

Contemporary Use of American Youth Slang: 'Sluts with Pride'

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If you take a minute to open your ears to the conversations going on around you, there is bound to be a countless number of differences in prosody, diction, and concern. Just by listening for a second you will be able to presume something about the individuals involved in discussion. Actually, you might be surprised how much you can learn or infer about a person based upon the language and idioms they use. This is a concept that is ever prevalent and noticeable in a place like St Andrews. Being home to a university known for its international student body, the town is inhabited by undergraduates representing more than one hundred and twenty different countries from the months of September to June (University of St Andrews, 2012). This level of diversity in the community helps to highlight these variances in language. However, there is one nationality that appears to stand out more than others: the North American. This is due to the fact that they not only speak English, the sole common language of all students, but also in an accent that is arguably the most recognizable and comprehensible in the world. All of this is furthered by the sheer number of them in this small town; American students make up 15% of the undergraduate population (University of St Andrews, 2012).

Being English but spending the majority of my childhood in the United States, I have always been particularly astute to the distinctiveness of the American language and since coming to St Andrews I have become even more aware of its unique characteristics. In fact it was this experience with two distinct English dialects that developed my desire to study the argots of the American youth. Although, with such a broad subject, finding a focus was crucial, I needed to discover which aspect of American language I was most interested in. However, it wasn't until attending the birthday celebration of one of my American friends that I realized what that was.

The following day, sitting in my flat I looked up at the wall where a 'Happy F**** Birthday' sign was hung (see Figure 1). My roommate had brought it back from the

United States in preparation for her birthday. It had been there for weeks, but this was the first time I had really noticed it. A similar one had been hanging on the wall in my friend's flat that read 'Birthday Bitch' (See Figure 2). It was at this moment that I began



Figure 1



Figure 2

to wonder why we found it so amusing; what was our obsession with crude language? Why did we feel the need to add a vulgar, harsh word to what was meant to be an innocent birthday banner?

It was from this series of questions that I formed the focus of my research project. It appeared that there was a trend amongst young American girls and their use of vulgarities. Instead of looking at the overall usage of so-called 'dirty words', I chose to concentrate on one word that I found particularly characteristic of American girls and particularly problematic in its usage: 'slut'. Through the employment of Malinowski's theory of the function of language, combined with various linguistic and social studies on function of slang in youth culture, I will aim to provide an answer to the following question: why do some girls use the term 'slut' whereas others do not and what do they mean if and when they say it? Is it simply a feminist function?

Before I discuss the usage of the word 'slut', it is important to understand its meaning. As explained by linguist, Connie Eble (1996: 15), "looking back a thousand years in English, we find that the vast majority of words have been changed", and 'slut' is no exception. Its origin is thought to be from the fifteenth century German word 'schlutt' meaning slovenly woman. In fact the *Oxford English Dictionary's* primary definition of the term is 'a woman of dirty or untidy habits or appearance; a kitchen maid; a drudge', however this is not the meaning that we give to the word today. In order to get a better understanding of how this term is used in today's society, in all my interviews I asked the question 'what does the word 'slut' mean to you?' The descriptions I received varied from, "a joking term of endearment for friends", to someone who is "willing to be used or taken advantage of." All the girls had their own, individual interpretation, and it is these interpretations that influence the way that the term is used.

As I have previously stated, I centred my research on the question of what 'slut' means to the individual. Even though each interview began with this question, it was the only consistency. I conducted a total of four interviews, with six American girls,

whose names I have changed for privacy reasons, and tailored each discussion to the person I was talking to. I wanted to create an environment in which they would each feel most comfortable sharing their views on this potentially controversial word. With three girls I interviewed separately, I followed a more structured to semi-structured approach to the interview. Whereas the three girls I spoke with together, it was more a facilitated discussion than an interview, which also allowed me to perform a level of participant observation. I feel it is important to tell you that I was acquainted with all my informants prior to my fieldwork, although some better than others. Nevertheless, I do not think this affected the integrity of my research. The girls I interviewed were all from similar backgrounds and had all grown up in the Northeast United States. However, it was not until I began to analyse all my data that I noticed a trend emerging. It appeared that the environment in which the girls spent their adolescence, mainly what type of high school they attended, influenced their use of the term 'slut'. I will refer to this trend later and further support it with American anthropologist, Michael Moffatt's theory on the 'coming of age'.

All four of my conversations took place in similar settings, whether it was in their living room or respective bedrooms. I felt it important to speak with the girls in a private home, because I was worried that being within earshot of others would hinder the candidness of their answers and the openness of the discussion. The first three interviews were quite similar. They were similarly structured with each one on one, as well as being similar in content. I had a list of questions to work through and due to their relative lack of engagement I was constrained to that list. My first interview was with twenty-year-old Katherine, from Connecticut. Perched on her bed, I began to ask her questions as she kept busy folding and putting away clothes. She seemed a bit taken back by the bluntness of my first question and was quick to deny any usage of the word, but after a few minutes began to open up a bit more. Her interpretation, she reluctantly explained was, "a word that has a negative connotation to it that goes with the idea that the girl's priority is male attention. 'Slut' is too harsh, but as an adjective I can use it even on myself like, 'I feel like I look "slutty" – I don't want to look like I am asking for

attention.” Her distinction between the noun and the adjective was a notion I had not considered before, but it seemed to be a view agreed upon by all the girls. My next two informants appeared to be a bit more at ease discussing their feelings towards the word, but likewise did not have very much to say. Lily, also 20, from just outside New York City, assertively told me she defines a ‘slut’ “as someone who either hooks up with a lot of people or commonly dresses as if they are trying to hook up with someone.” She went on to clarify saying, “the way a slut acts makes it seem like they are willing to get used and taken advantage of.” Despite the derogatory definition she ascribed to the term, she admitted to having used it in a sarcastic sense, “but with no relation to what it actually means”. Charlotte, 19, and from New York City, in varying diction, expressed almost identical views to Lily. However, there was one concrete distinction. Unlike the previous two, she did not express any disdain towards promiscuity, instead she stated, “you can be promiscuous as long as you’re in control of your sexuality.” The idea of it being ok to ‘have a little fun’ was an opinion that appeared among the girls of my last interview.

In preparation for my last interview and to help explain the previous three, I must review the place of the word “slut” in the overall category of language. The usage of words with no actual reference to their perceived meaning is characteristic of our generation. As stated by Juhani Norri (2000: 73), in his essay on the labelling of derogatory words, “the meanings of individual words, including their positive and negative colourings, are similarly subject to change.” This is especially true of the word ‘slut’. Its original meaning was not intended to be negative, simply factual whereas the more modern definition is labelled as derogatory, but is currently being used in both a positive and negative manner. The versatility of the term has made it a staple in American youth slang¹. This quality of versatility is applicable to most argot words and for this reason slang words cannot be defined independent of their use and function. The concept of slang, and therefore language in general as a function, is a notion that was pioneered by functionalist anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who stated,

¹ Slang can be defined as oral, informal, sometimes offensive language that is spoken in bounded social worlds and used to symbolize identification (Hummon, 1994: 77).

“language is the ethnographers most important tool” (1935: 4). A prominent school of thought in Anthropology in the early twentieth century, functionalism focused on the present by establishing the necessity of fieldwork rather than looking at the past. They believed if events were to be understood it was their contemporary function that should be observed and recorded (Lesser 1935:55-56). Not only did Malinowski see the importance of focusing on the modern society, but also argued that all aspects of cultures are connected, such as the studying of social behaviour and social relations must be in their concrete cultural contexts (Porth; Neutzling; Edwards, 2009). Slang is no exception; its function has to be viewed in reference to language as a whole. As explained by Malinowski himself, “speech is meaningless without the context of the activity in which it is enveloped” (1935:8). In order to understand how ‘slut’ is applied today it is necessary to observe the context in which it is used, only then can one grasp the intended interpretation. The one over arching function that we shall focus on is the use of slang to construct an identity (Bucholtz, 2007: 243). Despite the versatility, the use of the term either ascribes an identity to someone or establishes a social identity within group (Rothwell, 1982: 105-11). This is best shown in my last interview.

My fourth interview consisted of three girls, two from Connecticut, Chloe, 20, Lexie, 18 and one from New York City, Abby, 18, and was arguably the most informative and interesting of all. The girls had very different opinions of the word “slut” in comparison to the responses I had previously heard, their use and therefore the function of the term appeared to be heading towards being feministic. I had decided to interview them as a group because I did not know Lexie or Abby very well and by having Chloe there I knew they would all be more comfortable and open. I anticipated that they would feed off each other’s responses and I would be able to sit back and observe. This facilitated discussion turned out to be my most informative interview.

Not only did the structure of this interview differ from the others but also the setting; it was very casual and relaxed. While I lay on my friend Chloe’s bed, they crowded around the open window smoking. I turned on my recorder and started, as I previously had, with the question, “What does the word ‘slut’ mean to you?” With her

back facing me, Chloe blew smoke out the window before she replied, “a joking term of endearment for friends”. Lexie added, “it’s something you call someone you’re acquaintances with, or friends with.” These initial responses were very different to the definitions I had received from Katherine, Lily or Charlotte. Although, Abby did clarify that they still were aware of its alternative meaning stating, “well it can be used in two ways, like someone can be joking with a friend or it’s like somebody’s promiscuous.” This view is not uncommon; the term ‘slut’ has ameliorated in college slang and is frequently used as a noun of address among female friends (Eble, 1996: 59). Just as Chloe said, “It’s literally a greeting. Instead of being like ‘hey girl!’ you say ‘hey ‘slut!’” Abby continued to be the one to provide the other perspective. Numerous times throughout the interview she would agree with what the other two girls had said, but then pause before prompting us to remember that the term has not lost its derogatory meaning. “But also think about this”, she reminded us, “if you were in a really big fight with a guy and he was like ‘you’re a ‘slut’ that’s different, that is mean”. This relates to back to Malinowski’s theories; the functions of this word can only be recognized when it viewed in its context, when you look at the relation of the word to the speaker. Malinowski (1935: 6) wrote, “language is not just about communication, it has a definite relation to the life of those who speak it and their mental habits and attitudes.”

So what is it about these three girls’ mental habits and attitudes that makes them use the word ‘slut’ differently to the previous three girls I spoke with? Unlike the other girls, Chloe, Lexie and Abby were very open about the fact that they say ‘slut’ in a casual manner relatively frequently. I wanted to know why; were these girls influenced by something that was not present in Lily, Katherine, or Charlotte’s lives? I began to ask where they picked up the word; was it movies, the media, or somewhere entirely different? Almost in unison, they replied, “*Mean Girls*, definitely” (See Figure 3). They clarified that although at ages 12 and 13 they already knew of the word, the movie utilised it in a way in which they had not heard before. Linguist Connie Eble (1996: 13) explains this phenomena stating, “with increased use in a variety of contexts, such terms lose their shock effect, sometimes even becoming euphemistic.” However, this

was not the influencing factor, for they all agreed that they did not start saying “slut” until high school.



Figure 3: A popular teenage comedy about the unwritten social rules of a stereotypical American public high school.

These three girls all attended similar private, coeducational boarding schools, whereas Lily, Katherine and Charlotte did not. A boarding versus day-school dichotomy was the underlying difference between the two groups that affected their usage of the word. As previously mentioned Michael Moffat furthers this trend with his theory on the ‘coming of age’. He argues that the prevalence of slang may well be heightened by the subculture where dorm and campus life promotes informal sociability (Moffat, 1989). Having also gone to an American boarding school in Connecticut, I can confidently say that my language became more vulgar while I was away from home. Although part of this may have been just part of growing up, there is also the element newfound freedom at boarding school. Granted it is a very limited freedom, but as Chloe put it, “we could say whatever we wanted.” Contemporary youth value student social life for its dormitory experience, among other aspects, as equally important to academic life. Therefore much of youth slang speaks to and for these domains of student life (Moffat, 1989). Living away from home we felt this sense of personal autonomy, and one of the ways we capitalized on this was through our choice of language. However, it was not just the use of slang and swearwords in a negative

manner that increased, many derogatory terms were also used playfully. As explained previously, one function of slang is to form the social identity of a group. It can unify its users, as author Rachel Simmons found, groups often draw 'invisible lines' around themselves by using certain words and phrases (Simmons, 2007: 268). The increased vulgarity of their language was something, Chloe Abby, and Lexie all attributed to boarding school. "It's fun, some things are funnier if they're a bit more ridiculous, like out there", they explained, "that's just like our generation, we exaggerate everything to be funny or seem cooler."

However, looking back over my interview with these three girls there was more to their usage of the word than just the desire to be funny or extreme. Although it may be subconscious, by using the term 'slut' in reference to themselves as well as other females they were in essence 'taking back the power'. Even though, all three were aware of the potentially judgemental, derogatory implications of the word, not once did they use it in that fashion. This does not mean that they did not use it in a factual manner. During our discussion they all admitted to referring to someone a 'slut' or describing someone's behaviour as 'slutty'. Chloe clarified, "that does not mean I am judging her, at the age we are now, you are deciding was your sex life is like, it is natural and normal to have sex." They believe just because you chose to dress a certain way or act a certain way in your private life, does not give anyone the right to judge you. Chloe also went on to describe why girls tend to say it about themselves, she stated, "We use it as a shield. We will admit something was 'slutty' to prevent people from talking about us or making fun of us, because like there is no point, when you walk away for them to judge you and call you a 'slut' when you have just said it yourself." Lexie added, "no one feels the need to repeat it, so it puts the ball in your court." These are the examples of how girls today take back the power over the intended derogatory term. As previously explained, the more the word is used, the less shock factor and meaning it has. Whether this was intentional among American girls or just a serendipitous consequence, it has taken the potentially malicious power away from this term.

Not only has the control of slang term been taken over by American teenage girls, it is becoming a worldwide movement. In response to the comment made by a Toronto policeman during a personal security class that to prevent being raped, “women should avoid dressing like ‘sluts’”, demonstrations known as ‘slut walks’ (see figure 4) have popped up all over the English-speaking world (‘slut’ Means Speak Up). These walks are campaigning against the notion of people ‘asking for it’. Women are claiming “it’s my hot body, I do what I want” (Figure 5). Women are declaring the right to dress the way they want, act the way they want, and be as sexually active as they want. There is an absolute double standard; numerous words refer to women’s sexual activity in a pejorative fashion, yet are there any for men? Women are attempting to reclaim the word, which is intended as an insult. They are marching around cities proudly showing off their inner ‘slut’, for a woman’s choice of attire should not give anymore the right to taken advantage of her, and a in this day and age a woman’s sex life should be nobody’s concern but her own.

When I began my research, I was unaware of how much one could say about a singular word and was, unfortunately, not able to cover as much as I would have liked. Through my interviews I learned that the experience of living in a dormitory through your adolescent years had an effect on you’re the vulgarity of your language and choice of argots. However, I also noticed the underlying theme of feminism. Although they may have been unaware of the impact they were having on the connotation of the word, nonetheless using it so frequently they effectively took away the power of insult. This concept of putting a feminist twist on derogatory words is something that is popping up all over the English-speaking world in relation to women’s safety and rights. Thanks to the six girls I interviewed, I was able to see that first hand.



Figure 4: a 'slut' walk held last year in Glasgow



Figure 5: the 'Slut Walk' in Boston

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"slut' Means Speak Up: The Radical Notion That Nobody Deserves to be Raped"

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