

SLUTS: FROM ONE COMMENT TO A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

SlutWalk Toronto turned into a massive global feminist movement no one saw coming. The movement's aim is to challenge the social normative blame of sexual assaults and terms, such as, 'slut,' which have historically imbued negative connotations. This paper argues that the movement's messages have become undermined by the powerfully patriarchal hegemonic mass media. Through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony theory, discourse analysis is employed to investigate and analyze the representation of SlutWalk's participants within *Toronto Star*.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does the *Toronto Star* undermine SlutWalk's messages, by representing the participants through narrow discourse that emphasizes appearance and dilutes issues they are challenging?

METHODOLOGY

A small qualitative discourse analysis of three *Toronto Star* articles published on 30 March 2011, 3 April 2011 and 25 May 2012 was conducted. Discourse analysis is most suitable to determine if the *Toronto Star* does represent the SlutWalk participants responsibly, or if it frames them through a narrowed hegemonic lens that positions the participants in opposition to their core messages.

The *Toronto Star* was chosen because it has a high circulation rate, it is the most read daily newspaper in Toronto and has the largest audience in Ontario. Utilizing non-random sampling, I went to the *Star's* website and searched "SlutWalk" and selected the three most appropriate articles. Non-random sampling is a method that allows the selection of specific samples, enabling a narrowed focus on news stories and omitting, for example, opinion pieces. The focus of these three articles has been solely on a more qualitative analysis of the participants descriptions,



CONCLUSION

As I hypothesized, the *Toronto Star* does misrepresent the SlutWalk participants and its messages. This is achieved by using narrowed discourse, emphasized by appearance while diluting the key societal issues they are challenging. SlutWalk embraces terms that are connotatively negative and perceived as derogatory, such as, slut, to advance their struggle against oppression and repression. In fact, SlutWalk Toronto was sparked by Sanguinetti's misogynistic and victim-shaming use of 'slut'. It resulted in a domestic anti-oppression movement that ultimately turned into a global one, in places such as New Delhi, Basilia, London, United States, Paris, Tegucigalpa, and Sao Paulo ("Slutwalk' Protests Around the World"). Ringrose and Renold expressed the movement's blazing expansion beautifully, "the SlutWalk movement illustrates how a small group of determined women can generate awareness that has grown into a fully fledged international reaction and form of political resistance to a culture that considers it acceptable to blame the victims of sexual violence" (333). Ultimately, SlutWalk is a movement fighting for "vital liberties: both the freedom to be sexual and the freedom from violence, harassment and rape" (To Reclaim Slut or Not to Reclaim Slut: Is That the Question?).

RESULTS

- 1) "In fishnets and stilettos, t-shirt and jeans, a three-piece suit and a birthday suit, hundreds of self-proclaimed "sluts" marched through downtown Toronto Sunday afternoon, protesting a police officer's suggestion that women could avoid sexual assault by not dressing provocatively."
- 2) "[W]omen of all ages wearing a wide variety of garments – brazen, tight, tight, casual, sacklike, wonderfully ill-advised, from fashion-forward to borderline bathrobe – walked happily together, everyone absolutely fine with wearing whatever."
- 3) "SlutWalk will feature people in all sorts of garments and gear, dressed for the office, clubbing, yoga, walking the dog, whatever it is that people wear as they go about their lives not asking to be raped. It is a message of love and strength to all women (and men), especially those who have been assaulted at the core of their being."

Articles (1) and (2) focus solely on what the protestors are wearing. It appears the authors are using derogatory descriptions of the participants clothing choices, minimizing the seriousness of the issues being advocated. Instead of focusing on the issues against sexual assault, the *Toronto Star* frames the participants in such a way to not draw upon their challenges and cause. The *Toronto Star* portrays the participants as dressing provocatively, as *only* wanting to dress provocatively, rather than dressing provocatively as a means to protest Sanguinetti's comment regarding the sexual assaults and the victim blaming. In contrast, article (3) focuses on a variety of activities the participants could be engaged in, rather than describing them by their choice of dress or "deviant sexualized outfits". To note, article (3) was written prior to the first Toronto SlutWalk. Thus, it is interesting to observe the different descriptive discourses prior to and after the movement.

