College students' perceptions of slut-shaming discourse on campus

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the college students' perceptions of slut-shaming discourse. The research indicated that there was a strong correlation between cultural expectations and slut-shaming. According to the results, the perceptions of slut-shaming are influenced by aspects such as: class, culture, media, gender, feminism, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Overall, college students were found to be on crossfire of slut-shaming discourse on a college campus. It was concluded, based on the research, the participants have significantly identified with judging a woman by the way she dresses. It is recommended that further research be devoted to slut-shaming perceptions in different: cultures, groups, regions, religions, organizations, media and institutions. Furthermore, counselors will be able to explore efficacious methods of advocacy which are geared more to prevention of SSD (Slut-Shaming Discourse) than just treatment. Creating a multicultural awareness of this adverse social phenomenon will shed light on the subject and encourage more research to be done.

Keywords: Slut-shaming, multicultural, student perceptions, sexual labeling, media

INTRODUCTION

 "Slut shaming" is defined as an act of maligning women for alleged sexual behavior which is common among young Americans (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014). To illustrate, Armstrong et al. (2014) argued that Urban Dictionary which is a website recording youth slang has made reference to the following words: "*slut* to *whore, bitch, skank, ho, cunt, prostitute, tramp, hooker*, *easy*, or *slug"* (p.100). Furthermore, Rahimi and Liston (2009) indicated that adverse sexual labeling such as the word usage of "slut" is a form of sexual harassment that is embedded today in American society, as it was twenty, fifty, or even one hundred years ago.

 In agreement with the above, Rahimi and Liston (2009) confirmed that sexual labeling is a clear form of sexual oppression. Thus, it serves to remind young girls of their gendered role in the heterosexual script. The researcher sought to investigate college students' perceptions of SSD (Slut-Shaming Discourse) in a South Texas university campus. It was important to note the different stances that both men and women have in relation to slut discourse. Rich (1983) as cited by Rahimi and Liston (2009) investigated the extent to which the culture of Southern Texas contributes to the complicated debates of young adult female sexuality. A conciliation that has historically been shaped by silencing and discursive tactics designed to punish women who begin to develop their own independence in regards to their sexual activity (as cited by Rahimi & Liston, 2009). These women are then marginalized by class, race, and other middle class norms (as cited by Rahimi & Liston, 2009). It then challenges the widespread notions of a male-dominated sexual script presented by compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormality (as cited by Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Since, SSD was a common dialogue among college students, the principal investigator distributed a questionnaire to participants of the campus in agreement with the Institutional Review Board of the campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

 "Slut-shaming" is an act or a belief that both males and females sometimes verbally or non-verbally behave in a manner where the effect may negatively impact another individual in a multitude of factors such as: class, culture, media, gender, feminism, sexuality, race, ethnicity, politics, history, biology, anthropology, and religion (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014). Ringrose and Renold (2012) (as cited by Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014) argued that women's participation in slut-shaming is often viewed as evidence of internalized oppression. However, young men are projected to desire and pursue sex regardless of relational and emotional context in which young women are allowed sexual activity, but, only when in committed relationships and "in love" (as cited in Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014).

 "Slut-shaming" can be defined from a social psychological stigma approach, in which the context of sexual labeling is principally about distancing the self from a stigmatized, and thus low-status, sexual category (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014). In agreement to the above, Ringrose and Renold (2010) confirmed that a main way females (i.e. girls and/or woman) are socially allowed to express meanness is through indirect and direct regulation of other females' sexuality. Therefore, as other research indicates, it is the norm for females to position themselves and others in sexual hierarchies, raising regulative discourses around sexuality, appearance and performance in the private spaces of their friendship groups, such as a

manner of constructing idealized femininity (as cited in Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Wagner (2009) attested that the ideal role-models for millions of girls across the country regardless of their intelligence, kindness, courage, or compassion are celebrities who chose the purity path.

Another factor that explains how slut-shaming came about is the historical context of sexual double standards according to Crawford and Popp (2003). Historically and traditionally, men and women have been exposed to different "rules" guiding sexual behavior (Crawford and Popp, 2010). Thus, women were defamed for engaging in any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage (Crawford and Popp, 2010). Whereas for men such conduct was expected and rewarded (Crawford and Popp, 2010). Being said, boys had to "sow their wild oats" but girls were cautioned that a forthcoming husband "won't buy the cow if he can get the milk for free" (as cited in Crawford and Popp, 2010, p.13). On the same vein, Crawford and Popp (2010) argued, "women were faced with a Madonna-whore dichotomy: They were either pure and virginal or promiscuous and easy" (p.13). Riscol (2013) added as well, that the virgin/slut contradiction and the purity myth that equates women's value with their sexuality, is as much about opposition to changes in the meanings of femininity and masculinity as it is about sex per se. Wagner (2009) who wrote a review on the book "*The Purity Myth*", indicated that adults perceive them as 'bad' girls, classmates view them as 'sluts', and these sexually active women are continuously told they are used up and worthless by abstinence-only schooling programs.

The religious aspect of slut shaming is intertwined with the notion of the "The Purity Myth" in American society as the author Valenti (2009) described in her book. Wagner (2009) affirmed that Valenti's notion of the purity myth is the fictionalized story that women's self-worth is determined by their sexual status. Valenti (2009) and Wagner (2009) both advocated for a morality based on ethics and not on bodies. Valenti (2009) also argued that regardless of the personal meaning each woman gives to virginity otherwise known as purity, its individuals who have social and political influence ultimately get to choose the meaning of virginity which affects women on a large scale.

Moreover, Valenti (2009) asserted that religion plays a critical role in pushing abstinent-free programs in schools to a greater extent in legislation. Thus, Valenti (2009) proclaimed that keeping young women chaste according to religious doctrine is best because women are to be highly valued only for staying pure. Another phenomenon that adds to the virginity movement is embraced as the most recent trend in virginity worship which is purity balls (Valenti, 2009). Valenti (2009) described the above event as fathers escorting their daughters to these "promlike" balls, in which it involves young girls doing ballet around big wooden crosses in the midst of dancing, food, and entertainment. With that, in the center of it all the girls recite a pledge vowing to remain pure until marriage, and name their fathers as the "keepers" of their virginity until a husband takes their place (Valenti, 2009, p.65).

The concept of virginity has not changed a great deal over time in that is has been used to punish women and impact their rights, and is at the core of the purity myth (Valenti, 2009). Furthermore, in a world where "porn culture" clashes with a reenergized abstinence movement, the ethical panic myth about young women's promiscuity is diverting attention from a very serious issue where some women are still being judged (sometimes to death) based on their virginity (Valenti, 2009).

In an effort to deliberately emphasize the above, the following questions make a clear disconnect of interrelated perceptions of beauty and sex in an anthropological context: according to the book "*The Beauty Myth*":

> Is the "beauty" really sex? Does woman's sexuality correspond to what she
> looks like? Does she have the right to sexual pleasure and self-esteem
> because she's a person, or must she earn that right through "beauty" as she
> used to through marriage? Does it bear any relation to the way in which
> commercial images represent it? Is it something women need to buy like
> a product? What really draws men and women together (Wolf, 2002, p. 271)?

Wolf (2002) affirmed that when female sexuality is completely affirmed as a valid passion that arises from within, it is to be directed without shame to the chosen object of a women's desire. The sexually expressive clothes or manner she may assume can no longer be used to shame, blame, or target her for the beauty myth harassment (Wolf, 2002). On the same vein, Durham (2009) attests that myths are false, by definition. However, Durham (2009) stated that myths cannot be let go as fictions or fairy tales, because they have a real influence on girls' lives. In essence, Durham (2009) argued that sexuality is understood only in terms of cultural and social myths that operate in ways that are counter advanced, prejudiced, and limiting, thus, there is a problem in society. Also, in relation to cultures, societies, and historical moments, myths are diffused in various ways (Durham, 2009). Likewise, Durham (2009) claimed that a prevailing mythmaking machine in the modern society is the mass media industry. As the cultural opponent Douglas Kellner wrote (as cited in Durham, 2009):

> Radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide
> materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood;
> our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class,
> of ethnicity and race, of nationality, or sexuality, of 'us' and 'them.'
> Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values:
> what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories
> provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a
> common culture (Durham, 2009, p.61).

From a biological and psychological standpoint Chesler (2001) in her book *"Woman's Inhumanity to Woman"* asserted that females also play a pivotal role in implementing indirect aggression towards other women in order to maintain their status quo. Thus, it is an effort to explain and describe their participation and role in slut-shaming. Chesler (2001) argued that females' indirect aggression can be very agonizing psychologically, socially, and economically. Aggression is transmitted via verbal and non-verbal communication and has its reputation-slandering gossip and ostracism effects on women, which in some cases may lead to public "death" and, in some cultures, to real death as well (Chesler, 2001).

In Hrdy, (as cited in Chesler, 2001) it was stated that female primates (gorilla and hamadryas baboons) exhibit bonding but, it is an effort to support each other in caring for their infants. However, they destroy the dependent's capacity to mate or to allow her to have infants of her own (as cited in Chesler, 2001). Chesler (2001) confirmed that although some female primates will sometimes fight *for* each other, more frequently, females fight *against* other: mother against daughter, upper-ranking female against lower-ranking female, one troop of females against another troop of females. Furthermore, female primates battle over food, infants, sex, and a position in the hierarchy. As female primates' compete for their position, they are volatile, combative, and aggressive hence, Chesler (2001) explained that they hit, push, pinch,

shove, and make faces at each other. Ultimately, Chesler (2001) concluded that there is some evolutionary predisposition for humans to be aggressive toward each other.

METHODS

In this study, the primary investigator surveyed college students at a South Texas university with permission of the faculty. Also, the Institutional Review Board gave consent to collect the data at the above university. The researcher created a survey instrument with the following questions:

- I'm 18 years of age, or older.
  ____yes
  ____no

- I voluntary consent to filling out this survey:
  ____yes
  ____no

- Gender (please select one):
  ____Female
  ____Male
  ____Transgender

- Please select your age:
  ____18-29
  ____30-49
  ____50-64
  ____65+

- I consider myself based on my or my parents/caregivers income:
  ___Lower class
  ___Middle class
  ___Upper middle class
  ___Upper class

- My ethnicity is the following:
  ____Caucasian
  ____Hispanic/Latino
  ____African American
  ____Asian American
  ____Pacific Islander
  ____Native American
  ____Bi-racial
  ____Other
- I identify myself with the following (select as many as you like):
  ___Christianity
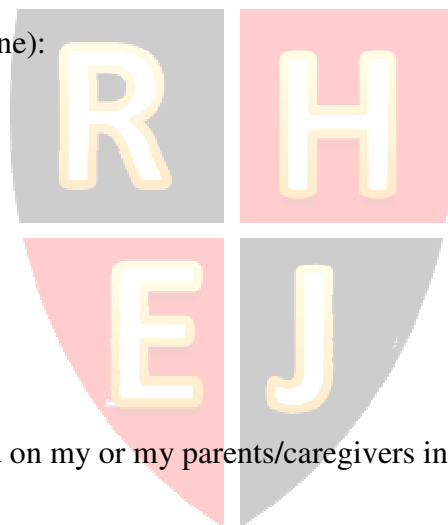
       ___Judaism
       ___Islam
       ___Buddhism
       ___Hinduism
       ___Unitarian Universalism
       ___Wicca/Paganism/Druidry
       ___Other/ Unaffiliated

- I have been hurt or offended by someone who has used derogatory terms (ex. "slut")?
  __yes
  __no

- I have used derogatory terms with the purpose of offending someone?
  __yes
  __no

- In a college campus, I have judged a woman by the way they were dressed (ex. indecency)?
  __yes
  __no

- In a conversation with my peers, I have used derogatory language about the way others are dressed.
  __yes
  __no

- I believe people should be able to have multiple partners?
  __yes
  __no

- According to my beliefs, casual sex is not practiced.
  __yes
  __no

- My culture influence my thoughts of how I perceive women dressed.
  __yes
  __no

- I think the media (T.V. Magazines, Internet, Music, Videos, Movies, and etc.) in United States influence my perception of women.
  __yes
  __no
- I believe social class is directed to the way a woman dresses.
  __yes
  __no
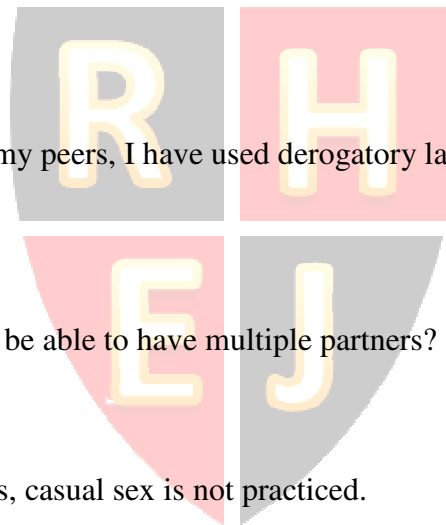
- In my opinion, I believe it is okay to defame a person based on their physical appearance (via the internet, social networks, telephone, email, text, call and verbally).
  __yes
  __no

- I believe a woman should dress to a certain standard of dress code at all times.
  __yes
  __no

- I have heard a person gossip about how a woman was dressed on a college campus.
  __Yes
  __No

Approximately 307 surveys were administered in undergrad and graduate classes at a South Texas university as part of the research study. The principal investigator asked permission from the instructors at the departments before she administered the surveys. The participants returned the surveys to the principal investigator when they finished taking the survey.

RESULTS

There was not a set goal to survey a certain number of males and females in this research. The demographics of the students surveyed at a South Texas university are as follows. Results from the survey indicated that 50.3% of the participants rated themselves as females and 49.7% rated themselves as males. In addition, the results from the survey showed that that the age of the participants was 95.4% between the ages of 18-29, 4.2% between the ages of 30-49, and .3% between the ages of 50-64. When asked about the parents/caregivers income, the results indicated that 13.7% indicated themselves as lower class, 68.6% as middle class, 16.3% as upper middle class, and 1.3% as upper class. In terms of the ethnicity, the participants responded to the following: Caucasian 13.7%, Hispanic/Latino 73.2%, African American 7.8%, Asian American .7%, Pacific Islander .3%, Bi-Racial 2.9%, and Other 1.3%. The responses to the survey indicated the following answers: Christianity 83.2%, Judaism .7%, Islam .3%, Buddhism .3%, Hinduism .3%, and Other/Unaffiliated 15.1%.

The participants were asked if they have been offended by someone who has used derogatory terms. The results indicated that 35.6% of the respondents stated "yes" and 64.4% stated "no". When asked if, on a college campus, had the participants themselves judged a woman by the way she was dressed, 60.8% stated "yes" and 39.2% stated "no". In addition, the participants were asked if in a conversation with their peers, they had used derogatory language about the way others are dressed, the responses in the survey revealed that 61.1% stated "yes" and 38.9 stated "no". Also, when asked if the participants believed they should be able to have multiple partners, the results indicated that 22.5% stated "yes" and 77.5% stated "no". With that, the participants were asked that if, according to their beliefs, casual sex was not practiced; results said 49.3% "yes" and 50.7% "no".

Moreover, when the participants were asked if their culture influences their thoughts of how they perceive women dressed, the results revealed that the respondents in the survey showed that 51.0% stated "yes" and 49.0% stated "no". Also, the participants were asked if the media in

the United States influences their perception of women, the results said that respondents in the survey responded that 70.6% stated "yes" and 29.4% stated "no". Participants indicated that they believed social class is directed to the way a woman dresses, the results revealed that the respondents in the survey showed that 55.2% stated "yes" and 44.8% stated "no".

However, when asked if the participants believed a woman should dress to a certain standard of dress code at all times, the results said that the respondents in the survey showed that 40.8% stated "yes" and 59.2% stated "no". Likewise, when asked if they believe it is okay to defame a person based on their physical appearance (via the internet, social networks, telephone, email, text, call or verbally), the results revealed that the respondents in the survey showed that 7.2% stated "yes" and 92.8% stated "no". Lastly, the participants were asked if they have heard a person gossip about how a woman was dressed on a college campus, the results said that the respondents in the survey represented that 83.6% stated "yes" and 16.4% stated "no".

CONCLUSION

College students view themselves as people who get influenced by the media. However, they view themselves as moderately being influenced by their culture. Also, as far as identifying with dress code standard, most did not identify with believing women should dress to a certain standard at all times. These results concluded that the participants have significantly identified with judging a woman by the way she dresses. Therefore, it was a link in the findings that was connected with the studies cited in the literature review. In addition, the participants indicated firmly and significantly towards the usage of derogatory language about the way others are dressed, when engaging in a conversation with their peers. Again, the statistical data collected indicated that the participants consisted of an equal number of females and males that participated in the study.

Through this survey is it was evident that religion played a factor in holding others to a certain standard of physical appearance and sexual behavior. Similarly, social class was also a factor in "slut-shaming" discourse because it highlights the fact that the participants highly identified with being part of the middle class not lower. As seen in the results, it is evident there are multiple factors (e.g. class, culture, media, gender, feminism, sexuality, race, ethnicity, politics, history, biology, anthropology, and religion) which seem to foster an atmosphere for "slut-shaming" dialogues to occur.

These results as well as further research in this area could be useful to counselors working with clients who have experienced the effects of this behavior. For instance, counselors will be able to understand the severe impact SSD can have on individuals, particularly other females. Additionally, counselors will be more likely to follow the course of influence SSD has for those clients who are suffering from emotional abuse and low self-esteem. SSD awareness can be a catalyst in learning more about multiculturalism issues in higher education. Finally, counselors will be able to explore efficacious methods of advocacy which are geared more to prevention of SSD than just treatment. Creating a multicultural awareness of this adverse social phenomenon will shed light on the subject and encourage more research to be done.

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