still applied in whatever way they presented themselves, positive or negative, and she replied with a scenario of a recent event in which she and her friend had essentially called someone a slut without using the term:

There are some things that just happened with my friends that like there was cheating in the relationship, kind of screwed up and we aren’t, we didn’t say like the girl’s this slut, but we’re using different, we’re describing her, were, sluts here and then we’re using every other term basically… I may have to change my answer now, yeah just thinking about this. Because there’s slut in the middle and then you just all these different points or words that describe, like you just have this humungous thesaurus for the word slut. It’s almost unavoidable, the way, whether you use it directly or indirectly, it’s an unavoidable term almost.

She states here that whether the term is used directly or indirectly, it is unavoidable. For a term to hold such discursive power without even being uttered, means the meaning behind it can adapt to suit new contexts, while still retaining the underlying term slut. It was not said directly, but it was embedded within the discourses surrounding it; the concept was still very much alive.

Veronica also talked about context, while giving an example of it, “Yeah context environment, again a bar on a weekend, um, is different than somebody who’s at school or at their job.”

Brendan also makes an interesting distinction from the definition he gave for slut, suggesting that girls use the term outside its definition as a way to hurt someone’s reputation:

Actually I don’t even I wouldn’t even uh, maybe from my perspective, a guy’s perspective, if a girl was talking to another guy… or hanging out or doing whatever with another guy, then I can see like that group of girls calling her a slut, but then again I can also see them saying ‘oh that bitch’ - like you know what I mean like, for backstabbing them, not backstabbing but you know like sneaking in… I guess its cause it’s from my own personal experience seeing it happen, I’ve never seen
like guys attack a girl call her like a slut right in front of her face, I’ve never seen that before. But like when the girls would say it like, I would say it’s like whatever comes to their mind, like whatever to like make them feel crappy, like about themselves, they throw bitch out they throw slut, you know it’s just to attack them just for doing what, just for talking to the guy.

In this framing, slut is used as a tool for girls to police other girls as a way to increase their own status in the eyes of prospective male mates, making it a distinctively heterosexual term. Raina and Veronica, along with Erika who I quoted earlier talking about how a woman’s physique is seen as more or less slutty, made the distinction that while they did not agree with the characteristics, they felt that slut was based on links to clothing and the way a girl looks.

I don’t want to say someone who dresses with less clothes cause I don’t think that has anything to do with like how… um, I’d say, um, someone who has like extremely low self-esteem but carries themselves as if they like, doesn’t really have any respect for themselves. You can kinda see it by the way they talk to people or um, like associate with people or like if someone like um, kinda doesn’t like I don’t know, like someone who’s too open with certain things they say like in a sexual aspect? (Raina)

I think its associated a lot with appearance especially with Halloween that just passed on the weekend, I had a lot of conversations with people saying that, ‘oh girls dress, there’s two types of girls on Halloween there’s the ones who dress slutty which is like short skirts or lots of skin’ and that type of thing… or there’s like girls who like um, yeah who are just being something silly or scary. (Veronica)

Veronica touched on Halloween as an interesting divide between men and women’s costumes, and other participants also noted this difference; men can be firefighters or police, but women’s costumes are labeled ‘sexy’ firefighter or ‘sexy’ cop. This distinction yet again emphasizes gender differences, how closely connected the ideas of sexy and slutty are, and how labeling something ‘sexy’ or ‘slutty’ changes its meaning all together.

Participants Theresa and Sam felt that clothing was indeed linked to being a slut, though they both felt that girls and women might wear certain clothing as a way to find confidence or fit in:
I don’t know just like how like maybe kinda like the attitude in it like, oh maybe you just shouldn’t dress like that, like there’s more surrounding the circumstance why people dress like that. Like confidence and stuff and yeah, trying to get attention so maybe like there’s something else you should focus on first and that’ll fix why they dress like that. (Theresa)

Theresa also expressed that while she could understand why someone would dress that way to gain confidence, she felt there were better ways for women to fit in and express themselves.

When asked what the opposite of a slut was and how one might characterize them, participants had just as much trouble trying to come up with a word that was, essentially, the antonym of slut, and what exactly that would look like. Key words used were conservative, monogamous, prude/pure, shallow, and self-respect. Yet other than prude, none of the words used were nouns, they were all adjectives of the non-slut in question, for example, someone can be monogamous or be conservative, they are not a monogamous or a conservative, unless we are talking politics. A person can be in a monogamous relationship, but monogamy is not a label in and of itself. To be monogamous is a lifestyle choice, the same way acting conservatively follows certain principles. Conservative can also mean private, and perhaps about certain aspects of one’s life, like their sexual experience. However, just because someone is private about their sex life does not mean they do not have one, as my participant Veronica pointed out, noting that she has had multiple partners but would never be called a slut because she does not announce her experiences.

These characteristics emphasize the societal values that are placed on a woman’s sexuality: to be conservative, respectful, private/reserved, have high self-esteem, and it appears most importantly, monogamous. Veronica later asked if it is really about the number of partners, or the frequency of having sex, because someone can be in a few long term relationships and have had more sex in those relationships than someone who has hooked up with multiple one night stands. This also questions the style of sex; does any one position make a person more or
less of a slut? I did not have this question as a part of my interview table so it did not come up in all interviews, but again, it highlights the ambiguity of the term slut.

Appearance brings up a very crucial point that other authors have pointed out. Writing on style, Pomerantz (2009) touches on how clothing can change how a person is perceived. Whether the individual is wearing ‘conservative’ or ‘provocative’ clothing can be an indication of how they see themselves and how others see them. This was much like the example of Wendy in the documentary ‘Sluts’ where the girls clearly suggest that because of the girl’s appearance, she is a slut, with no indication of her sexual history (Dorfman, 2006). If being labeled a slut has an effect on one’s reputation, or status, and whether they are seen as ‘easy’ or not, then I wonder to what extent it can influence an individual’s sexual subjectivity. If being a slut means you do not respect yourself, as suggested by the characteristics, and the opposite means you do respect yourself, then the word slut is a mark of shame.

In discussing the idea of what the opposite of a slut would be, or a ‘non-slut’ as participants indicated, many alluded to the idea of respect as previously mentioned, and that a ‘non-slut’ is someone who respects themselves. Sam had some difficulty explaining the idea of respect stating, “I guess someone who’s… I wouldn’t say has more self-respect, I guess it’s just um, how they choose to respect theirselves [sic].” This was contrasted with a term like ‘prude’ that Raina suggested, which proposes a woman who is uptight and does not want to have sex out of self-righteous reasons. Brendan brings up what makes defining and explaining slut so difficult, because he suggests it is someone who is not monogamous or loyal, but the definition that he gave of a slut was simply someone who sleeps with many people, and loyalty is not a part of that characteristic. He and his friends used the term ‘slew’ instead of slut, as they felt it was less vulgar, something I will examine further when discussing resignification.
I guess it would be the exact opposite of what my friends defined as a slew, which is someone who is I guess, um, you know someone who believes in I guess monogamy, and um, you know I guess not sleeping around... I guess they’re loyal in a relationship, um, in my opinion I guess that’s what the opposite would be. See we never associated how they dressed how somebody dresses, so like I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t say it’s someone who dress conservative, no it’s not, to my opinion its more of behaviour aspect. I guess the opposite behaviour of what a slew would be.

(Brendan)

He felt it was not about the clothing; it was a person’s behaviour. Erika also felt it was a person’s behaviour that assisted in their label, not dealing with the number of partners, but how someone treats the person they are with: “I know promiscuous also stands for cheating and stuff, that’s one thing that I’d like, I’d have a hard time not calling someone a slut if they like cheat on their significant other. It crosses my moral line like hugely, [as] opposed to being single and sleeping with a lot of people too.” However, as expressed by Veronica, if no one knows about the behaviour then they may be a slut or a non-slut, making it quite the paradoxical term. The discourses that surround the term slut mean that without the knowledge of a person’s behaviour they cannot legitimately be called a slut. As the term slut is used as a way to gain or maintain power, it is essential that the definition remain within this ambiguous state as it can move between discursive fields (Weedon, 1987). This fluidity acts as a tactic of surveillance in which institutions and social agents police women, until women internalize said discourses. When women internalize discourses, such as those surrounding slut, they begin to change their behaviour, in concrete or subtle ways such as changing clothing or changing whom a person trusts with discreet sexual experiences so as not to be judged. While the opposite of slut has no discernible characteristics, similar to the term itself, there are still assumed qualities that people know to display based on social conventions. Amy discussed the issue dealing with the ambiguous nature of slut:
The first word that came to my head was purity, and then I thought about virgin Mary, so those two things kinda came to my mind because it’s more of a sexual term I think, just like, ‘oh a slut she probably sleeps with a lot of guys’, that’s just what I think, purity. But I really couldn’t think of like an opposite to it. And it’s funny just today in seminar I said we, as humans, we need opposites of things right? Like good and bad, and things like that, but if we don’t have an opposite than how do we deal with that?

She brings up an intriguing point about the dichotomous nature of our society, as well as religious aspects, which I will discuss when looking at intersectionality. Amy suggests that as humans we constantly need binaries, things need their opposite, but when there is no opposite, or a person does not fit neatly into any one category, the binary begins to dissolve which is disconcerting for many people who rely on that system to make sense of their lives and others around them. The easiest example of this is gender, because the majority of people seem to feel they fit into a gender, such as masculinity or femininity. But that is where the problem lies because while many of my participants felt slut should hold a definition that is unisex, the examples of a slut are decidedly female. The term divides women into ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and leaves no room for the in between, and it does not have an opposite other than the idea of someone who is ‘conservative’. Slut reflects, reproduces, and polices a double standard based on gender, so we have to question what purpose the term serves, and for whom. Amy also stated that “across the board like everybody uses it not everybody but, when it’s used to attack someone, it’s used to attack a female, cause you don’t hear, maybe guys or girls will call a guy a slut, generally when you think slut, you get a picture of a female in your head. That’s the first thing, you never think of a man.” This suggests women are demonized for being sexual and men are glorified.

Dani also suggested the term could mean another term altogether, such as a nymphomaniac, which he described as “someone who engages in the sexual act and receives no pleasure from it, but simply compulsively does it multiple times.” While the definition may be
slightly different from Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary’s definition, “excessive sexual desire by a female” (which has its own ties to how we view women’s sexuality), it highlights the idea of women seeking approval or respect from men, and Dani felt that was not a fact that held true for every woman who ‘slept around’. Veronica commented that she felt she was being very stereotypical in her depictions, which made her reflect on where those ideas came from, and this was something my participants Fran and Amy associated with a “male driven culture” in Canada.

Our culture, our, let’s name the problem, male driven culture, um… demonizes a woman for saying no to sex because that’s not giving the men what they want, but also it, slut can be used to demonize a woman for saying yes, and that’s how you get control of someone, no matter what, you learn this in cult behaviour 101, no matter what you do you are flawed. That’s how you get control of someone and having control of, especially when women are taught, you’re already taught that your sexuality is your every worth, if they can control your sexuality, they can sell you anything, convince you to do anything. (Fran)

Similarly, Amy noted:

I don’t know, I think, there, hmm it’s difficult we, as in women, we are either told to be sexy or like our bodies are sexualized, or we’re censored. Like there’s just no in between, I don’t know, I think they’re just complete opposite ends of the spectrum, really because if you’re slutty you’re bad, but if you’re sexy you’re good, there’s no, even if there is a crossover like it’s still, now I have a Venn diagram of it... (Amy)

**Gender and Slut**

The intersection between gender, class and the term slut was one of the only things I had expected to find in the interview data, due to the gendered nature of the term. Even within the definitions and characteristics my participants gave, many said immediately that it was more associated with women than men. While the majority of my participants identified as female, there was a great variety in their responses, some which echoed each other and others that were completely different perspectives. My range of participants produced a more complex conversation about gender than I might have anticipated. For one, all of them believed the term
slut was gendered, and it was the male participants who brought up the idea of ‘the player’ and ‘the game’; examining how we weigh sexual activity differently among men and women:

I’ve never heard a guy ever called a slut before uh, I guess they just call them players, um, that’s what my group of friends we would call them, players, um, and again, this is the problem is like, you have a terrible word like the word slut that’s very negative and then you have players but then guys would associate players with uh, like a positive attribute right? Which doesn’t make any sense, that’s my opinion, but um, yeah I don’t think there can be like a negative term from a male’s perspective looking on this um, I don’t think there can be a negative term for men who sleeps around. (Brendan)

I asked Brendan why he thought that men were seen as players and women as sluts,

That’s the million-dollar question, um, maybe it has to do with like societal pressures or… I don’t know like honestly like, just looking back at like with my friends or whatever, it just kinda seems to be like the, not the talk, but the it was okay for guys to you know to be with all these other girls and where that originated I have no idea, it was just, everybody knew it, so maybe it came from like hearing about experiences with older, cause we play football, right? So we were friends with the older guys and just hearing their stories or whatever, you know just hearing from the older group and then it gets passed down kinda. But like I have no idea where that originated, where that ever started, but it was kinda like uh something that we all accepted. Um, never really questioned it, it was just uh, yeah men who like got around and talked to a lot of girls and they, they knew what was called the game, as people called it, ‘The Game’, and they were players, and it was never considered bad.

Brendan brings up an analogy, about the game and its players, which is something I grew up with, at varying times a willing and unwilling participant. All my participants alluded to this idea, saying that men who are able to get women are respected. Only Max suggested a term she felt held equal weight with slut for men, ‘fuckboy’, which I discuss below. However, looking at this idea of ‘The Game’ suggests differences in gender perspectives. After Brendan brought it up, I was eager to learn more about the rules and roles of the game. If men were the players, where did that leave women who were deemed to be sluts?

The game isn’t, your goal is not to find a slew, the game, the whole point of the game is to um, how do I say it, have those interactions with women and then have that lead to something… The game is all about, not necessarily [sex], like it can be talking or um, being with, or doing things with many women… In the game you
got someone who’s not a slew, so it’s not necessary that they have a part in it, I would say they have a part but like they’re not the sole objective of the game, finding a slew, I don’t think so, obviously it makes the game easier.

Even in trying to describe the idea of the game, Brendan’s answer was gendered because that was the way of the game. Women were not contenders, not players, they were the pieces won and collected, and the more women collected the better the achievement. This idea of the ‘player’ connects to Butler’s (1999) performativity, as it suggests that men and women are actively ‘doing’ gender. While the ‘player’ is aware of his performance, the game they are playing is embedded with social constructs that influence the rules of the game, and leaves women, as well as other minorities, at a disadvantage. This rule does not hold true for women, as many of my participants pointed out:

When you have something like a beautiful body that you can offer onto a guy, then multiple guys are going to be interested. However, why am I called a playa, when I’m really a slut? Why do I get an honourable term such as playa and then a girl gets a dishonourable term such as slut? (Dani)

It’s [being called a player] not perceived as the same meaning, because it’d be like oh this guy’s a champ, like he’s a player, whereas oh you’re a slut like I don’t even want to talk to you kinda thing.” (Sam)

I think girls call guys like a man, male whore or something haha. Something like that, but I think guys love it I don’t think that they take it like females do because again its appearance it’s how many people you’ve slept with its that type of thing and when, I think when males say it to a female it’s supposed to be degrading like she was so easy like, uh, yeah, the type of thing whereas a male is getting high fived because he has had multiple partners, um, and I guess in our society that’s something that’s looked upon for that gender. (Veronica)

Veronica reiterates the idea that it is the societal values placed on men and women that allow for men to feel empowered by their sexual prowess and for women to feel shamed by it. The term ‘easy’ is used in many of the participants’ quotes, as we saw in Veronica’s, but also at the end of Brendan’s quote about ‘the game’ he makes a quip about how sluts make the game easier, meaning that they are not hard to get. A slut is the lowest level of difficulty and in gaming terms,
the player is trying to work up from the easy level to a more difficult challenge. Calling a person easy, a meaning associated with slut, creates the idea that they are always willing to have sex. For example, Veronica talked about her sexual experience, and expressed that if people did not ask her how many people she slept with, they would not be aware of her number of partners, because of her appearance.

I mean, I have, and I’m not, I don’t, if anyone called me a slut I would be upset, but people don’t call me that because of my appearance, because I don’t look like a slut, because I’m educated, and because I don’t dress provocatively and that type of thing, but yes I do have multiple partners and I’ve had quite a few, but I don’t think that makes me a slut if I’m consenting to sex… Whereas again for men it’s looked upon as a good thing.

Veronica brings up the idea of appearance and education, which addresses that intersection between gender and class. Appearance is critical to our subjectivity as it deals with how we present ourselves to the world. I reiterate this point to show the importance that appearance plays in how my participants hoped others would view them. While they talked more about traits than style, each participant strongly felt that they wanted to be respected and perceived as driven or caring and most often as an open individual that people admire. Erika said she would be described as a risk-taker and also open, “[Friends] would describe me as 100% a risk-taker because they tell me that all the time, and like they’d describe me as like very open and honest.”

This was similar to other participants, like Brendan, as well:

I feel like people would associate me with being friendly or like open, like somebody they can come to talk to… like if there’s a problem, oh go talk to Brendan… I wouldn’t mind them describing me in that sense. But again not forgetting the aspect where I’m still athletic and that is important to me.

Brendan also explained that because of how he performs academically and socially he feels he is a well-rounded individual, and this seemed to be how participants wanted to be viewed. Brendan suggests that while he wants to be seen as open, he also places a lot of importance on his athleticism and he is proud of that, and he wanted people to take notice. He did not want any one
aspect of his life to overshadow other equally important aspects. Yet the label slut doesn’t allow
for complexity of identity – it does not make layers or nuances possible. Its ambiguity as a term
allows for it to adapt to any given context, but it is still singular in its denial of sexual
subjectivity and forces those labeled to live with one-dimensional identities. When someone is
labeled a slut, their sexuality is emphasized over all other traits (Victor, 2004).

As a mobilized and shifting term, slut can be influenced by different intersecting factors.
A gender analysis shows how it does not work as a negative influence on a man’s sexual
subjectivity, but also for those of higher class, as I discuss below. I would suggest, however, that
calling a man a virgin has a similar effect, in that it highlights his sexuality over everything else
in a negative way. These values on men were something Veronica noted as well, stating: “for a
male if they haven’t slept with a lot of people um, they’re probably looked at as not being ‘the
man’ or not being cool, because they haven’t slept with a bunch of girls, but I think to a lot of
girls that’s like a respectable trait, but again then the same could be said for females, so then
maybe not sleeping with a lot of people is a respectable thing for a female as well.” This idea is
similar to Pascoe’s (2007) findings around the emphasis for young men’s values on having sex,
derived from machoism and wanting to perform the stereotypical male role in hopes of not being
called a ‘fag’.

Sex seems to be the ultimate truth and milestone of masculinity. To be a virgin means to
lose the respect of one’s peers and prospective sexual partners. Male culture is saturated with
machoism and violence (Katz, 1999; Pascoe, 2007), and it praises aggressive behaviour above
all. This culture is important for many reasons including the idea of surveillance and
internalizing behaviours based on societal norms and labels. It may also explain the very
aggressive nature of playing ‘the game’ and how that may link to men calling women sluts. An
example of this aggressiveness, and why I connect it to using the term slut, can be seen in this story from Erika about an ex-boyfriend who used to call her a slut because she did not want to have a relationship with him.

I dated a guy who was a really negative experience for me, and he would call me that... Like if, he would get mad at me he would be like, ‘you’re such a fucking slut...’ When he was saying it I think it was he wanted to be in a relationship and I didn’t... it was his way of expressing that he’s angry that I don’t wanna be like exclusively in a serious relationship...looking back to two years ago, at that point when I’m like- it’s a really negative experience. He would talk about so many girls that way.

I would suggest that what Erika’s boyfriend really wanted was control over her by using this term. Later on in the interview, she told me that her then ex-boyfriend, along with a drunk friend he brought with him, sexually assaulted her:

The one guy, it was like premeditated, and the one guy who premeditated it is the guy I dated two years ago who called me a slut... it happened while I was sleeping, like I woke up. The other guy was so drunk that he didn’t remember doing it, and felt terrible about it, sincerely, like I could see it, but I still, like he had the capacity to do that, like I know guys and girls who get really drunk and still know better!

In this statement, she also touches on the idea of the ‘guilt’ that women feel towards their male perpetrators after being sexually assaulted. Exploring that in more detail later, I will say that Erika brings up an excellent point about the decision and capacity of an individual to assaultsomeone. It may not be completely clear what connection is between calling Erika a slut and her ex-boyfriend’s decision to sexually assault her, but there is some indication that he wanted to control her and used that term as a way to try to make her feel guilty about her actions. As discussed it is a term often used to justify violence towards women. He was trying to dehumanize her to make her change her behaviour, and when she did not, he took control through other means. It begs the question, why use slut as a term? Why did he choose to call her a slut over other insults? I believe it is because of the shame it is meant to impart, and the power it has over a women’s sexual subjectivity.
This dehumanizing quality is akin to the idea of ‘othering’, in which a person is excluded or shamed for who they are or their behaviour. This was looked at extensively by Haskell and Burtch (2009) when discussing homosexual and transgendered youth and their experience of high school. They discussed the use of homophobic and transphobic bullying as a way to other those individuals. This was also something practiced against youth of different minority racial backgrounds, specifically black and aboriginal. By turning them into an object they become an it, just as Fran suggests, by calling a woman a slut she becomes it and it is subject to those in control. This is where ‘fuckboy’ comes into play.

**Race and Slut**

I had never heard the term ‘fuckboy’ before Max described it to me:

I think it’s almost equivalent to female slut except it’s worse in the sense that not only are they I guess, sleeping around but they’re doing it in a way that they have no, like they disregard sex for the people that they’re with. Like if they are a player or whatever, they have no respect for the women or the girls, that they come into contact and intimately with, so while slut is you’re wrong for having sex with people, with fuckboy it’s, ‘you’re wrong for having sex with people but not respecting them at all as a human being, like you treat them awfully’.

I asked Max how she felt about the term, and if she thought it was a good thing to have a term with equal weight to slut, and she said yes:

Because both genders behave the same when it comes to sex, you have people who are traditionally or stereotypically a slut or aren’t, but you have that of both genders, male and female, but for some reason it’s the females who are punished for it. Males aren’t punished at all which I think isn’t fair, either give punishment to both or take it away completely, obviously take it away completely is better! But it’s a little more fair, which sounds awful because I understand that it’s oppressive and definitely like not that, but in a way it’s kind of equal, how we treat both genders and their sexuality, like we should be more equal about it. Like why is it acceptable for a man to sleep with whoever he wants but not a woman?

‘Fuckboy’ raises many concerns. It seems to confirm that slut is a solely negative term directed at women and because of this, there has been a term created to rival it. However, ‘fuckboy’ does not have the same ambiguous nature. Fuckboy is a man who disrespects women by treating them
badly after sleeping with them. They sleep with multiple women with no concern for how they feel. Slut, however, is any woman. It might be based on her appearance, her clothes, or the number of partners she has been with, regardless of how her partner is treated. The difference is that fuckboy distinguishes the behaviour as disrespectful based on how the man treats the women he sleeps with; the problem is not that he sleeps with multiple women, but that he is disrespectful towards them. The term slut is used to judge a woman’s character based on ambiguous behaviours or traits; a woman will be labeled a slut not because she is disrespectful towards others, though that is one reason, but because of arbitrary reasons such as clothing or number of sexual partners.

While all participants made a connection between gender and the term slut, only a few suggested it had racial implications, and of those few, only one suggested it had to do with how women of racial minority groups such Black/Aboriginal/Asian are eroticized, hypersexualized or seen as prostitutes.

Race for sure, um I’m obviously for the sake of your transcription white, and I can’t speak to the experiences of women of colour, but from what I understand, uh, black women [are] very hypersexualized in society’s eyes, eastern Asian women, kind of a uh, dichotomy as one person described as like the uh, lost my train of thought, but it’s very one or the other, like very sexualized or very asexual, no appeal there at all, they’re too interested in studying [about Asian women]. Check out my racial stereotypes haha. (Fran)

As we see in Fran’s statement, she connects stereotypical images of different minority groups to how these women are viewed sexually. The literature also notes that racial identity is influential in the construction of a woman’s sexuality (Lei, 2003; Lim & Fanghanel, 2013; Armstrong et al., 2014). What should be taken into account here is that Fran is a women’s studies student thus exposing her to ideas that some other participants’ might not have been exposed to. However, she was not the only participant who was involved in women’s studies, and her
statements as well as those of the others, help to better examine the invisibility of racial awareness and understanding.

Indeed, when discussing ‘race’ many participants felt it had no effect, or that the term slut was primarily used by and against white women. As Theresa noted, “I think there’s like, that separation between that [race] is kind of lessening, I think anyone really like just from seeing how certain people dress it’s all different types of people. I don’t think it’s really geared more towards a specific type of person, like cultural.” And Sam also stated, “I wouldn’t say race, um, I’m not sure about class or anything like that but, uh, I know it was like more targeted to a certain group of people, then anything.” Brendan also agreed: “No, I think that it applies to everybody, yeah it’s not based on ethnicity or what class you’re in, no it applies to everyone based on that behaviour of sleeping around, I guess that’s the only way I would see it, anyone can be it. It doesn’t have to be limited to anyone.”

Given the fact that most all my participants identified as white, it is not so shocking that most were unaware of the experiences of other minority groups, something also witnessed in previous literature (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013; Lei, 2003). Again, it emphasizes the gap felt by those of colour and those with white privilege.

There were also many comparisons between white young women and Muslim young women, with many participants suggesting that due to differences in cultural beliefs or religion, Muslim women are seen as more chaste or hold more strongly to their culture’s beliefs about sex and clothing than non-Muslim women. As Raina offered: “I’d say that race more like, I don’t wanna say like more Caucasians, like women who, like kinda like North American kinda countries like that kinda demographic, where they’re so like accustomed to having like media and like um like different kinda clothing and attire then someone who is like Indian, where’s like
the hijab and stuff like that.” Raina seems to imply that only white people in North America use the term, and that it might be due to media influence, which suggests that media in other countries such as India do not characterize men and women the same, or that it is not as strongly influential. Dani offered these thoughts:

I think that it’s a, typically, and I don’t mean to sound racist or stereotypical, usually its white girls. White girls can be very- white and black girls can use it extremely often. Now on racial lines, of course, every race can use it, and ironically enough, even though they um, want us all to think that none of them partake in sex, Muslim girls specifically Sunni and Shia girls, use it quite a bit, especially when they’re in Canada.

Lastly, Max concurs, suggesting that white girls seem to get called slut the most.

There’s definitely interconnections between like race, class and sex for all sorts of stereotypes, discriminations, oppressions. You name it. Um, I think yeah they all support each other, all the systems support each other and they definitely all interconnect… in terms of race… I honestly think that white girls get the brunt of the slut stick. Cause I grew up in a very multicultural school like, I had friends of all different sorts of backgrounds, nationalities, you name it and I think that even calling other people, like when I was in the phase and I did slut-shame it was mostly directed at white girls, and as a white girl myself I was directing it at other white girls so I think part of that is religion, in the sense that I had a lot of Muslim friends growing up and they dressed more conservatively, and they had stricter parents, so I think that’s a play in it, no one ever called a Muslim girl a slut.

In Max’s statement, she spoke of parenting so I asked her to expand on her thoughts on why she believed Muslim women are viewed in such a light, and how it relates with their culture. She stated:

Their culture is very different. They dress more conservatively. One of my best friend’s is Muslim, she’s getting an arranged marriage, so she’s not allowed to date, so it’s just a very culture, so and that, there’s nothing slutty deemed upon that culture. So it’s a very cultural thing.

While not explicitly stating ‘race’ as an indicator of how one’s perspective can change, Max, like other participants, continuously said there were cultural differences, and that because of those differences certain women act differently so they are less likely to be labeled a slut. Perhaps it also suggests that the term slut polices cultural values for women, as they fear being labeled will
mean they are acting against their cultural beliefs or practices. It may also police how others associate them in terms of the discourses that follow slut. Muslim women were seen as less likely to be labeled a slut because of their background and the way they dress. However, as was discussed by Lim and Fanghanel (2013), Muslim women are not any less likely to be called a slut because they dress more conservatively, and they are more often discriminated against and sexualized because of their cultural style.

Again I note the demographic of my participants, with most identifying as either white or European, and only one identifying as mixed. As shown, most participants saw the term as an issue between white women most specifically. This lack of racial awareness in relation to sexualisation connects to the literature on SlutWalks as a ‘white’ movement and the lack of historical context of Black women (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Likewise, Muslim women felt strongly that ‘race’ and clothing played a large role in how police handled situations of discrimination and assault (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013). This disparity between what my participants understood about racial identity and the term slut has a heavy impact on whether or not the term can be reclaimed, and for whom. It is an unfortunate reminder of how women of minority groups have often been silenced in policy and practice historically (Mowatt et al., 2013).

Fran’s statement jibes with previous literature in suggesting that Black women, Aboriginal women, Asian women and women of various other minority groups within Canada and the Western world, are often sexualized based on ‘race’, whether it be through hypersexualization or asexualization (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013; Lei, 2003). Gender, as discussed, plays an exceptionally important role in how a person’s sexuality is viewed, and this intersects greatly with ‘race’, though unfortunately my participants did not suggest that distinction. The
invisibility of intersectionality is problematic as Aboriginal women are disproportionately seen to exist within the sex trade industry, as well as black women, due to low SES, as well as historical aspects (Mowatt et al., 2013; Kubik et al., 2009). We even see this in colloquial jargon such as ‘once you go black you never go back’ suggesting that to be black in any regard means to have sexual prowess.

**Class and Slut**

It was also suggested in the interviews that the young women who slut-shamed were more often than not ‘white Christian girls’, and the emphasis was on *white*. As Dani explained, “I don’t mean to offend any beliefs by saying this; its typically Christian girls who do the slut-shaming, well, ‘non-practicing’ Christian girls.” Religion may also have an intersection with class. In fact, Max made a comment about how she and her friends were like ‘Catholic girls’, she brings up the idea that to be Catholic is to behave and dress according to standards that are respectful and ‘classier’. These comments on religion indicate that the effects of religious practices historically as well as contemporarily, still hold a lot of weight when looking at social values and morals. Religion seemed to come up quite often in the interviews as a marker of class, or as an institutional failing, which seemed especially true for Dani. Max also made a similar link about cliquish behaviour in relation to calling herself a ‘church girl’, echoing Dani’s earlier comment about ‘Christian white girls’, presenting herself and her friends on higher moral ground and therefore a higher class, that afforded them the opportunity to look down on other girls and call them trashy and slutty for what they wore or how they acted. Just as Armstrong et al. (2014) suggest, we see two different classes both rejecting each other on the basis that they are sluts, based on style and likeability.
Participants easily connected the term slut to class, especially in terms of dress. Many brought up the idea of how expensive clothing can make a person seem more high class, and because of this, they are less likely to be labeled slutty:

Even you take classiness say women’s shoes, there’s a difference between classy high heels and unclassy high heel which are stripper shoes, so the sex industry has already pulled into the unclassy, arbitrary divide in high heels, uh and it’s not clearly defined and it changes what’s a classy, uh high class woman’s high heel and what’s a stripper shoe. I think if you can get that barrier to move back and forth you can get women to keep buying shoes to keep up, because you don’t want to have the lower class the stripper shoe, and if suddenly your classy high heels suddenly have one too many straps oh no it’s a stripper shoe, you get far away from that... sexy and slutty there’s I think it’s uh, almost two sides of the same coin almost and that coin is negative one dollar. Um, I suppose sexy, affords the woman a little more autonomy, but I’m not sure how I feel about that, um, there’s a difference, slutty is um there’s like defined characteristics of what slutty is, sexy I think is a much wider spectrum, probably again because women are defined by our sexuality in our culture so regardless of, of how professional to uh, unprofessional your dress style is, there’s sexy all the way in there right? Even like, like our work clothes, they’re cut to make our boobs and butt look big, we’re at the office, that doesn’t need to happen. So sexy happens wherever it can, slutty is, just the lower end of that I think. (Fran)

Giving an example, uh I would say, particularly with um, lower class people especially women, you tend to think of them more as sluts or dirty just because they’re lower class, like that’s the stereotype. It just, because apparently having more money means you’re classier, so that’s the stereotype. (Max)

My participants made the connection between low SES and slut-shaming, or at the very least being seen as less ‘classy’. As mentioned above, participants discussed the differences between what is slutty what is not, and what the opposite of a slut looks like. All participants gave the image of a woman with low self-esteem as well as dressed in promiscuous or typically ‘low-class’ apparel when describing what slut looks like. Dress is crucial in this discussion because in this case social status can also intersect with physique and attractiveness (Pomerantz, 2009; Raby, 2009).

I feel like more people who are heavy, especially when people are heavy they don’t wanna wear tight pants, they don’t wanna wear short skirts, they don’t wanna wear crop tops or anything like that, so I feel like the more skinny you get the more um, comfortable you are with your body and I feel like that’s a good thing like you
should be, you should be proud of what you have and I feel like some people take it in a negative way… When big people do that they’re like omg this big girl is showing off things she shouldn’t, she must be a slut.” (Raina)

I can see how like in terms of like what clique you belong to would definitely come into play like. If you were, like in the popular, like say in high school if you’re part of the popular group, and then there’s someone who’s a part of the neglected group, like they might be more likely to say it, oh that popular girl’s dressed too slutty, because there’s that uneven playing field and that person kind of resents them, or it could be the opposite be like the popular girl is doing it to maintain their status. So I can see how that, I think that one hundred percent would, or if the person is beautiful you’re like well they’re allowed to dress like that. (Erika)

In Erika’s statement, she suggests a difference between people who are popular and those who are not. She suggests that being popular allows leeway for a girl to dress more ‘slutty’, and the same with girls and women who are more attractive. This suggests that popularity changes the way a woman is perceived, and their likeability can privilege them so that even if they are sleeping with multiple partners, or dressing in a certain way, it is seen as agentic and even sexy (Armstrong et al., 2014). Slut is meant to devalue girls’ reputation, and so those girls from working-class backgrounds may mobilize the term to slander the reputations of girls with middle-class backgrounds, because they may consider them snobs, while those of middle-class backgrounds may mobilize the term to slander the reputation of those with working-class backgrounds, branding them tacky and uncultured (Armstrong et al., 2014). However, those in the middle-class are less likely to have negative consequences.

This tactic of slander based on class also has a lot to say about status and reputation, and how girls tear each other down to maintain or gain popularity. Amy begrudgingly stated that she had been popular in high school, “I even hate saying that I hung out with the popular people, I feel so gross saying that. It sounds so just ‘love myself’ you know?” Her hesitance to think of herself in that light also echoed Brendan’s feelings, as he said he and his friends “weren’t the most popular” but they were able to move in and out of groups fluidly. Popularity and status
have a large role in how people perceive each other, whether they feel someone has ‘earned’ their status or if it was simply given to them. Fran suggested that because she felt outside of the ‘regular girls’, she saw them as ‘vapid’ and ‘slutty’ because, while she connected it to their behaviour and need for attention and male approval, she was also jealous of their seniority and ease with which they walked through high school. My participants consistently noted that popularity always came in groups, and those groups were often sought after and highly cliquish. Erika talked about her experience in her group of friends, and while she did not feel they were necessarily the popular group, they were simply a core group. Because of this she found that her friends did not take kindly to people coming from the outside into the group, which Erika experienced when she tried to invite a boyfriend to hang out with them. “I started dating someone outside our school it was like, no he can’t come to like so-and-so’s birthday, uhm, like we just want our friends there, like whoa, like that’s maybe exclusive.”

Attractiveness and popularity have been discussed in much of the literature and the connections are always similar if not the same (Pomerantz, 2008; Raby, 2009; Haskell & Burtch, 2010). Girls and women receive special treatment and privileges if they are pretty and popular, however it can change quite drastically and their fall from grace can be even more demoralizing based on a single transgression. Those who are not stereotypically labeled pretty or popular are not offered the protection of other popular girls’ privilege, and can maintain a reputation for being slutty no matter what they do. The protection of peers is examined in Pomerantz’s (2008) study, which explores the fragile line a woman walks in order to maintain her good reputation. My participants talked a lot about how popularity affects girls in high school:

…Especially if they’re not one [a slut] at all. Um, just because uh, say like the popular group of girls don’t like an individual and a girl from outside the group starts talking to that guy, that doesn’t mean that girl is a slut per say, right? It’s just, they just did it because they’re threatened by this other girl coming in and, like
they’re threatened and probably jealous, that’s probably why they’re trying to throw all these negative terms at her, to try and get her to back away; make her feel terrible about herself. (Brendan)

Brendan’s statement stresses the need for control and to maintain status within a group. It is a way to socially ostracize a girl, and make her feel ashamed for simply thinking she could be a part of the popular group, or date someone who was popular or attractive.

Paralleling the idea of what marks a woman as classy or attractive, participants often connected being a slut to prostitution. Some of the participants examined this in relation to class and trade, and the degradation that comes with being seen as a prostitute, or possibly worse as prostitutes are paid for their services and sluts are not.

When I think slut I also think prostitute too, um and I think maybe, I don’t know history very well but I think prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. But I usually I think European culture… it’s more Western I think where slut is associated with prostitution, like sex and you know putting yourself out there, and when you think prostitute or a stripper, they’re kind of all, they’re not all in the same category but when you think about it they kind of all just pop up in your head. You think less clothes, they’re having sex with a lot of men or women, doing a lot of sexual things. (Amy)

That’s interesting because, cause, especially women of in prostitution, pornography, in the sex industry, um, slut is almost their job description, and those in that industry that complex isn’t I don’t think it’s pulling in the women of higher classes the way it’s pulling in the women of lower classes. (Fran)

Prostitution and the sex trade industry have been demonized as a whole for promoting sex as legitimate work, and yet repeatedly the consumers of this industry are not critically explored. However, if the market for sex labour was not profitable, then it would not be such a thriving part of our economy. But because sex work is seen as immoral or the work of desperate women, there is a clear element of shame embedded in that definition. To be a slut is to be desperate and depraved, seeking approval in any way one can.

**Age and Slut**
My participants continuously talked about slut as if it were a phase, indicating a ‘youthfulness’ to the term:

I’ve been a make out slut and I would just tell people oh I’m a make out slut it’s a phase I’ll get over it soon… I think for a lot of people it is a phase. I talked to my friends, I had a serious relationship with someone for a few years, a couple years and now I’m back in a serious relationship with someone new and like when I talk to my friends about some of those things they’re like yeah, but like I don’t regret my slutty years I think everyone needs to have those slutty years. (Erika)

Maybe at the end of the day, I think I’m past, I think everyone goes through phases though. I think that maybe girls do have their slutty phase, maybe men do to, but I think it’s not slutty I think it’s just exploring, and I think I think that um, that being associated with that is even the way you dress you’re exploring um, yeah how you feel in these clothing’s and how your body reacts in different situations, and that type of thing. So I think that it depends on that period of exploration. (Veronica)

There seems to be the idea that only youth go through exploration, and that it is not something that happens over a lifetime. Subjectivity continues to change and evolve as we engage in new experiences; it is dynamic (St. Pierre, 2000). Looking at these many different aspects of subjectivity including ‘race’, class, gender and age just to name a few, there is a clear change in the meaning of slut and its relation to women’s subjectivity. This section of my interviews really emphasized the discursive power the term holds. It surprises in its direct links to women’s sexual subjectivity because even if a man displayed all the characteristics attributed to slut, it would be unlikely that he would be called one.

It is also clear that peer evaluation plays a significant role in how participants felt about the term slut, specifically in their teen years. While peer scrutiny leaves young women vulnerable to the negative consequences of the term slut, the term ‘teen’ allows them to bracket their actions in a way that protects themselves. Suggesting that being a ‘makeout slut’ was a phase, indicates that this is ‘teen-like’ behaviour and is acceptable when one is going through
teenagehood. However, this bracketing is problematic because it reinforces the idea that being ‘slutty’ is bad, and that it is only acceptable as a teen but not as an adult.

**Slut-Shaming and Self-Respect**

If we look back at the characteristics explored in my interviews, slut can mean outgoing or promiscuous, and this uncertainty or ambiguity was seen when I asked whether they felt they term was inherently negative or positive, or perhaps at times ‘fun’ or ‘playful’. Many participants felt it could be used playfully between friends, and some felt it really depended on the person. Max talked about how her and her friends call each other sluts and said “its playful… I got it more as I got older and then I did start… getting sexually active.” This was also something my male participant Sam suggested that he did with his friends as well, “Honestly sometimes it been just like joking around. Just like, kinda like with the guys or something like that I don’t necessarily say hear other people calling it because they actually mean it, it’s because um, you’re just joking around or whatever.” Both Max and Sam suggested that the term was acceptable between friends, however, Max encountered a guy who had called her ‘easy’ and “was surprised I wasn’t a teen pregnancy, and I’m like okay. So in a way, I consider that slut-shaming even though he never used the word slut.” Max’s comment reminded me of Amy’s story about her friend cheating on someone, in which the term slut was implied rather than directly stated.

Brendan and his friends used a different approach to the word slut by changing it to sound less harsh:

[On the term slew] Honestly I think it was more of like a playful, like it wasn’t um, like my friends we never would uh like attack someone like that, we would never call a girl like a slut, ‘oh she’s a slut’ no like it was more of a, I wouldn’t say its positive but I wouldn’t say its negative as well. Like if there were to be a balance and a joking manner, just to like lighten the mood, you know what I mean like I wouldn’t, cause like how like direct and abrupt the word slut is, so I dunno I wouldn’t say it’s good and I wouldn’t say it’s bad, that’s how we would associate uh slew with that term.
By changing the way slut sounds, as in ‘slew’, Brendan views the term as more playful and less hostile. But while slew may have a lightness to it, when I asked Brendan if he would ever call a girl a slew to her face his immediate response was no.

Never, never ever, have we ever said that to a girl, um, never said slew, never said slut, none of my friends ever said that. Um, never, its way to uh. Like in my opinion like who cares, like what’s the point of calling a girl out on it, unless you’re in a relationship with them and then they were let’s say cheating on you or something like that like then maybe that word would come out but no we never, we would never just walk around and be like ‘oh she’s a slut’.

Even though the term slew is a mock version of slut, it still holds the discourses surrounding slut, which much like Max and Amy’s comments means that it is indirectly being used even when not. I was also interested in Max’s statement about how being called a slut did not bother her because it was based on the context of who was saying it and where. As I discussed earlier, she said she was careful with who she chose to talk to about certain sexual acts because they might judge her.

Well even when I talk about my past relationships with friends, as weird as it is even I’ll identify as a slut, I’ll just be like yeah, like it’s kinda slutty I’ll admit to that, but when I talk about it I don’t mean it in a negative way, like for me it’s more like, this is what I do and I’m okay with it. It’s more like accepting… It depends on who I’m talking to, if I know someone who I think would judge me for it, then I might kind of admit to it as a moral wrongdoing, be like yeah, but if it’s people I know who are going to accept me for who I am I’m just like yeah I’m a slut whatever, it’s not a big deal, yeah but like it’s more in like a joking way just because they’re joking when they call me a slut.

Max also said that while she was never called a slut in high school,

“I mean I didn’t always, yeah I wore short shorts and a bikini but, we didn’t like, as far as I’m aware no one ever called me a slut to my face. So who knows what they said behind my back, and like joking around with friends we would call each other -and like that’s the thing too as a joke friends would call each other sluts. But there’s no meaning behind that, like we didn’t mean it in a bad way, it was very like you’re a slut, you’re a whore, like so it can be used in a harmful way like I don’t like her she’s a slut, and it can be used like here’s my best friend she’s a slut.”
She said that she was slut-shamed in high school. At which point I started to wonder if the reason certain people were okay with being called a slut was because the term might not affect them negatively. When Erika’s ex-boyfriend called her a slut, she discussed how it did not hurt her because she did not view the relationship, or his opinion, as important. She had a certain amount of popularity or status in high school as well, making it more difficult for that term to carry weight when thrown at her.

However, Erika did discuss feeling like a slut at times, such as her phase of being a ‘make-out’ slut. She also noted how she dressed conservatively because of her body type, and noticed how girls immediately assumed things of her because she was ‘curvy’, especially if she wore certain clothing.

People are quick to judge so they see you in one wrong light and that’s that. Cause I remember, I wore a shirt to a party a couple [of] years ago, it wasn’t meant to like open in the middle but it had broken like on my way to the party. So I’m at the party and my shirt like kept opening up and I was like trying to hold it together, but I, so people who were there for sure, like all the girls were looking at me like what the hell, like I didn’t do this on purpose! I’m not usually dressed like this, but um, I’m sure they would have been calling me that [slut]. But it’s not really, like I don’t dress like that often ever, it was a broken shirt.

In contrast to Max, Fran did not find the term as fun or playful in the least, and did not appreciate people using it as a joke.

Once that I can recall, um it was, interestingly enough it wasn’t even within the context of sex, it was just being used as a weapon divorced from that. This is super weird, I was posting on Facebook about liking a band, and um, I admitted, this particular band has put out like thirty albums, and I admitted I had not heard all of them, and this guy I was kind of a friend with, we met once or twice, we have some interesting conversations, I knew there was something a bit wrong with him, uh he was like, you haven’t heard all the albums? You ignorant slut! And I fuckin went to town on that guy haha. [do you think it was meant to be funny?] I have no idea about that guy, and couldn’t tell. If he was trying to be humorous I didn’t approve, I don’t think that’s something that is humorous I don’t think it’s something that can be used in humorous context.
It is possible the line used from this man was from Saturday Night Live ("Jane, you ignorant slut!"), however, as Fran said, she did not see it as a joke either way. While participants noted that boys and men used the term, what became clear throughout the interviews was that participants felt it was more often than not girls and women who used the term against each other. Female participants said it happened more with their friends than with boys and men, and that it often had to do with obtaining a moral high-ground, increasing status, and also as a reactive tactic such as when angry at a friend. Raina in fact talked about being called a slut from a friend who was mad at her, “like I just had like a confrontation with one of my friends for making out with someone I shouldn’t have, and she was like oh you’re such a slut, and I’m like okay.” Many of my participants felt similar:

But I also find that people especially girls to other girls, even if the person doesn’t have any qualities of the slut, if you don’t like them they’re automatically a slut. You’re gunna use that term just cause you don’t like them you’ll call them a slut… it’s awful but I definitely slut-shamed people. Um, but that was back in a time, like I was in high school especially like grade nine and ten just coming into high school. I was very, I was much more closed minded and judgemental, and it was probably part of the way that I was raised though, I was raised in a more conservative way, so were all my friends and so in our bubble it was like this is what’s acceptable and this [is] what’s not and people who didn’t fit into the acceptable were shamed. Whether it was slut-shamed or whether they did other things, whether it was drugs or whatever that we didn’t find acceptable, we judged really harshly. (Max)

In addition to Max, Veronica felt that while she was not likely to be called a slut based on appearance, her closer friends who knew about her sexual exploits often told her she needed to stop, and like Max, she has now started specifically choosing who she discusses her experiences with.

Dani made the point that women are socialized to tear other women down,

“Sometimes a girl who has only had sex with one person gets called a slut, as a way to psychologically attack. Because usually this is a stereotype, however it’s a stereotype that I usually find holds true, is typically women do not attack each other with their fists, they attack each other using something that can be far more
lethal, their words. Because it’s the um, it’s the culture, it’s the, key word, CULTure, because they’ve been taught that girls don’t fight each other they just yell at each other and speak at each other behind each other’s backs, and that’s what I observe. But that’s not so much based off of a um, you know gender reality, more so then a cultural paradigm, that has been continually shoved down their throats over and over and over again.”

This idea of a cultural paradigm frames how other participants felt about the term’s use. As examined earlier, it seemed to have more to do with status and reputation than sex, and was about tearing down other girls and women, while building oneself up. Most of my participants talked about this:

Usually more women, if like they’re having a fight with another woman or, sometimes I don’t think as many men but sometimes I feel like if a man or boy was like mad at a girl for like a certain thing they’d be like oh you’re such a slut. But, I think it’s more like cattiness between different women… Maybe makes her feel better about herself, makes her think that she’s not a slut because she doesn’t do the same things as the other girl. (Raina)

Men and women alike, it’s a way to place a value on a woman, because women are products and as products women need to compete right? So even women will tear other women down and ‘this one’s a slut, I’m good, like’ [Why would they do that?] I imagine it feels good, to feel like you’re the better one right? You have something that’s more desirable. (Fran)

Fran brings up a point about internalized objectification, which links to the idea of internalized misogyny or shame that women perpetuate through the tearing down of each other for males’ approval. This was acknowledged by Brendan as well, and he gave an example of what would happen in his own school, “So say, uh, perfect example, popular girls liked some guy, well this other girl comes in not a part of that group and starts to like that guy, then they would all team up and call that girl a slut and just slut shame her, and make her feel like shit, like sorry I don’t know if I can swear, but like, um, make her feel terrible about herself and that’s what they did.”

**Respect and Self-esteem**

None of the male participants said they had been called a slut in a negative way, though Sam had been called it jokingly. Amy was the only participant who said that she did in fact
change how she behaved, what she wore, and who she dated for fear of being labeled or thought of as a slut, or discourses surrounding that label. At first she said it only dealt with what she wore, in part due to media images that sexualize women, but as she continued talking she discussed how she also policed her own sexual experiences for fear of being labeled:

It’s kind of always in the back of mind because of how negative it’s always perceived, um and I’ve never really been, like put myself out there in terms of guys because I’m so worried they’re gunna… I am not putting myself out there sexually because I’m worried people are gunna call me a slut, that’s bottom line… like not exploring or experimenting, anything like that because I’m very worried people are gunna think that I’m a slut… It holds people back, the word holds people back.

Her statement links to the idea panopticism and the influence of surveillance and internalized-shame; even without someone calling Amy a slut she still felt obligated to dress and act a certain way for fear someone might be watching (Foucault, 1995). It was interesting that none of the participants viewed themselves as sluts, and believed that no one else thought that of them; however, they sensed that they might have been called it behind their backs. Erika brought up an important part of self-esteem, and that it is linked to others’ perceptions, “people usually base their perception of themselves on what other people perceive them. I feel like what other people tell them they’re going to start to believe, especially if it’s like excessive, or if a lot of people are calling them that, I feel like they’ll start to like um, be in their own head and it’ll get to them and they’ll start to like thinking that themselves. Especially if they don’t have a lot of high self-esteem, to begin with I feel like it starts to deteriorate, and I feel like it um, it has a tax on people and I feel like it brings them down.” The way others perceive a person, and whether that person believes these perceptions, is dependent on their self-esteem and also their status. If a person is of lower self-esteem, the long-term impact can have devastating effects, and clear internalization of shame (Murnen et al., 2003; Kubik et al., 2009).
Participants discussed how they felt the impact of a term like slut was definitely dependant on a person’s confidence, in not just themselves but also in their behaviour; meaning confidence expressed through someone’s behaviour and whether they feel good or bad about what they did. Sam suggests it may be different for a girl who does not typically have sex and is called a slut once she starts, “compared to a girl who’s like yeah I know I’m a slut whatever, just brush it off.”

I initially asked my participants if they knew what slut-shaming was, and if they were unsure, I asked them what they thought it meant. Most had an idea of what it was commenting that it meant putting women down by labeling them a slut, such as Erika suggested, “I think it would mean like putting people down or like putting a negative connotation on the word slut. Like it would have that negative light on it and it would be intentionally to put someone down and make them feel crappy.”

I then decided to ask my participants about what they thought and how they felt about officer Sanguinetti’s statement. Dani was the only participant who I was not able to ask because we ran out of time. All of my participants felt the officer had been out of line, but for different reasons. Two of my participants expressed that they could understand where the officer was coming from, and what he meant, but that he had gone about saying it incorrectly:

I think that’s pretty like forward, and like abrupt of the officer to say, I dunno, like in a way, like it’s definitely not how I would choose to portray myself but everybody’s themselves and I guess they can do whatever they want but. I don’t know it comes to a point where it’s like respecting yourself too. Yeah, I definitely think that was maybe a little out of line to say. (Theresa)

I think, it really depends cause I think he’s really generalizing there and I think that’d be unfair to say because I know some people try and act like a slut or try not to, even if they’re not wearing um, a certain amount of clothes. Like I know it depends on the atmosphere of where you wear those clothes but, I know not all girls want to act like a slut or try to, um, I think it’s a really unfair term to be honest. (Sam)
My one participant Raina reflected on how she used to believe in what the officer was saying until she had a conversation with a friend about clothing and slut-shaming.

That’s funny because I used to think that um women who didn’t wear a lot of clothes were like kinda setting themselves up but um my one friend who had a huge talk to me about it she said that like basically like, women, it’s not like women wear things to -it’s not like women wear things to like purposefully attract- some women can but I think it’s more like on how they kinda wanna, not portray themselves to men but like it’s not all about anyone else it’s kinda about themselves and how they, they wear it because it makes them feel good not because of anyone else.

But most of my participants talked about how the officer was victim-blaming and they were truly hurt by the idea of women ‘asking for it’. Veronica and Brendan both shared the sentiment that clothing should never mean that a woman is ‘asking for it’, with Veronica stating “I don’t think it’s fair to associate [how you dress] with uh, yeah, asking for sex.”

Amy felt that it was a matter of correcting how we teach people about sexual assault and creating an awareness about consent and what that means: “I think that, boys even women, I’m not gunna say only boys or men sexually assault people, people need to learn don’t do this just because they’re dressed a certain way and they look a certain way or even their skin colour, like what their hair looks like, anything like that, that you think is saying yes, if the word yes did not come out of their mouth then that’s it, don’t do anything.”

Max discussed the idea of victim-blaming:

That’s definitely victim-blaming, and coming from a police officer that’s kind of scary that even they victim-blame because then they’re not taking crimes seriously either in the sense that oh if only she didn’t drink, if only her dress wasn’t so short, then that wouldn’t have happened because the truth is it still could’ve happened. Violence against women, assaults and stuff exist. Yes it’s easier if you’re drunk, or you look more inviting if you’re not as covered, but that doesn’t mean it won’t happen even if you did all the steps that they said to take, it would still happen unfortunately, and why should women have to live their life with all these restrictions so that this doesn’t happen? Why can’t they go out and have fun and drink with their friends? Why can’t they dress the way they want to dress, because the way someone dresses is not an invitation.
The concept of ‘asking for it’ perpetuates and encourages rape culture, victim-blaming, and the discourse surrounding women’s sexuality that demonizes them for desiring sex. Clothing is a social construct and is a form of censorship for women. Victim-blaming serves to vilify women and turn the perpetrators of sexual assault into victims. Dani noted the harrowing effects of slut-shaming on young girls: “many girls have very tragically ended their lives through the slut-shaming culture, it is a cultural aspect and it is a cultural phenomenon, and it is a remnant of a religion, pardon my French, but it really is, that says that sexuality is a sin.” He was not the only one who felt strongly about these effects dealing with sexual assault.

Returning to the idea of guilt, Erika said that after having been sexually assaulted by her ex-boyfriend the feeling of guilt stemmed from how people addressed the situation with her. They would ask her what her part in the assault was, which led her to trivialize her own experience and feel guilty for the perpetrators. She stated having many reasons for not reporting to the police, but also because she knew she could ruin their lives, and she felt guilty for having that power, even though that power came from her perpetrator’s actions against her.

What happened to me should never have happened in the first place but relative to what could have happened, I got lucky that it was stopped. But, even like I tell myself don’t downplay it like nothing should have happened period, either way your rights were violated your space was violated and stuff right? But then, you talk to girls and like even close friends like they tell me like about an experience that they had but they never talked about it before. That pisses me off because we need to talk about it, and guys need to be exposed to it, cause there’s a lot of really good people, male and female, they need to be aware of their actions as having consequences. Like part of it I think is that people are getting away with it, it doesn’t seem as bad and they don’t even realize how severe one little behaviour could be so, um or that like drinking has consequences in the sense that their decision making, cause a lot of the incidents happen while drinking, so it’s not just for the female but it has those consequences for the male because they start making poor decisions, in that sense because they have other males encouraging them.

Many of my participants made comments about masculinity in this regard, suggesting that because men are taught to be aggressive in their pursuit of women, they do not understand
consent or the negative consequences of sexual assault on a woman’s subjectivity. I will discuss this further in chapter five.

**Resignification vs. Normalization**

When I asked my participants about resignification and whether the term can be reclaimed, none of them felt it could be resignified into a term of endearment, even though some had said it could be a playful term. Max did not completely understand how the term could be resignified, “I don’t know what they plan on making it mean, I know they want it in like a sex positive way, but does that mean someone who’s promiscuous but it’s not viewed as a bad thing?” Many other participants had hopes that it could be changed, such as Amy and Veronica, but did not fully believe that it could, suggesting that while the SlutWalks are good at getting people’s attention “I don’t think that it’s making a new definition for the term.”

Amy suggested that it would be great if the term could just mean nothing, “because it’s the hierarchy and its associated with females and you don’t wanna be called a girl because being called a girl like you’re weak, you know. It’s just so negative, so yeah like call me a slut, call me a wuss whatever, that make females look weak because it doesn’t bother me.”

Erika suggested that research was also important:

… The movement of it all changing that feels so far away still. Like almost unachievable but I think it is, because we need people doing research on things like what you’re [Student Researcher] doing, and standing up for it. But it’s like a long way to go.

The sentiments of my participants echoed in Morrison et al. (2014), as well as Ringrose and Renold (2012). Many of Morrison’s participants thought the resistance, or resignification, of the term slut was not effective or helpful and most felt they would not want to be a part of the SlutWalk movement.
Participants had mixed feelings about whether they felt the SlutWalk was effective, though most felt it had at least some positive impact, mainly in terms of awareness, as Brendan stated, “It’s progressive, definitely, you shouldn’t expect it to, to hit large scale. If you influence a few people then you know what you’ve supported them in a way that nobody else really could have.” Max shared similar sentiments while also including that it is trying to change the way we look and question sexual assault:

“I think it raises awareness and in the sense that it shouldn’t matter what someone’s wearing or what they did that night, they shouldn’t have been assaulted and people shouldn’t victim-blame. Why are we asking all the questions about the victim, what were they wearing, how much did they drink, and why aren’t we asking why did the perpetrator do this, why did they assault, what were they doing that night. Turn the question to the perpetrators from the victims.”

Some suggested what could be done to help make the movement more effective, stating that it needed better advertising and also that the message needed to be inclusive of men to get them involved, with some feeling the movement might even alienate older people because of the provocative clothing which sends mixed messages. Erika felt that,

“If they had done it in the way where they went in their normal everyday clothes regardless, I think that would have sent a stronger message, but then the second… and obviously it’s hard to control a movement like that sometimes they get carried away in the extremists, or kind of interfere and they show up naked saying like, and even that I think a girl should be able to wear something like that and its fine but… I think if it was done in a way where people went in their normal clothes, that they would usually wear, it would have been more powerful.”

One participant Theresa felt the movement was not effective, stating, “I don’t really think it would be that effective, I don’t know. Yeah I don’t, I dunno, I just think girls can like, yeah find another way to like, get confidence, or like, I dunno it’s just not, I don’t think a slut is a term that like if what the walk is trying to do is trying to turn it into like a positive term and making it seem as if being a slut is okay, I don’t really think that that should ever be used as like a positive term, I think girls should stir away from being like that. I don’t think that like it should be
promoted or should be tried to be switched into a positive term, I dunno. Like, yeah, like part of me is like thinks that like everyone’s themselves and stuff but I think it comes to a point where you know you need to be respectful.”

Veronica and Erika emphasized the importance of education and awareness in reforming slut-shaming and rape culture.

The reason too I can grapple with the effects of the word slut is because you know I’m in my MA, I look at theories, I’m reading a ton of articles and I feel like I only kinda like gained this type of intelligence this year in terms of how I look at things that perceptual intelligence, I don’t know what else to call it, whereas the general population, they’re not being exposed to this information in this way, they’re only getting it through the media. (Erika)

For me, I’ve been in school so long, I’ve learned like um, to question words and to question things being in university has really helped with that… So even if somebody was to say raped, like I would totally rape that girl, like wait a minute, like that’s not a nice thing to say, like why are you saying that. I think a lot of people just throw it around and don’t realize how hurtful it can be. I think it’s just a matter of questioning… But I think with education, obviously again that’s not something that’s available to everybody. It’s been beneficial for me.” (Veronica)

From this suggestion, it would seem that, while education does not change the term’s meaning, it can make people more critical of the term’s insidious nature and power. I also appreciated that Veronica pointed out that not everyone has access to education at higher levels, and so their needs to be a change in conversation and how researchers approach the masses and the public sphere, not just other academics. As Erika said, education is a gatekeeper that controls the way information is transferred from one person to the next, which is how knowledge works and moves through language. How knowledge is transferred is based on the way it circulates through a system (Foucault, 1990).

The term slut is complex and contextual, shifting from playful to degrading, and it is not clear if this is useful in regards to empowerment or resignification. Raina and Veronica felt that slut and other such terms “are just thrown around in different contexts, but ultimately like it’s
very hurtful…in shows and movies they make it a joke, they make the term a joke,” and ultimately trivialize the effects the term has on a person’s subjectivity. I also had an experience in which I was at a party where a man ‘complemented’ me by saying he would like to rape me because he thought I was attractive. At first I was shocked and enraged, but I realized very quickly that what was more horrifying was that he said it was because, as he later explained, I was so pretty he found it difficult to control himself. By saying this, he essentially suggested it was my fault that he wanted to sexually assault me, and also thought that if he did sexually assault me, I would return his affection. If change is to happen, it has to be built on awareness and education, and language has to be thought of critically in terms of what power it holds.
CHAPTER FIVE: Concluding Thoughts

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few notable limitations to my study, dealing with my own researcher bias and background, and the lack of diversity of my participants, which I discussed earlier. Due to self-identifying as a white female of working-class background, potential participants may not have felt comfortable to participate (for example, men and people of colour). Also, while not necessarily a limitation, it is important to note that because of my background I have my own ideas on the subject of slut and slut shaming, and this in turn can alter my own interpretations of the data. I negotiated my own stance on the topic through a critical analysis of the discourses in the data, as well as the use of other texts. I often agreed with the literature, which tended to validate my opinions. I also believe the lack of racial diversity, as there was class and gender diversity, might have spoken to the invisibility of racial minority groups in my demographic. I talked about this more in chapter four, and I discussed the importance of intersectionality research in chapter one and two.

Another limitation occurred when I asked my participants if they had heard about the SlutWalks. Most all of them had some idea of what it was. However, I had two participants who connected SlutWalk to ‘the walk of shame’ rather than the feminist movement. I did not catch these references until I transcribed the interviews afterwards. While I cannot expand much on what they said, it is worth mentioning. I asked if they knew what SlutWalk was and they replied:

Would that be like the walk of shame? (Sam)

Like the walk of shame type thing? (Raina)

At the time of the interview, I misinterpreted what they said, and thought they were talking about the ‘No Shame’ movement, which is also a walk. I later realized they were talking about ‘the
walk of shame’. This expression relates to the walk home a person (usually a woman) takes after sleeping with someone, or staying over at someone’s house after a ‘hookup’. The next morning, they have to walk home in the clothes they wore from the night before, hence the ‘walk of shame’. The ‘walk of shame’ suggests that the behaviour associated with the night before is shameful, or possibly that the person who has to walk back has acknowledged in daylight, the taboo act of the night before. This just serves as another reminder of the subtly that surveillance has, and how we internalize and normalize this behaviour. Again, dress plays a part. Not bringing a second outfit is deemed shameful, sleeping with the guy on the first night is shameful, and admitting to this behaviour with confidence and no shame is committing an act even more shameful than bowing your head and admitting your shame. For example, one of my participants, Max, talked about who she chooses to talk to about her sexual endeavours based on whether or not they will judge her positively or negatively.

**Gender Fluidity and LGBTQ**

I was unable to delve into much research dealing with gender fluidity, or LGBTQ, and it did not come up much in my results, save for a comment about using the phrase ‘that’s so gay’. However, given the gravity of the term slut and how it changes based on context, it would be interesting to investigate what similarities or differences occur among those in the LGBTQ community and how others use it, if they do, towards those in this community, as well as how it is used within the community. Much literature, such as Haskell and Burtch (2010) and Pascoe (2007) suggest that homosexual slurs like fag or gay are used as a weapon against non-hegemonic masculinities, and it would be interesting to examine how slut may act as an insult, or if it changes in use based on the context of the LGBTQ community. The way slut is used may relate to the myths surrounding the LGBTQ community, especially gay men and bisexuals,
which frames them as more promiscuous (Haskell and Burtch, 2010). This may also play a part in how the SlutWalk movement, or related movements, circulate, as it may be important to look at these individual levels of concerns, it relation to the LGBTQ community but also other ethnic groups who have spoken out about the movements overgeneralized approach (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013). Perhaps the movement could have been more effective working within communities as opposed to trying to fit a single idea across nationalities before understanding different perspectives on the subject, or the term slut specifically, and its historical context.

**Religion**

Religion was another area in the research on slut-shaming that came up frequently within my interviews and I do not believe has been looked at enough. Religion not only intersects with ‘race’, but also gender and class, especially if we look at the LGBTQ community. It is an aspect that has historically informed policy and practice, and is still very active within society in more ways than simple traditional practices of worship. An individual’s values, morals, and beliefs are very much influenced by their religious beliefs, as religion(s) are based on a set of values, morals, etcetera. that people under that faith are meant to follow. This is not to suggest that religion itself is problematic, but instead the way it can be practiced, and in turn taught to children and youth. Coming from a Catholic background, I have a general knowledge of how institutions teach and inspire these values; however, I cannot speak more critically on the subject without further research. My participant Dani felt very strongly about religion as a key component to the way slut has evolved. He offered a historical context to the term, and expressed how frustrated he was by the term slut:

For a young girl going through this world, that is not fair, that is not good, and it is something that personally enrages me, because it is not part of the religion, and that religion, while beautiful, was made in the sixth century, no offense to Christianity,
it was made way back when, and they’re taking these religions, applying them literally.

The idea of religion is in close relation to cultural differences that my participants addressed:

But then um, other cultures, I don’t know for sure, I would think maybe it could be a religious thing? But I think usually generally it comes back to sex a lot, because I’m reading the Quran right now and its very similar to the Bible and I just think that in Israel and India people with would be Muslim or Islam, I think that they would bring it back to religion, in that if you’re not with one man for the rest of your life than you’re a slut, you’re defying what your god is telling you that kind of thing… I think North America as a whole, not that were not religious but were less religious than the rest of the world, and I think we’ve kind of brought out uh, religion isn’t everything maybe, I just think were veering away. I think it’s cultural for us but in other parts of the world it’s more religious. But that’s just an assumption like I don’t know for sure. (Amy)

Amy’s statement is a very interesting notion of Western culture as less religious, or less informed by religion, and I had a sense that many of my participants felt that way, though I did not have enough time to address that subject area. Had I been able to accrue a more diverse range of participants the view on religion and its impact and influence in regards to women’s sexuality and the way the term slut is viewed, and in relation to that how women labeled sluts are viewed, would have been much more complex. In fact, one participant, Max, identified herself and her social group as ‘church girls’ when she was in high school. Though even without talking to religious participants, we can certainly look at how many beliefs around women and sex are deeply rooted in religion and religious history, especially around the veneration of the virgin, as discussed by Jessica Valenti (2009).

‘Fuckboy’ and Male Culture

There was also a term one of my participants brought up, fuckboy, which has just started to gain some traction in its use, mainly as a way to devalue men for their sexual behaviour, which I discuss in chapter four. It brings up a key point about how we alter language to suit our own needs, and that this alteration is not always passive or helpful in gaining equality, but
instead looks to equally oppress both men and women. Being critical of slut should not be about tearing men down alongside women and other minority groups; the goal should not be about turning men into sexual objects because women are sexualized.

The idea of sexualisation came up quite a bit in my interviews, especially in relation to media. Max felt very strongly that the gender difference in the way media televised women and men as sexual objects had a large impact on how women and men view themselves, which in fact, seemed to conflict with her view of the term ‘fuckboy’:

You can just look at our media and how we portray women vs. men in commercials and ads and magazines um and the biggest ones you see magazines and the shot of the woman is a full body shot and she’s usually dressed provocatively but then with men they’re very business looking… I think the media is a huge influence and I think that’s where a lot of it would start. If the media stopped portraying it so vastly different, as women and men as so different and women as sex objects and men as real people. If they started showing both as real people and as sex objects, because sexuality is a thing that exists, so eventually everyone kind of is a sex object, but at the same time you can make them the sex subject, like yes they’re sexual, they’re a sexual being, but they’re still a person so don’t dehumanize them as just a sex object.

She makes an excellent point here about making men and women ‘sexual subjects’ in media rather than sexual objects. This distinction is paramount to the conversation that needs to change surrounding sexuality in general. It is not about sexualizing men and women equally, but acknowledging them as sexual agents in their own lives, with desires and needs the same as any person, but individualized so that not every man or woman is assumed to want or need the same things. A person’s subjectivity is more than their sexuality.

Max also used the term ‘player’ which seems to be, paradoxically, a synonym for fuckboy. So again, in suggesting there are differences in who can be a player in ‘the game’, emphasis is put on the gendered structure of ‘hookup culture’ (Currier, 2013). The discussion of ‘male culture’ and how men benefit in Western society came up frequently within the interviews.
Fran also brought up a point about ‘hookup culture’ saying, “it benefits men disproportionately more than it benefits women, because men are socialized not to want an emotional connection, that the number of women they sleep with is a ‘high score’.” She also suggests that women are socialized to want an emotional connection and look for it through hooking up with multiple partners and “that hurts them.” I do agree with this idea of socialization, though I would suggest that it is due to the assumption that men and women are supposed to feel and act this way, and that we are shocked and appalled when they act against what we perceive to be their ‘nature’.

Fran suggests an unawareness of this culture, as though girls and women do not have agency within ‘hookup culture’, and while this might be true some of the time, it is more complex than simply being unaware. The common result of these gendered concepts is that it places both men and women under various restrictions and obligations to fulfill their role as men and women.

Guilt and shame do not equate to liberation, it is a tactic of silencing a person’s voice, and again their subjectivity. Erika expressed this in her experience of assault.

I think it’s how we perceive a female over how we perceive a male. We view them in different lights like no one ever says “Oh well that guy was sexually assaulted because look what he was wearing.” So, that would be the first thing they say to a girl, or the first thing they say is, were you drunk? Doesn’t matter! It really doesn’t matter, like. So I feel like we when the male’s a victim we really see them as a victim, we’re like “OMG I can’t even believe that happened to you!” Whereas when a female’s a victim we go “Well what role did you play in that?” And speaking from a personal situation, like most people’s reaction was, “Were you drunk?” “What did you do earlier in the night that made it sound okay?” “What were you wearing?” Like and you’re like, “It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t matter like regardless.” I was a victim but they don’t see the female as a victim, as often, or as easily as they see like a male as a victim… Like from my experience like people felt sorry for the guy, to the point where I started feeling sorry for him, cause I had like the power to report him to the police and kinda destroy his life that way, but cause I was like if I report it to the police when he has kids he can’t go coach their soccer team cause he has it on record like, and like I felt bad for him because he was like really drunk and made a poor, obviously a very poor decision but, that’s stupid, I shouldn’t feel bad for him he still made that decision. But people like, they would be like “Oh I feel bad for you but I also feel bad for him what are you gunna do?” Like blew my mind how many people felt sorry for him, I’m like that’s insane when you think
about it, if I had like done something to make a male uncomfortable, whether it was like just physically hurt him or sexually pass at him, people would not feel sorry for me, like they wouldn’t they’d be like “Get your act together you’re being a slut.”

Veronica also had a lot to say about the idea of victim-blaming and suggested that it can be difficult for men because they are told, through our culture to pursue women and are not taught about consent. She felt the conversation surrounding that needed to shift.

So is it not a man’s fault if he tries to um, pursue a sexual act with a female just because of the way she’s dressed? And this goes back to this whole consent is necessary, like when no means no, and I mean I could speak on a personal experience for this as well, like um, I’ve been raped and that’s something that has affected my life, but again not something that I want to be vocal about. But it wasn’t, maybe it was associated with the way I dressed, or the context I was in, but I think that when a female says no, it absolutely means no, and that’s the bottom line, and that’s not, the way she dressed or the way she acted, I think that’s terrible but I think men need to stick up for women like that. Again, it’s the men who assume those kinds of things. And like the blame, and it took a while for me to realize it that it’s not my fault, it wasn’t my fault that that had happened, um, just because he was bigger and stronger than me, um, yeah, like that’s awful.

Amy made a point about our culture, and how because men are taught to be persistent in their quest for women. Such persistence, she noted, is supposed to be attractive to women, and, as a result men do not understand when a woman is saying no through her body language. She talked about an experience she had had with a young man who would not stop pursuing her:

A month ago some guy just would not get the hint, I told him before like I don’t want to talk to you, it’s not personal it’s just I know what your intentions are I’m just not interested in that and then you know it flips around and I’m the one who’s overreacting and I’m the one who’s like making him uncomfortable, like god forbid, right? But yeah, I think it just, okay I don’t think the word slut is used as much, but I think the idea of it and the um, the very negative idea of it, like its female because it’s a female word it has to do with every female, because I think guys even if you’re just sitting there, or girls whoever, uh they just don’t understand no really. I think that’s what it is, slut like, is associated with sexuality but like people just don’t understand the word no. And I just don’t want to, not to get defensive cause that’s what happened, like I was trying to tell this guy... He says he just wants to be friends when I said I don’t want to do anything. So I go to his house, like I have my hair up, I smell like chlorine, I have just jeans and a sweater on, very like flat right now, so then I go over, and there were three of us so there was this guy that asked me out, and then his roommate, so it was fine, and then he wanted to cuddle, and I was like “I don’t want to do that at all,” and he kept, he was so persistent like “Come
on, I wanna cuddle,” and I’m like “No I don’t want to,” so I didn’t, and then he was like, “Kiss me,” and I was like “No I don’t want to kiss,” and I was like “Ewe, stop please.” Anyway, the turnout was ignorance… Nobody’s saying you can’t do this, it’s wrong and like this is a violation of somebody’s personal space, like mentally too it’s all mental, like yeah, how you dress and what you do sexually that’s physical but it all comes back like you have to think about what you’re doing.

Amy also pointed out that the aggressiveness of male culture and the perpetuation of rape culture is very apparent in cat-calling, and the way men control women’s space and safety.

The catcalling and slut, they go hand in hand… I was so angry, it’s little things and it’s not like it’s usually guys that do it. It can be saying a lot like, “Hey honey what’s up?” or even just, one guy at work just called to me, he didn’t call at me, like I was a person he called me like I was an object, and asked me how old I was and I was like, “Are you kidding me?”

**The People vs. Brock Turner**

After I had completed my data collection, analysis, and written most of my thesis, a sexual assault case made headlines around the world and seemed to crystallize why I embarked on this research in the first place. The case of defendant Brock Turner and the Stanford rape victim brought up two issues that help to conclude my thesis, but also point toward important directions for future research. Drinking culture and promiscuity were the two main arguments made in Brock Turner’s defence for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman behind a dumpster during a frat party on campus. Though found guilty of three counts of sexual assault, Turner received only six months of jail time, as well as public service after his sentence is complete. The presiding judge, Judge Persky, received universal criticism for the light sentence, reduced from 15 years. Following the case closely and in light of my thesis. I wondered which argument was meant to justify leaving a young woman naked beside a dumpster with pine needles and lacerations in her vagina; the drinking or the promiscuity? As Brock Turner argued, sexual assault is a consequence of “drinking culture and the sexual promiscuity that goes along with that. Goes along with that, like a side effect, like fries on the side of your order. Where does
promiscuity even come into play? I don’t see headlines that read, *Brock Turner, Guilty of drinking too much and the sexual promiscuity that goes along with that.* Campus sexual assault. There’s your first powerpoint slide” (Baker, 2016).

Throughout my interviews, many participants felt that gender and racial inequalities were something that were in the past, or that in terms of sexual assault, it did not have anything to do with the use of the word slut. Only the participants who had experienced sexual assault understood the ramifications that they would face for coming forward, and they felt that had they reported the assault, backlash and negativity would have befallen them – they would have been criticized for ruining the man’s reputation. These women expressed the guilt, fear, and betrayal of being told that they did something to deserve being sexually assaulted. The skepticism surrounding survivors’ stories and the shame imputed to them is rooted in deeper societal values surrounding women’s’ sexuality. Brock Turner’s defence was centered around the premise that he and his victim were both drunk, and that she had ‘asked for it’ -drinking culture and promiscuity is apparently what turns men into rapists, never mind that no one else at this party took the survivor out back to a dumpster and left her there.

As the case unfolded, the defense asked the survivor typical questions about what she was wearing, what she was drinking, and how she can be sure she did not ‘ask for it’. The survivor and victim of Brock Turner’s sexual assault wrote a powerful and moving letter that addressed the night in question. Her words were reminiscent of my participants’ comments on sexual assault, which suggested that it should not matter what a woman wears, if they were drinking, and that no one ever asks to be sexually assaulted. Turner’s statement on the matter was appalling and disturbing for many reasons, but particularly because he was trying to convince the jury that he had done nothing wrong, and *people supported him.* I believe they
supported him because they dehumanized the victim; they did not post her swim times, and Turner’s lawyer dragged her through the mud. They turned the victim into a slut and in so doing trivialized her experience. The use of promiscuity in his statement, and in his father’s letter to the court, is what drew me to this case. As the judge stated, it was only his first ‘incident’, like it was just a small occurrence, ‘it was only 20 minutes of action’ (Bay Area News Group, 2016). It should be mandatory to be more specific, so that every time the defense said ‘incident’, what they would actually have to give a detailed account of everything the nurses and doctors found when examining the victim’s body. This discrepancy between language and sexual assault is also examined by Susan Ehrlich (2004).

In a turn of events, the judge who gave the ruling came across a similar case with a Latino man, and sentenced him to three years. The only difference in the two cases was the colour of the perpetrators’ skin. Had the results of Brock Turner’s case come out a year ago, followed by the collective outrage of women and men who spoke against the judge’s decision, it would have been the backdrop to my thesis. It exemplifies my main research questions: what are the discursive powers of the term slut in youth culture and how is it related to ‘race’, gender and class? Well here is a clear, unambiguous answer: Brock fucking Turner, a young white upper-class male, who, when found guilty of three accounts of sexual assault and attempted rape, is sentenced to only six months in jail. Brock fucking Turner, who was caught in the act of sexual assault by two witnesses who chased him down, who wants to speak out against drinking culture and promiscuity, was protected by his ‘race’, gender, and class privilege. What gives me hope – and what points to directions for future research on contemporary Canadian youth culture’s use of the word slut- is the massive public outcry that occurred after the victim’s letter was released on line. Because people are starting to talk about the fact that being promiscuous and being
drunk have nothing to do with sexual assault, but you know what it does have to do with? Being called a slut.
References


Buckland, L. (2013, Sept. 20). Miley Cyrus naked? She is just "reinventing her sound" says dad


THE POWER OF SLUT


http://www.genderandeducation.com/issues/how-miley-brought-feminism-back/


Renold, E. & Ringrose, J. (2008). Regulation and rupture mapping tween and teenage girls’


United Nations, Definition of Youth, reference:


Urban Dictionary reference: www.urbandictionary.com