

Are we mightier than the S-word?

Cultural commentary by Caroline Thompson

Suddenly, being a “slut” is all the rage. Trends like “hot-girl summer” and “slut-o-ween” appear to encourage young women to embrace their sexuality, yet the s-word enforces an ever-present double standard. But does the increasing normalization of the once-taboo word empower or undermine women? “Slut” is an undeniably powerful tool for dehumanizing women, and it should not be used lightly. Or ever.

The crude epithet gained traction in 1990’s pop culture with Riot Grrrl bands and third-wave feminism. Activists intended to reinforce women’s power by reviving the word, yet their sentiment hinged on using a profoundly misogynistic insult. That jarring juxtaposition ensured that the word retains its sting. More often than not, “slut” is whispered with a pointed glare, wielded as an all-consuming label that simultaneously debases and dismisses women. Its well-intentioned infusion into the mainstream may have done more harm than good.

Across six centuries, “slut” has consistently belittled women and defined them by their value to men, pushing aside their autonomy. Demeaning some women with such a descriptor uplifts the pervasive standard that an ideal woman is untouched, without her own agency.

It is worth noting that there is no male equivalent. Terms like “stud” and “player” lack the same sting and seem playful, even aspirational.

While less overt today than in the 1500s, puritanical culture lives on. It’s especially noticeable in traditional religious institutions where girls are taught, through patronizing and heavy-handed similes, that their virtue is akin to a piece of chewing gum or an ice cream cone. Once girls are metaphorically chewed, licked or otherwise spoiled, they will no longer be of value to men.

There are hundreds of belittling platitudes invented to shame sexually liberated women, including charming expressions like, “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?” or “Who



Illustration by Caroline Thompson

wants damaged goods?” Today’s teenage girls feel the pressure to both own their bodies and show skin, to not be prude but to not come off as easy. America Ferrera’s famous speech in “Barbie” nailed it: it is literally impossible to be a woman. St. John’s tacitly endorses this narrative by pushing girls to wear longer skirts and keep shirts tucked, all to appear more modest. The implication correlates skirt length with the ability to be taken seriously.

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If a girl has a short skirt, the fear is that those extra two inches of leg will cause pandemonium for distracted male students. There is no specified length (or tightness) for boys’ uniform shorts.

The dress code gives teachers the responsibility to examine and call out inappropriate skirt lengths, an invasive practice that normalizes the scrutinizing of women’s clothes. Society feels emboldened to inspect women’s lives through a microscope and judge their character, extending to reproductive rights and access to birth control. That entitlement comes in part from words like “slut.”

Unwillingly, it is a statement for women to either show off or hide their bodies. Even though modern women have the ability to make choices for themselves, sometimes that means choosing to serve the male gaze. Objectification has been rebranded as empowerment, and women remain on display to please others.



The fact is, the word “slut” erases a woman’s credibility. By keeping the word in circulation, men retain their power over women’s reputations. Women also fear that being sexually free means their experience with harassment or assault will be written off as an example of “she was asking for it.” “Slut” is a one-word excuse for sexual predators. Simultaneously, the word is weaponized in the movement to abolish abortion and birth control. Planned Parenthood states that the stigma around abortion comes from “the transgression of a gendered norm,” essentially when women do not fulfill imposed expectations of female sexual purity. Men can walk away from fatherhood while women are shamed for not accepting the consequences of their promiscuity.

Ultimately, “slut” is part of a desperate effort to perpetuate outdated gender stereotypes. Instead of tearing down women’s confidence through misogynistic vocabulary, reflect on the word’s warped mythos and its very real impact. We need to continue dismantling the rampant double standard against women and dissolve the language that upholds it. By abolishing the s-word, we abolish an instrument of hypocrisy and promote true equality.



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