

Power in the Powerless: Discursive Agency in Slut Culture Online

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May 2019

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I. Introduction

How do women/girls transform derogatory and stigmatizing insults into a sense of empowerment? How is the insult “slut” and the whole culture of “slut shaming” becoming transformed into a source of power for women and girls? The key terms in this study are re-appropriation, slut shaming, and discursive agency. Re-appropriation is the reclaiming of terms once thought of as disparaging to women into something positive. Slut-shaming is a form of stigma against women who are judged as being overly sexual. Discursive agency, as understood by Judith Butler, is the control one has over a given narrative. Ideas on *discursive agency* aid in understanding how gendered narratives transform into greater autonomy within everchanging discourse. Women gain back power over their sexuality and bodies the more they gain control over discourse directed at them. My research highlights how women become emboldened by the very scars of their oppression.

My research showed that by looking at the way’s women are shamed in our culture, they learn how to reframe these held ideas into empowerment. This is revealed in the way I structure my research by sections. My literature review is broken into three main sections. The first section, I looked at the norm’s girls develop in adolescence that teach them how to behave in adulthood, as discussed in previous literature. This takes place when internalizing gender scripts in adolescence. The second section looks at theory. I use Judith Butler’s theories on the process of resignification (the appropriation of harmful labels) and discursive agency to facilitate this appropriation. The third section applies Butler’s theories. I looked at how the appropriation of old labels to new labels allows women new autonomy over their bodies. I looked at the sex positive Slut Walk movement to better understand this.

In my analysis, I conducted content analysis of female written blog websites who have

experienced slut-shame, to understand this process. I identified the motivations of slut-shame to understand the cultural norms that are dismantled in the slut-empowerment movement. I identified these as *Cultural Sanctions: Motivation and Tactics* that include the *Maintenance of Existing Narrative, Unindividuated* and *Dealing with Rejection*. The tactics are defined as *silencing, labeling* and *objectifying*. I then analyze the process of *Post-Shame* as the act of counteracting these sanctions through the creation of *new discourse* and *self-exposure*. These women use something thought to culturally hinder them to instead gain agency over their bodies and sexuality. In my research, I hope to emphasize the importance in changing discourse to breathe new cultural paradigms into existence that change the way we blame and shame in our culture.

My research looks to answer my research question on how the culture of slut shaming becomes transformed into a source of power for women through the process of learning and unlearning. I looked at early influences to understand how narratives influence how we perceive ourselves. However, I acknowledged how these narratives help girls communicate with one another and proved a platform for changing how we look at the concept of “slut.” My research also considered how people use these culturally enforced narratives to understand themselves and other women around them. Those who shame, I considered the “unindividuated” and those who begin to shift narratives and become empowered by their bodies, I considered “individuated.” These phrases were established by the blogger, Maya Jordan. My research question is answered through the female bloggers I analyzed. Their experiences with being slut-shamed reveal there are processes women go through in becoming empowered. These women acknowledged the above “sanctions” mentioned as behaviors that are culturally influenced. The women begin unlearning these behaviors and establish new ones.

II. Existing Literature

I begin this literature review by examining the purpose of slut-shaming in adolescence. This is used as a platform for understanding how its aid in development becomes a source of empowerment for some women in adulthood. This potential for a shift in narrative is supported by the idea that slut shaming proves to be a reliant source of education on the body and gender norms (Summit et al. 2016). I further examine this under my section the “Confirmation of Established Gender Roles.”

The limitations of sex education in America expose the need for a new platform to discuss female sexuality. I analyze this in the section “Platform for Sexual Conversation.” I then move my way into “Discursive Agency” which recognizes the destabilization of narrative that takes place when women begin reclaiming identities they learned to be ashamed of in adolescence. I use Judith Butler’s theories on discursive agency to understand the tentative nature of sexual narratives. Moreover, I consider how slut shame has potential to be appropriated by women due to its unlikely assistance in understanding female autonomy. My literature review concludes with “Slut Pride” and the feelings that occur post-shame, the final phase of grappling with slut culture, as an empowered woman.

Collective Reflection

This section will analyze “girl-on-girl” slut-shaming as it serves to understand the complex, rigid and misogynistic roles expected of women (Kågesten et al. 2016). Though it serves as a means of bullying and often reproduces ill-informed conversation, it provides space for girls to understand themselves and interact with other girls who may be experiencing similar

confusing stages. I recognize in this section that gaps in sex education breed toxic conversation. However, I provide reason as to why slut-shaming within the female demographic, something so personal to women, becomes a bolster in reclaiming the female tropes that are heavily shamed in our western culture.

Girls use slut-shaming to confirm established social structures, maintain their identity through defensive othering and openly discuss female sexuality (something often viewed as taboo.) (Summit et al. 2016). We observe these female behaviors of manipulation to understand where agency might formulate.

Platform for Sexual Conversation

Girls will often slut shame each other to discuss difficult topics about their own sexuality (Summit et al. 2016). One of the reasons this happens is because of the lack of sex education. There is a lack in diverse and positive sexual education in public schools and for this reason many young girls only know how to express themselves through means of degrading not only other women but themselves (Miller 2016). Girls learn to identify with their oppression early on in life, using it, in its limiting ways to gain hold of their lives. Girls often do not have other means to explore positive and supportive sexual dialogue due to an emphasis on heteronormativity and gender roles in sexual education (Miller 2016).

Slut-shaming through sexual rumors and labeling is used by girls to understand their bodies and sexual desires (Miller 2016). This jargon transforms taboo sexual conversation into something more digestible and easily discussable (Summit et al. 2016)

Sex education in schools often emphasizes men's sexual desires rather than women's and the responsibility women hold as sexual objects rather than the subject in this conversation (Miller

2016). Improper sex-education leads to misconceptions on sex and the female body.

Underrepresentation of the female experience leads male students to assume appearance is the most definitive way of understanding female sexuality and expression of it (Almazan, V. A., & Bain, S. F. 2015). Misconceptions such as this, lead to scapegoating the victim herself in gender-based violence. Victim-blaming promotes such philosophies as *the more supposedly responsible the victim, the less harsh the punishment for the defendant* (Pickel, K., & Gentry, R. 2017). This culturally embedded idea explains the results in a study conducted in 2017 that simulated a mock-bullying incident. Researchers found higher correlation between guilt of participants for the control victims (dressed conservatively) of gender-based bullying than for those dressed more revealing. (Pickel, K., & Gentry, R. 2017).

Without agency over personal and sexual needs, many girls become ashamed of their bodies, their sexual attitudes and sexuality. This shame inhibits girls from seeking information and services that would improve the attitude and quality of their sex life (Summit et al. 2016). Most teenagers are not abstinent and with little education, many girls become inflicted with STD's, pregnant or exploited by men. Without proper normalization of female sexuality, girls are shamed because of educational limitations (Summit et al. 2016).

Much of the existing literature has analyzed the reasons for maintenance and impact on social structure among women whereas more research in its preliminary causes are necessary to understand this form of gendered bullying. My research along with existing literature demands the need for better sexual education. It is imperative further research examines the way girls communicate with one another to better personalize an educational system that resonates with young people. Further research on modern sexual education that enforces healthy, communicative, consensual sexual relationships would help combat the toxic conversation on

female expectations and sexual labels that currently are embedded in the social lives of America's youth.

Confirmation of Established Gender Roles

Another related reason many young girls use slut shaming is because of the lack of proper role models and mentors (Summit et al. 2016). The ways teenage girls interact with one another are not established by circumstance but by the social understandings of misogyny imbedded in western culture. Women develop understandings of sexual relationships through means of gender scripts or (internalized notions of gender expectations) (Summit et al. 2016). Siblings (especially brothers), lack of sex education, parental attitudes and emphasis on concealing the female body in schools all aid in developing these gender scripts (Kågesten et al. 2016). Girls are given more household chores with the onset of puberty and are told to hide their developing bodies and sexualities from boys (Kågesten et al. 2016).

These “significant others” all promote the idea that a girl should constrain herself physically and emotionally. These scripts contain ideas of submission and politeness. We observe this in the house roles learned early on and the emphasis on concealing the body. Shame appears to be learned with the onset of puberty, when women begin developing sexually physically and physiologically.

These findings reveal that adolescence is the phase in which girls absorb the scripts¹ that will serve as reference points on gender and sexuality (Kågesten et al. 2016). These scripts inform girls on the traits of a “slut” and how to resist the cultural label itself (Kågesten et al. 2016).

The slut label creates hierarchy in the female community and limiting identities of which to

¹ Situational rules expected to be played out by designated person (females)

associate. Women navigate the social world around them in accordance with an existing *Virgin-Slut Continuum* (Laina Y. Bay-Cheng 2015). This continuum categorizes women as sluts versus “good girls,” a way to make sense of the heteronormative structure they live in. They are deflecting the pressures of gender roles (faced in adolescence) on other girls, continuously checking in with themselves to make sure they are playing out their ascribed roles (allotted by schools, peers and families) properly. This othering creates divisiveness among girls. It also exacerbates victim blaming in rape-culture by shaming girls for their appearance and actions (Miller 2016).

The way girls and women confirm their role expectations is telling of the scripts fed to them. This confirms a patriarchal social structure. In conversing on rules, roles and regulations, they in some sense gain ownership of selfhood when discussing with other women and begin assessing gender expectations. This conversation, limiting at first glance provides a platform and space for a change in discourse.

Discursive Agency

We can better understand how “slut” is reclaimed and how this platform for change takes place through Judith Butler’s ideas on discursive agency. *Discursive agency* is the bodily autonomy women reclaim with their established social means, when cultural identities shift as narrative changes. I use this idea to observe the ways narrative is altered around slut-shame. I have examined the power of discursive agency in girlhood where it provides a platform for ownership over the body. This agency over the body takes form when slut-shamed and evolves into sexual empowerment. Women become more aware of their bodies and the cultural meanings

they hold. Discursive agency allows women to gain ownership and decide for themselves how they wish their sexuality to be portrayed.

This theory of discursive agency is relevant to my research because it allows me to analyze the contrasting aspects of shame (learned behaviors from patriarchal themes from teachers, parents and men) and empowerment (autonomous behavior that comes into fruition when discourse changes). In understanding how that process takes place, the ideas of discursive agency provide a lens for my research and an explanation to which we might understand how the shift occurs. Moreover, we see in my research how women upon unlearning behaviors, create space for new feelings on their sex lives.

Within Fourth Wave Feminism, comes sexual empowerment, the identifying with slut culture. This empowerment comes from the need to “activate,” feelings of agency within a limiting structure. (Taylor 2011). This *discursive agency* allows women to find “hope in failure” (Butler 1997). Sex positive movements are supported by Butler’s theory that it is “in the possibility of the failure to repeat” established norms that “*de-formity*” takes place. This *de-formity* behaves as a gateway to the revelation that identity is a “tenuous construction” (Taylor 2011).

Discourse because of its everchanging nature, can be recreated and dismantled (Butler 1997). We recognize through feminist movements, such as the Slut Walk, that patriarchal discourse is everchanging. With aid of feminists of various paradigms, we navigate identity as something unfixd and gain agency over our identities. We do not inherently own our agency but gain it in our culture through discourse; “subject-formation takes place within specific historical contexts and discursive regimes” (Butler 1997). Though the subject is “delimited in advance” in the “collective social,” or prominent discourse, there is the “condition of possibility” for agency

(Taylor 2011). Agency is not understood as a property of the subject but is conceptualized as an “effect of power, as constituted in discourse” (Butler 1997). Butler notes that agency is not authentically owned by the self as our collective discourse is too complex and influential but rather a “radically conditioned” subjectivity.

In this way, when we alter the narrative surrounding our discourse, by re-appropriating labels, we assert our discursive agency. This agency is not truly our own but a reflection of our culture. Discourse is not hegemonic but operates rather as a “multiply contested site of meaning” (Butler 1997). The blogs I analyze in my research demonstrate how altering the lens over an idea can dismantle existing narratives.

Slut Pride

With this understanding of Butler’s work, in particular how agency is reclaimed through actively altering discourse, we can now understand the need for resignification to take place. Reclaimed labels have been made emboldened by movements such as the Slut Walk movement. Women are offered opportunity today, to gather in unity in various sex-positive, slut-positive, feminist groups that mobilize ways to navigate new founded pride in what was once shame.

The way the Slut Walk Movement came into fruition, explains how patriarchal narrative fueled new, feminist narrative. When a Toronto police, Constable Michael Sanguinetti, spoke at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University and told students that rape prevention included refraining from dressing like a “slut,” we saw a cultural shift wherein the normalizing of misogyny and victim blaming was more widely recognized as a harmful result of a patriarchal culture. This conversation launched a series of demonstrations under the name of “Slut Walks,”

the first of many arranged on April 3rd, 2011 (Carr 2013). Several thousand protesters attended upon invitation that read "Whether a fellow slut or simply an ally, *you don't have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve*: we just ask that you come" (Carr 2013). We see the process of resignification take place, in which women identified with their oppression and instead took ownership and pride of their ascribed labels. The movement spread like wildfire globally.

Protest posters such as "Stand up for yourselves and demand respect. Shame has to switch sides!" indicate Butlers' theory that reality can be recreated since it relies on everchanging discourse. We might understand better this narrative switch, when we consider the source of patriarchal discourse. Though the paradigm of gender inequality once served a purpose, it no longer does in our modern culture. Women are "subjugated in relation to an established capitalist imperialism whose social roles are reflected by "traditional property relations" (Carr 2013). Carr notes "although patriarchy cannot be eliminated under the existing capitalist imperialist superstructure, the seeds of its unraveling exist in revolutionary socialist movements." We again see the process of discursive agency being discussed in this movement, the "seeds of its (patriarchy) unraveling."

Carr quotes a speaker Jaclyn Friedman at the 2011 Slut Walk who explained the original definition of "slut" as an untidy woman, whereas now the term expresses women who "stepped outside the line that good girls are supposed to stay inside ... it is used to keep us in line, separate us, police each other," while "all we want is to enjoy the incredible pleasure that our bodies are capable of." In shaming women for being sexual, they are further "deodorized," made more cleanly by a patriarchal gaze (Carr 2013). Appropriating the word reminds others that women choose not to be shamed by the word but empowered as it recognizes a woman's choice to engage sexually with whomever and whenever she so chooses.

Alice Walker explains the necessity of the maintenance of this word in viewing a slut as someone who “freely enjoys her own sexuality in any way she wants to; undisturbed by other people's wishes for her behavior” (Feminism Unfinished 2014). She notes “sexual desire originates in her and is directed by her. In that sense it is a word well worth retaining.” We can make use of a word that once was used to harm women when we alter the lens surrounding it, bringing attention both to the damage it caused culturally as well as altering the way we look at women’s sexuality, releasing women of their shackles in some sense. The label slut “should be worn as our badge of honor or a casual title of sexual liberation” (Carlsbad 2017).

The Slut Walk movement allows scholars to “apply feminist theories to a new form of transnational feminist activism located at the margins of mainstream society” (Carr 2013). We might understand Butler’s theories I have discussed, as one of the ways theory becomes action. The use of feminist rhetoric in activist communities allows for interrogation of power relations “through ongoing processes of self-critique and collective reflection” (Carr 2013). This is the process of altering narrative, as previously discussed. The process of “de-formity” takes place in this “interrogation.” We see how narrative is altered through the interpretation of shame within the female community.

III. Methodology

My research consists of qualitative content analysis, analyzing the ways feminist online users recreate the social world around them using Butler’s theories of resignification and discursive agency. Content analysis studies the subject matter of communicated material through classification and evaluation of key symbols and themes to achieve an overall cultural message.

My method of classification is seen through the coding of my sample of various online blog posts. Coding allowed me to more easily answer my research question through observed patterns and repeated words. After coding observed language, I explored the relationships between the codes and mapped out my overall findings.

Specifically, I used relational content analysis. This allowed me to analyze the relationship between repeated words, leading to an overall theme. My chosen observational lens is concerned with the semantics of my data sample and the way terms interact to create new discourse. In particular, I was interested in the interplay between contrasting words denoting shame vs. empowerment. I analyzed the tactics used culturally to shame women for sexual deviance and considered how women adapted shameful rhetoric into self-actualization. This again, is made possible by changing the way discourse around sexuality is understood. Content analysis allowed me more leeway when dealing with a controversial topic that may be too invasive for in-depth interviews. I focused my research on western women (however not limited to cis-gendered² women) of whom will vary in race, age and sexual orientation. These intersections will be considered as they may affect various interpretations of feminist agency.

I primarily used anecdotal posts from *sluttygirlproblems.com*, *unslutproject.com* and *talkspace.com* as well as interviews from the sex-positive activist, Carly Sciortino of Vogue's *Slut Ever* column. I observed the ways women re-write rules enforced by slut-shaming, via unlearning patriarchal narratives. This is revealed through but is not limited to re-appropriated language as well as altered language and sex positive movements that negotiate norms. The

² A person of whom chooses to identify with their gender assignment at birth

common themes and patterns I establish will reflect both the cultural influence of the internet and existing theories on slut positivity.

I looked to find women performing the theories Judith Butler understands to take place in the process of resignification, as discourse is unfixed and can redefine cultural narrative. These themes reveal the effects of patriarchal discourse, through personal experiences of prejudice experienced by online users and new community jargon and philosophies that grow from empowerment. Observing examples of the reclamation process (as seen by online users) explains how perceptions on female sexuality has been altered and how the internet has come to be a platform that allows women greater autonomy in discourse.

IV. Findings and Analysis

Cultural Sanctions: Motivation

In synthesizing various female blog posts, of whom experienced slut shaming, all have been subjected to a lens of cultural regulatory processes. These processes rely on the above-mentioned scripts and behaviors we absorb throughout life. These learned behaviors govern the way “unindividuated” people shame sexually open women. Those lacking pride in sexual display are thought of as “unindividuated” (*sluttygirlproblems.com*). Unindividuated women may experience feelings of discomfort and jealousy of those women who are “individuated.” Where there was once an existing narrative that only allowed a limited spectrum of female tropes women can engage in, we see through my observations a community of women altering these limitations. This narrative (The Slut Continuum) constantly compares women to one another. This limits their personal freedoms to explore sexual identity and exposure.

We see a transition from “good girl” vs. “bad girl” dichotomies to unindividuated vs. individuated women. This way of looking at sexuality eliminates held ideas of cultural expectations of women’s sexuality. This new dichotomy holds women accountable for shaming other women and bridges the gap of the double standards of sexuality between male and female genders.

Sanctions placed on the individuated by the unindividuated display the harms of the slut continuum. Looking at these culturally motivated sanctions emphasize the learned norms slut-positive women are beginning to address and dismantle. There are two main cultural motivations for slut-shaming itself. The first is the maintenance of patriarchal power dynamics and the second is the unindividuated discomfort felt by those who sexually shame. Those who live empowered, we might assume recognize the dangerous motivations of shaming.

Maintenance of Existing Narrative

The existing patriarchal narrative reveals itself in the way women internalize misogyny. This internalized behavior leads to sexual shame and judgement. Some of the bloggers I observed very clearly demonstrate the “good girl” vs. “bad girl” dynamic at play in the world of slut-shaming that develops from a need to hide sexual desire. This leads to shame around personal sexual experiences.

The blogger, Maya Jordan’s commentary revealed patriarchal influence on internalized misogyny when she rationalizes her friends’ shaming behavior as the results of “historical forces and social norms...invested in keeping women down.” She examines her own experience with internalized misogyny when she admits it was difficult for her to view her sex life as a positive, discussable topic. This shame had not existed prior to her mother slut-shaming her at the young

age of ten. Jordan's curiosity and exploration of sexuality did not create feelings of guilt or shame initially, but rather her mother "*gave that to her (sic).*" Jordan emphasizes that she "*didn't arrive in this world with it,*" i.e. shame. These feelings were learned behaviors from social narratives.

We might understand how patriarchal narratives justify the chastising of individuated women, in attempts to maintain status quo. The online blogger by the name Alexandria LaRue provides some material to understand this process. LaRue's post reveals the feelings of justification from the perspective of conservative critique. Shaming women is seen as justifiable when women push sexual boundaries.

Alexandria LaRue is in the adult entertainment industry, specifically working with the Suicide Girls, an alternative modeling site. She receives much commentary from strangers and people she knows online. She explains some are "concerned for the damnation of my soul." She is often name-called by adults and expresses her disappointment by noting "It saddens (her) when these adults with all this power hold young men and women in such high regard that they think they can bully them into conservatism." We observe how constructed gender norms encourage this type of critique in attempts to maintain status-quo.

The Unindividuated Woman

The bloggers I observed explain their past lives as unindividuated or bullied by the unindividuated, whereby they carried shame over their sex lives and looked at other women's sex lives through a lens of disdain as well. There appears to be a common theme of bravery that comes with living sexually empowered. The bloggers all recognize the individuated self as a person that must un-learn established norms and create new narrative.

Maya Jordan expresses her fruition of “individuated” sex positivity in the article titled *Becoming a Sex Positive Slut*. She lived out a sex-positive life privately until her friend “*exposed*” her and her perceived status as “*whore*” and previous position as a stripper. Jordan expresses this moment as a defragmentation of herself.

Maya Jordan chose to write a theoretical letter to her “slut shamer”. She begins her passage by stating “there’s not a whole lot sexually that I haven’t done...” Jordan emphasizes her sex life as a form of logos in emphasizing its utility in her work with mental health and romantic relationships.

Throughout her letter, she distinguishes those who are *individuated* and those who are *un-individuated*. The targeted person is, to Jordan’s understanding unindividuated or follows the masses. This type of person is part of a culture that “others” deviant individuals. Jordan believes those who choose to stay un-individuated, “opt out of bravery”. Those who are un-individuated choose “sensibility” and comfortability but Jordan, as a sex positive woman understands why becoming an individuated female authority is important. Jordan understands the empowered slut to be a woman breaking boundaries within themselves and culturally. She adds “*the guarded, shame-based way you talk about sex needs to be re-authored.*” Sociologically, we might consider her letter a format for discursive agency brought forth by a new lens. Jordan’s demands emulate those who have been damned for their sexual expression and who seek empowerment. She speaks of new narrative around slut-culture.

Another blogger by the name of Sonia Audi admits in her post that she shamed women growing up out of jealousy of their freedom to be multifaceted- “smart and sexual.” She recognizes the persona of the individuated woman in saying “they had broken free of the stereotypes that had me caged” (unslutproject.com). Audi did not realize her insecurities behind

slut-shaming until after high school when she realized her shaming was perpetuating internalized misogyny. She realized she had yet to reclaim her own sexual life. She realized that publicly sexual women were not betraying a given role but rather embracing the naturalness of being a sexually curious and individuated person.

Emma, 36, recognizes the persona many slut-shaming women take on as that of concern. “Back when I was young and stupid...I did have friends who were much more reserved and judgey, so I remember specifically calling out a mutual friend with a ‘higher count’ than me out of ‘concern’ in order to make myself look ‘normal’” (talkspace.com). While her friends were “reserved,” or leaned toward one particular direction on the “slut-continuum,” she shamed women who were more sexually experienced. She speaks of “stupidity,” when reflecting on her previous shame-based judgement. We might understand this as her feeling *unindividuated*.

Dealing with Rejection

Women resist slut shaming by recognizing the root of the shaming itself. In some cases, the shaming stems from resentment experienced when rejected. The blogger who goes by the surname “*ssshforwomen*,” looks at the way’s men use perceived female deviant traits to shame them when faced with rejection. Her eventual rejection of a male slut-shamer’s friendship is seen as a form of empowerment, both rejecting his shaming tactics of her sexuality and asserting herself as an autonomous person rejecting a male gaze over her choices.

The blogger had expressed her career as a sex writer early on in their friendship and explains in her passage the consequences of doing so with many people in her past, “talk about sex casually and men will most likely think you’re either a) hitting on them or b) will sleep with anyone. Women will most likely think a) you’re a slut or b) trying to sleep with their man”

(*sluttygirlproblems.com*). In this, we find that a sexually empowered woman is often perceived as deviant. This alters discourse but oftentimes as we see in her display of interpersonal reactions, creates discomfort when a shift in dialogue and gender presentation takes place.

The blogger acknowledged that her friend was understanding of her position until he began having feelings for her. “*Ssshforwomen*” goes on to explain how this friend eventually called her a slut after she explained she did not want to get together the day after a party she had planned. We see the blogger’s thought process through the reflective sentence, “*this man was slut shaming me because I didn’t want to sleep with him. He imagined me going to a party and f*****g everyone but him – and that pissed him off, because somehow I owed him sex for being nice to me.*” She goes on “*...when you didn’t get what you wanted, you thought you’d bring me down a peg or two by first passive aggressively trying to shame me, then outright calling me a slut before trying to brush it off as a joke.*”

The blogging website allows her to acknowledge this man’s wrongdoings seen through a misogynistic angle. She works through her friends’ slut-shaming by recognizing the patriarchal position taken on by a man who used shame as a rhetoric to demonize this woman’s sexual liberty. The blogger closes her reflection saying, “*I know what I do, and I choose to do it because I love what I do,*” reclaiming concepts of slut-shaming by revealing her autonomy over them. She acknowledges that her life choices and job may fuel shame but rejects it proudly.

Cultural Sanctions: Tactics

Among the learned behaviors associated with punishment of deviant others, i.e., *sluts*, there are three reoccurring tactics used by those “unindividuated” people. These means of

punishment are motivated by a need to quell the sexually empowered. The first way to achieve shame is to silence the oppressed. In eliminating the voice, personhood and platform begin dwindling. This process begs for new breadth of narrative. The second common shaming technique is demeaning name calling in which women are labeled as others, outcasts, nonstandard.

Silencing

The unindividuated shame women by attempting to silence them. This is a preventative measure that keeps new discourse from spreading, which also maintains status quo.

Maya Jordan speaks of the way internalized misogyny silences those who publicly express sexuality. Jordan's mother's slut-shaming "*was a highly developed way of telling (her) to keep (her) mouth shut.*" She recognized her mother attempted to foster a "good girl" trope, one of obedience and submission. For this reason, it was difficult for her to reclaim the word slut, as part of reclaiming was speaking openly of her sexuality and previous sex-work.

Labeling

Labeling is another technique of othering used by those who are unindividuated. Each blogger I observed shared similar verbiage used against them or internalized that reflected shame. I examine the reasons why women shame themselves and the affects of being shamed by outside forces.

One of the bloggers I observed, Sonia Audi explains her experience with shaming women herself. She expresses the scripts she had been taught that led her to shame other girls growing up. She was taught to believe telling a man "you're into him" meant you were "cheap and desperate" (unslutproject.com). She was taught "...a woman could only exist as a stereotype,

either a whore or a Madonna.” We might understand this as the unnatural expectations and images established for women meant to be abided by.

Another blogger describes some of the labels associated with the female sex life in expressing her husband’s insecurities. “I have previously been slut shamed by my own husband when he’s been drunk...I have come home from the bar looking good and it kills me because it is a reflection of his own insecurity. He knew that I was ‘that kind of girl’ when he walked into this relationship. It’s not like I was shy about my past, but it sucks that I can’t laugh about it with him. It’s very much a double standard because he was no better when he was single (talkspace.com). She recognizes the double standards associated with sex and gender. She also similarly to the other women observed, experienced shame when she did not properly appeal to a male gaze.

Unlike, some of the other women observed, she appears to carry insecurity and some level of shame around her past rather than the emboldened persona taken on by others. There is an implied understanding of ‘that kind of girl,’ showcasing a duality and divisiveness among women, a goal many slut shaming incidents share. The blogger by the name of Samantha, associates the word “dirty” with the type of shame brought on by her boyfriend (talkspace.com). After sending out nudes of the young girl, her boyfriend persisted to exploit her sexuality by shaming her for past relationships.

Post-Shame

Self-Exposure

Self-exposure is one form of reclaiming power. While some of the shaming techniques encourage women to hide their bodies and sexual experiences, the post-shame persona exposes both. Women become emboldened by their sexuality and express themselves more openly.

Maya Jordan expresses this idea, when she speaks of herself “revealing” her identity as a stripper. Jordan was initially embarrassed of her family and friends finding this information out, she was forced to assess her complex identity as psychotherapist and former stripper. Jordan refers to her friends’ gossip about her as “*The Big Reveal.*” If not for this reveal, she “*would have kept her (sic.) mouth shut and not shared publicly.*” The shame she experienced forced her to accept that respectability and sex-positivity were not mutually exclusive as a woman. We see her affirm this theme when saying “*I would have stayed in my suburban hole drinking lattes and wearing yoga pants. Now I’m still drinking lattes and wearing yoga pants but doing so in a sexually individuated way.*”

Space for Subjective Discourse

As women deal with patriarchal norms, they have opportunity to carry out these norms or create new understandings of sexuality. The bloggers I dealt with discussed how they focused on the positive aspects associated with being a slut. This choice deflected shame and created new narratives, a space for new discourse. We see this in the conscious choices made in their clothes, the way they openly discuss sex and the way they speak of sex. The women I observed each assess their personal experiences through a subjective lens rather than a patriarchal. This is a part of the individuated woman identity. These women recognize their personal experiences as

aspects that make up an entire person, not one that is the culmination of learned behaviors. These women are self-actualized.

Carly Sciortino is a sex-positive and slut-positive writer and director of the Vogue Column and television show *Slutever*. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, she shines light on her past as a sex worker and the ways she shifted *slut* as a concept. Sciortino “concentrates not on the pain or humiliation caused by sluttiness but on the pleasure and material gains it has brought her” (Naomi Fry). Sciortino repeats what other individuated women I have observed, claim. These claims emphasize the ability to demonstrate multi-faced personalities, that of intellect and sexual deviance. Sciortino speaks of other empowered sluts who have influenced her such as Courtney Love. She was “...influenced in her early twenties by Courtney Love and her messy aesthetic of torn nighties and smudged makeup—which, worn “like strapping on armor” (Naomi Fry). This “armor” might stand as resistance toward sexual shame and oppression. We also see the alteration of language around revealing clothing- that of shame vs. that of empowerment.

The women I observed adopted a new tone when discussing shame, altering the discourse surrounding what it means to be a slut in a western culture. Maya Jordan deals with this self-actualization of her identity with humorous undertones. Jordan simultaneously speaks of the lasting and harmful impacts of shaming ones’ sexuality publicly, using sexual metaphors to mock the shame her friend meant to employ, reclaiming her identity. She speaks of her friends’ slut-shaming gossip and its effect on her, writing, “*One doesn’t always get those opportunities thrown in their face. It wasn’t a gradual undressing like in a high-class club; it was a down and dirty grind in a back room somewhere...*”

Individuated women assert their autonomy and control over their sex lives; there is a new level of control achieved when actualizing the sexual self. This produces more equality between men and women, where women once lacked this authority. Jordan is recreating the rules she has previously learned about gender roles noting she sees women now the way she sees men, i.e., “individuated and capable of choosing their partners and keeping themselves safe.” Jordan views her sexual liberation as entitlement to her own “bravery.” This bravery takes form as sex-positivity in a world of sexual-shame.

The female body has taken a politicized representation under patriarchal oppression. Individuated women understand the female body as an unlimited and independently owned vessel. Jordan expands this narrative by reminding the reader of the innate ownership self-hood possesses, “*our bodies are our own, meant to be explored, written about, photographed and talked about. It’s more important than ever for women to be creating their own sexual images and words to adequately depict our reality.*” In expressing sexually, the way a woman chooses, the cultural reality of control is altered.

V. Conclusion

The women I observed have dealt with slut-shaming through understanding the cause of social sanctions and made distinct the difference between adapting to learned narratives and altering. Each individuated woman acknowledged these learned behaviors when reflecting on their childhoods or previous relationships. As these women became individuated, they embarked on bravery in creating new narrative through changing the discourse they used around slut-culture and the lens they placed over shaming rhetoric.

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