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Can pejorative terms ever lead to positive social consequences? The case of *SlutWalk*

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ABSTRACT

Critics of *SlutWalk* social movements claim that the term *slut* can never be empowering and that it is inherently derogatory. However, recent research suggests that the in-group can re-appropriate slurs successfully (e.g., Croom, 2013, Galinsky et al., 2013). In two experiments, we investigated whether the typically pejorative term *slut* can lead to positive social consequences when used in the context of a social justice movement. We exposed participants to the term *slut* and systematically varied the sex of the speaker (Study 1) and the context in which the slur was used (Studies 1 and 2). Women were less likely to endorse common rape myths after being exposed to *slut* in a supportive (i.e., *SlutWalk* march) relative to a nondescript context (i.e., yelled in the street), regardless of the sex of speaker (Study 1), and even when compared to baseline (i.e., absence of any mention of the term; Study 2). Moreover, within a supportive march context the use of the slur *slut* did *not* significantly lower women's feelings of empowerment relative to a slur-free women's march (Study 2). Taken together, results demonstrate that the slur *slut* is not inherently derogatory and can be re-appropriated under supportive march contexts. Implications for language re-appropriation in social demonstrations are discussed.

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In 2011, a city police officer conducting a sexual assault educational seminar in Toronto, Canada, suggested that women "avoid dressing like sluts" to escape victimization (Rush, 2011). In response, on April 3, 2011 women held the first *SlutWalk* social justice rally where over 3000 people protested victim-blaming, slut-shaming, and sexual profiling on the steps of the Ontario government's legislature. Within a matter of months, *SlutWalk* became a transnational movement of protest marches attended mainly by young women who sometimes dressed in highly provocative clothing (Leach, 2013). According to *SlutWalk* organizers, their main goal is to combat the myth that women are to blame for sexual victimization by being too sexually desirable or promiscuous. That is, to "spread the word that those who experience sexual assault are not the ones at fault, without exception" ("SlutWalk Toronto," n.d.). Although *SlutWalk* embodies many of the characteristics of other social justice rallies, such as an organized march and media presence, it is unique in that it attempts to achieve its goals through language re-appropriation (Adelman, 2011). Specifically, *SlutWalk* activists attempt to re-appropriate the term *slut* "to use it in a subversive, self-defining, positive, empowering and respectful way," ("SlutWalk Toronto," n.d.) and by doing so, they ultimately hope to eradicate sexual violence by challenging myths about sexual assault victims—namely, that women are in some way to blame. In the current research, we empirically tested whether the typically pejorative term *slut* can lead to positive social consequences when used in the context of a social justice movement, such as *SlutWalk*.

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Despite international support for *SlutWalk*, considerable tension and controversy surround the social movement. A main source of controversy centers on the difficulty of reclaiming derogatory language (Dines, 2010; Kapur, 2012; Leach, 2013; Nguyen, 2013). Dines (2010), for example, argues that young women simply cannot reclaim the word *slut* within North America—where pornography is ubiquitous in mainstream media, and patriarchal ideology is hegemonic; the word is simply too rooted in the patriarchal "Madonna/whore" view of women's sexuality. In a similar vein, Nguyen (2013) argues that *slut* cannot be reclaimed because *SlutWalk* leaves in place the structure of subjection, with its image of scantily dressed women in stilettos doing "little to disturb social understanding of a "slut"—instead, reify[ing] and concretiz[ing] the concept of "slut" as scantily clad, sexually immoral women" (p. 160). Kapur (2012) takes a more moderate perspective, however, stating that *SlutWalk* embodies "feminism lite" —operating not as a revolutionary dismantling of the current gender system—but as a "space clearing" gesture so that people can begin to discuss and think about such issues as sexual assault and victim-blame.

SlutWalk has also been criticized for being a mainly white, middle class social movement (Black Women's Blueprint, 2011). For example, according to Cooper (2011), *slut* is not a universally experienced category and *SlutWalk* organizers must acknowledge that they are focusing on the "problematic use of terminology *endemic to white communities and cultures.*" Similarly, Nguyen (2013) writes that *SlutWalk* serves little purpose for black women who "bear the brunt of reductionist moral judgments that equate "blackness" with animalistic sexuality and immorality," (p. 161) making it impossible to reclaim the word.

The public has also levied sentiments expressing skepticism of *SlutWalks'* ability to successfully re-appropriate *slut*. Outside of academia, *SlutWalk* has been publically criticized for representing personal female sexual liberation in an unauthentic manner through use of male-defined terms and for providing an inadequate response to the violent oppression of women (Wente, 2011). Indeed, as a result of criticism, some *SlutWalk* marches have been downgraded into more private discussion circles in cities where public criticism was too high (such as Winnipeg, Canada; Wazny, 2013).

In contrast, theorizing from the language sciences, as well as data from social psychology, support the idea that derogatory terms generally—and thus *slut* in particular—can be successfully re-appropriated. Offering empirical support for the idea that typically derogatory language can be re-appropriated, Galinsky et al. (2013) found that when people labeled themselves with a racial slur, they reported greater feelings of personal and group empowerment, compared to when someone else labeled them. Specifically, Galinsky et al. (2013) demonstrated that self-labeling with a typically pejorative label is powerful because it (a) contests who can use the term and (b) is viewed as a group—not just individual—action. They concluded, "self-labeling with a derogatory label can weaken the label's stigmatizing force" by "transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect" (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2020). Experts in the language sciences have articulated similar theories. Croom (2013), for example, theorizes that slurs, such as *slut*, can be used as a means of increasing in-group solidarity. In sum, although many believe that the term is simply "too loaded to be effectively reclaimed" (Leach, 2013, p.12; Dines, 2010; Nguyen, 2013; for similar argument using the term *bitch* see Kleinman et al., 2009), a handful of theorists and recent data suggest otherwise.

In line with Croom (2013) and Galinsky et al.'s (2013) theorizing—and contrary to theorizing that typically pejorative terms *cannot* be used as a tool for social justice—we argue that using the term *slut* within the context of a collective march lessens the stigmatizing force of the label. Specifically, we hypothesized, as the organizers of *SlutWalk* intuited, that using *slut* within the context of a march does *not* diminish the positive impact of collective action, and can lead to positive social consequences such as the reduction of rape myths.

To test our hypotheses, in Study 1, we systematically varied the context in which the term *slut* was used (i.e., yelled in the street—which is a typical context—or yelled within a supportive march context—*SlutWalk*), and then assessed women's emotions, feelings of empowerment, self-objectification, perceived negativity of the label *slut*, and most importantly, their endorsement of rape myths. In Study 2, we again exposed women to the term *slut* within a supportive march context (i.e., *SlutWalk*) and assessed the same dependent measures as in Study 1 but this time changed the control conditions for a more stringent test of our hypotheses. In Study 2 we changed the control conditions from the typical nondescript context (i.e., yelled in the street) to a: (a) supportive empowering context of a women's rights march with no mention of the term *slut* and (b) true control condition so that a baseline measurement of empowerment and endorsement of rape myths could be assessed. To our knowledge, this is the first empirical research to directly investigate whether the term *slut* can lead to positive social consequences, such as reduced rape myths, when used within the supportive context of a march.

1. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to test whether the term *slut* can lead to positive social consequences (such as greater feelings of empowerment and less endorsement of rape myths) when used in the context of a supportive march compared to its typically pejorative use. To test the hypotheses, we randomly assigned female undergraduate students to read first-person vignettes in which a male or female speaker shouted the term *slut*, either as part of the *SlutWalk* social demonstration or in a nondescript context (i.e., yelled in the street). Specifically, our main predictions were that women would report relatively greater feelings of empowerment and less endorsement of rape myths when hearing *slut* within the context of a supportive march compared to hearing the word in its typical context. Of secondary interest, we also assessed women's emotional reactions, self-objectification, and how negatively they perceived the label. We hypothesized that women would report *greater* self-assurance, less fear, less guilt, and less self-objectification when *slut* was used in the supportive march compared to typical context. As well, we reasoned that women might perceive the label *slut* less negatively within the supportive *SlutWalk*

context. In addition, given past research showing successful re-appropriation within an in-group context (for self-labeling using racial slurs see Galinsky et al., 2013), we also manipulated the sex of the speaker to assess whether the positive consequences of using *slut* in a supportive context only emerge when the speaker is female (i.e., a member of the participants' in-group).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Female undergraduates ($N = 209$) enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes at the University of Winnipeg participated for partial course credit. They signed up for in a study on "Social Interaction and Impressions of Others" and were told that they might be exposed to a "swear" word prior to participation. Participants who did not read the full vignette were excluded from analyses, leaving 202 participants. The majority of participants were of European background (53.8%), followed by people who identified as Aboriginal (8.8%), East Asian (6.6%), Pacific Islands, (4.4%), South Asian (3.8%), African (2.7%), Middle Eastern (2.2%), Hispanic American (1.6%), and Latin, Central, or South American (1.1%). The remaining participants (14.8%) reported some other background. The average age of participants was 21 years ($SD = 5.86$, range 18 – 81). Participants' mean family income level fell between $50 000 and $59 999, ($SD = 2.52$, range: below $20 000 – $90 000 or more).

2.2. Procedure

The current study was a 2 (Context: typical vs. supportive) x 2 (Speaker: male vs. female) experimental design. First, all participants provided their demographic information and completed the Privilege to Resist Scale (Hunt and Gaucher, 2013).[1]

Next, participants were exposed to the experimental manipulation. All participants read first-person vignettes where they were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical situation in which someone standing to their left shouted the term *slut*. Participants were randomly assigned to receive a vignette that was either set in a typical (walking down the street) or supportive (*SlutWalk*) context and involved either an out-group (male) or in-group (female) speaker. Specifically, participants in the supportive context condition read the following (wording changes for the speaker manipulation are in brackets):

> You are taking part in *SlutWalk,* a march calling for an end to sexual violence against women and facilitating discussion surrounding sexual consent. Several students, who are also participating in the march, surround you. Just as you reach campus, you turn your head toward the school and hear a [man/woman] standing to the left of you exclaim '*Slut!*'

Participants in the typical condition read the following:

> You are on your way to class. Several students, who are also headed to class, surround you. Just as you reach the campus, you turn your head toward the school and hear a [man/woman] standing to the left of you exclaim '*Slut!*'

Next, all participants completed a questionnaire that contained the dependent measures.

Emotional Reactions. To assess emotional reactions participants completed a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson and Clark, 1994). Participants rated 18 emotions on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale. PANAS items were averaged to form three subscales assessing feelings of: (a) self-assurance (proud, strong, confident, bold, daring, and fearless; $\alpha = .93$); (b) fear (afraid, scared, frightened, nervous, jittery, and shaky; $\alpha = .91$); and (c) guilt (guilty, ashamed, disgusted with self, dissatisfied with self, angry with self, and blameworthy; $\alpha = .94$).

Empowerment. The empowerment scale was adapted from Galinsky et al. (2013). Specifically, participants rated three items, "How [powerful/in control/much influence] did you [feel/have] in the situation?" each on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale. Items were averaged to form a reliable empowerment composite ($\alpha = .78$).[2]

Self-Objectification. The Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Noll and Fredrickson, 1998) assesses participants' attitudes of self-objectification as the extent to which they value their appearance over their competence. The scale is designed to measure the level of concern respondents feel with their own appearance without a judgmental or evaluative component. Specifically, participants ranked several items such as "health" (an example of a competence item) and "sex appeal" (an example of an appearance item) for how important they were to their self-concept on a scale ranging from 1 (*least impact*)

[1] This scale was designed to assess participants' privilege to resist the societal status quo (full scale $\alpha = .34$), and contained items such as "I would feel physically safe participating in a social demonstration" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The Privilege to Resist Scale (Hunt and Gaucher, 2013) was further divided into three subscales – physical security (subscale $\alpha = .64$), emotional security (subscale $\alpha = .48$), and financial security (subscale $\alpha = .37$). Scores on the Privilege to Resist Scale did not moderate any of the findings, and generally showed low reliability.

[2] As a generalized measure of feelings of control, participants completed a modified version of Rotter's (1966) Locus of Control Scale. This scale asked participants to rate to what extent they agree with items such as "People's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Unfortunately, this measure had very low internal reliability ($\alpha = .23$); thus we did not focus on it. Moreover, a univariate ANOVA analysis revealed no significant main effects or interaction effects. The main effect of the context condition was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .25$, $p = .620$, as was the main effect of the speaker condition, $F(1, 198) = .24$, $p = .627$, as well as the interaction effect, $F(1, 198) = .56$, $p = .455$.

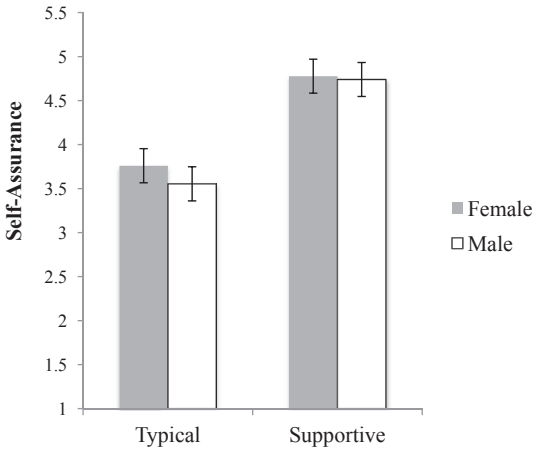

Fig. 1. Women's self-assurance as a function of context of slur and sex of speaker in Study 1.

to 12 (*most impact*). All appearance items were averaged to create an appearance composite ($\alpha = .37$.) and all competence items were averaged to create a competence average ($\alpha = .40$).[3] Next, a difference score was calculated, with higher scores indicating greater concern with appearance (i.e., sex appeal) versus competence (i.e., health) items.

Endorsement of Rape Myths. A modified version of the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon and Farmer, 2011) was used to assess acceptance of common rape myths. This 10-item scale included items such as: "When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble" and "If a girl initiates kissing or hooking up, a guy is right to assume she wants to have sex." All items were answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale and were averaged to form a reliable composite ($\alpha = .85$).

Attitudes toward the group-label. To assess attitudes toward the derogatory term *slut*, participants were asked, "How negative do you feel the label "*slut*" is?". Ratings were made on a 1 (*not at all negative*) to 7 (*extremely negative*) scale.

3. Results

A series of 2 (Context: typical vs. supportive) X 2 (Speaker: male vs. female) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted on each of the dependent measures.

3.1. Emotional responses

Self-assurance. A main effect of context emerged, $F(1, 198) = 32.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, such that participants experienced greater self-assurance after being exposed to the term *slut* in a supportive context ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.25$) than in a typical context ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.48$). The main effect of speaker was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .40$, $p = .529$, and no interaction emerged, $F(1, 198) = .19$, $p = .665$. See Fig. 1.

Fear. Neither a main effect of speaker nor context emerged, $F(1, 198) = 3.69$, $p = .056$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, $F(1,198) = 1.43$, $p = .234$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, respectively. However, a significant speaker by context interaction emerged, $F(1, 198) = 3.82$, $p = .052$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, such that women were more fearful when the slur was yelled in the street (typical nondescript context) by a man ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 1.19$) than by a woman ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 98) = 8.65$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. In contrast, when *slut* was yelled at *SlutWalk* (supportive context) women's level of fear did not fluctuate as a function of the speakers' sex ($M^{\text{male speaker}} = 3.60$; $SD = 1.54$; $M^{\text{female speaker}} = 3.61$; $SD = 1.35$, $F(1, 100) = .001$, $p = .98$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$).

Guilt. Neither the context in which the term *slut* was used $F(1, 198) = .73$, $p = .396$, nor the sex of the speaker $F(1, 198) = 2.48$, $p = .117$, had an effect on feelings of guilt. No significant speaker by context condition interaction, $F(1, 198) = .06$, $p = .803$ emerged on feelings of guilt.

3.2. Social consequences

Empowerment. A main effect of the context condition emerged, $F(1, 198) = 27.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. As predicted, participants reported greater empowerment after being exposed to *slut* in a supportive ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.35$) than in a typical

[3] Given that reliabilities were low, individual items were also assessed. No significant effects of speaker or context, or their interaction emerged on any of the individual items.

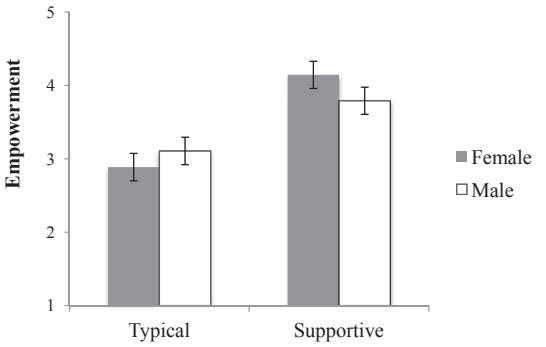

Fig. 2. Women's feelings of empowerment as a function of context of slur and sex of speaker in Study 1.

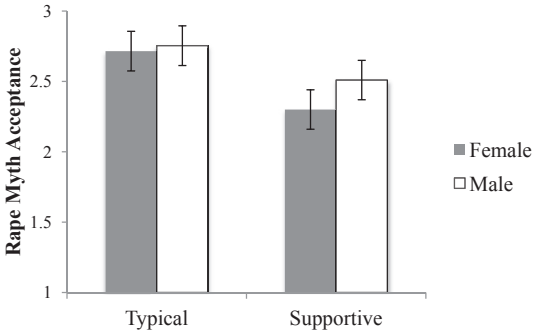

Fig. 3. Women's rape myth acceptance as a function of context of slur and sex of speaker in Study 1.

context ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.29$).[4] The main effect of the speaker condition was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .13$, $p = .721$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, and no interaction emerged, $F(1, 198) = 2.38$, $p = .124$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. See Fig. 2.

Self-Objectification. No significant effects emerged. The context condition main effect was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = 1.78$, $p = .183$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, as was the speaker condition main effect, $F(1, 198) = .48$, $p = .488$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, and the interaction effect $F(1, 198) = 1.97$, $p = .163$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Rape myth acceptance. A main effect of the context emerged, $F(1, 198) = 5.52$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, such that women were less likely to endorse rape myths after hearing *slut* in a supportive ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .93$) than in a typical context ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.06$). The main effect of the speaker condition on rape myth acceptance scores was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .78$, $p = .378$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, and no interaction emerged, $F(1, 198) = .37$, $p = .544$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. See Fig. 3.

Attitudes toward the group-label. No significant effects emerged. The context condition main effect was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .02$, $p = .880$, as was the speaker condition main effect $F(1, 198) = .13$, $p = .719$, and the interaction effect $F(1, 198) = .07$, $p = .786$.

3.3. Study 1 discussion

Although the label *slut* was deemed just as negative in a supportive versus typical context, the word had very different consequences for participants depending on the context in which it was used. After hearing *slut* within the supportive context

[4] The three-item measure of empowerment was further broken down to assess whether the dimensions of empowerment, (power, influence, and control) produced different results independently than as a composite measure. Results revealed a main effect of the context condition on the item "How powerful did you feel in the situation?" (Galinsky et al., 2013), $F(1, 198) = 23.90$, $p < .000$, $\eta^2 = .11$, confirming that participants reported experiencing more power in a supportive ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.49$) than in a neutral context ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.62$). The main effect of the speaker condition was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .44$, $p = .506$, and there was no significant interaction effect $F(1, 198) = 1.96$, $p = .163$. Results were consistent across the other two items, revealing a main effect of the context condition on the item "How in control did you feel in the situation?" (Galinsky et al., 2013), $F(1, 198) = 16.98$, $p > .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$, confirming that participants reported experiencing more control in a supportive ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.66$) than in a typical context ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.65$). The main effect of the speaker condition was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .71$, $p = .402$, and there was no significant interaction effect $F(1, 198) = 1.02$, $p = .313$. The item "How much influence do you feel you had in the situation?" (Galinsky et al., 2013), had similar results. The significant main effect of the context condition $F(1, 198) = 14.45$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .07$ confirmed that participants reported feeling that they had more influence over their surroundings in a supportive ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.72$) rather than in a typical context ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.59$). Again, the main effect of the speaker condition was non-significant, $F(1, 198) = .37$, $p = .543$, and there was no significant interaction effect $F(1, 198) = 1.87$, $p = .173$.

of the *SlutWalk* march, women reported greater feelings of empowerment and greater self-assurance compared to women who heard *slut* used in a typical context of being yelled in the street. Importantly, women were *less* likely to endorse common rape myths after hearing *slut* in the supportive compared to typical context. Interestingly, the sex of the speaker did not affect how self-assured or empowered women felt. Only within the typical context did the sex of the speaker matter; with women reporting greater fear after hearing the slur used by a man versus a woman. Women's self-reported fear was not greater if a man (compared to woman) used the slur within the supportive context of *SlutWalk*.

Some activists believe that men's involvement in gender equality movements can result in a replication of the existing gender hierarchy and grant men a continued position of societal dominance (Winterfox, 2013) while disempowering women. However, the sex of the person using the term *slut* did not affect women's feelings of empowerment, indicating that men's involvement in the march may not necessarily disempower women. The presence of men also had no effect on women's self-assurance, or their acceptance of common rape myths.

4. Study 2

In Study 1, we demonstrated that the pejorative group label, *slut*, was malleable. That is, in line with Galinsky et al. (2013)'s findings and Croom's (2011, 2013) analyses, the slur had relatively more positive social consequences when it was used within a supportive march context compared to a typical context. However it remains unclear where women's baseline self-assurance, feelings of empowerment, and endorsement of rape myths sit. Does using the term *slut* in the supportive context *increase* feelings of empowerment or are the effects driven by *decreases* in empowerment after hearing *slut* used in a typical, unsupportive, context? In other words, what is the direction of the effect? Thus, one aim of Study 2 was to establish a true baseline condition to assess women's feelings of empowerment, self-assurance, and endorsement of rape myths in the absence of any mention of the term *slut* or social justice march.

The second aim of Study 2 was to investigate the specificity of the effects found in Study 1. Is *SlutWalk* especially empowering relative to other marches for similar causes? To test this, we randomly assigned women to read one of three first-person vignettes. Group 1 read the *SlutWalk* passage used in Study 1. Group 2 read a virtually identical passage except that any reference to *slut* was removed but all other references to a social justice march were maintained. Group 3 did not read any passage and simply completed the dependent measures, serving as the true control (i.e., baseline) condition.

In Study 2, the hypotheses were more nuanced than in Study 1. In Study 1, we compared a collective action scenario to an everyday scenario, whereas in Study 2, we pitted two collective action scenarios against each other: *SlutWalk* and an identical social rights march but without any mention of the slur (i.e., *RightsWalk*). Thus, women's scores in these collective action conditions could be compared to women's baseline feelings of: empowerment, positive emotions, self-objectification, and endorsement of common rape myths. Moreover, comparisons between the *SlutWalk* and *RightsWalk* conditions could be made.

In support of the re-appropriation claim, in Study 2 we hypothesized that use of the term *slut* within the *SlutWalk* context would *not* diminish the positive effects of collective action. In other words, women should not report significantly lower levels of empowerment or positive emotions within the *SlutWalk* compared to *RightsWalk* condition. In addition, lowered endorsement of rape myths should emerge in both march contexts relative to baseline. In contrast, women's empowerment may be lower in the collective march conditions compared to baseline. Collective marches remind women of the reality of sexual assault; thus at least when compared to baseline, women's feelings of empowerment will likely be lower in any context in which they are reminded of the possibility of victimization (i.e., in either of the march contexts relative to baseline).

5. Methods

5.1. Participants

Female undergraduates ($N = 122$) enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes at the University of Winnipeg participated for either partial course credit or $5.00. They signed up for a study on "Social Interaction and Impressions of Others – Part II." The majority reported being of White or Caucasian descent (69.7%), followed by people who identified as Asian or Asian–American (13.1%), multiracial (8.2%), American Indian or Alaska Native (4.1%), Black, African–American, or African (1.6%), Latino/Latina (.8%), Middle Eastern or Arab (.8%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (.8%). One person did not answer the question (.8%). The average age of participants was 21 years ($SD = 4.77$, range 19–56). Participants' median family income level fell between $60 000 and $69 999, (range: below $20 000 – $90 000 or more).

5.2. Procedure

First, all participants completed the Privilege to Resist Scale (Hunt and Gaucher, 2013). Next, participants in the collective action conditions read first-person vignettes in which they were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical situation. Participants randomly assigned to the *SlutWalk* condition read the following:

> You are taking part in *SlutWalk,* a march calling for an end to sexual violence against women and facilitating discussion surrounding sexual consent. Several students, who are also participating in the march, surround you. Just as you reach campus, you turn your head toward the school and hear a woman standing to the left of you exclaim '*Slut!*'

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for dependent measures in Study 2.

	SlutWalk	RightsWalk	Baseline	P value
Main dependent variables of interest				
Empowerment	3.67[a] (1.41)	3.72[a] (1.38)	4.38[b] (0.88)	.02
Rape myth	2.19[a] (0.78)	2.20[a] (0.99)	2.76[b] (1.08)	.01
Negativity of label	5.50 (1.22)	5.69 (1.44)	5.49 (1.55)	.77
Axillary analyses				
Self-objectification	2.83 (2.97)	1.56 (2.83)	2.18 (3.10)	.16
Self-assurance	4.42 (1.33)	4.88 (1.09)	4.61 (1.11)	.21
Fear	3.65 (1.28)	3.12 (1.11)	3.35 (1.15)	.13
Guilt	2.39[a] (1.03)	2.53[ab] (0.98)	2.94[b] (1.27)	.07

Note: Means with different subscript differ at $p < .05$.

Participants randomly assigned to the *RightsWalk* condition read the following:

> You are taking part in a march calling for an end to sexual violence against women and facilitating discussion surrounding sexual consent. Several students, who are also participating in the march, surround you. Just as you reach campus, you turn your head toward the school and hear a woman standing to the left of you exclaim "*Rights!*"

Participants randomly assigned to the baseline condition read no vignette and completed the dependent measures. Dependent measures were identical to those used in Study 1.[5] Last, participants completed demographic items.

6. Results

We conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs with three conditions (*SlutWalk*, *RightsWalk*, control) on all dependent measures. We then followed up LSD comparisons on those dependent measures with an overall significant effect of condition. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for these analyses.

6.1. Emotional responses

There were no overall effects of condition for the self-assurance, fear, or guilt subscales of the PANAS, all *ps* $> .07$.[6]

7. Social consequences

Empowerment. Women who read about *SlutWalk* ($p = .013$) or *RightsWalk* ($p = .020$) felt *less* empowered than women who did not read about a march. The overall effect was significant, $F(2,119) = 3.99$, $p = .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. No other comparisons revealed significant differences.

Rape myth acceptance. Women reported lower acceptance of rape myths in the *SlutWalk* ($p = .010$) and *RightsWalk* conditions ($p = .009$) compared to the baseline condition. The overall effect was significant, $F(2, 117) = 4.59$, $p = .012$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$.

Self-Objectification. No effect of condition emerged. Further inspection of the simple effects revealed that although self-objectification appeared highest in the *SlutWalk* condition, those scores were not significantly different from those in the baseline condition, and showed a non-significant lower trend ($p = .06$) from those in the *RightsWalk* condition.

Attitude toward the group-label. Regardless of condition, participants perceived the term *slut* as negative (M = 5.56, SD = 1.40), $F(2, 118) = .268$, $p = .766$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$.

7.1. Study 2 discussion

Compared to feelings of empowerment in the baseline condition (i.e., absence of any march), women reported *decreases* in empowerment in both the *SlutWalk* and *RightsWalk* conditions. In other words, simply reminding women of the need for marches to combat violence against women reduced their feelings of empowerment relative to women who had not been reminded that such marches are needed (i.e., baseline condition). Given that such injustice cannot be ignored, however, the central question of the effects of *SlutWalk* remains. Importantly, women's feelings of empowerment did not differ by whether they had read about *SlutWalk* or the *RightsWalk,* suggesting that *SlutWalk* marches do not inherently lead to negative consequences—at least not any more than a march or demonstration without focus on the term *slut*. Perhaps most importantly, consistent with hypotheses, women in the *SlutWalk* and *RightsWalk* conditions were significantly less likely to endorse

[5] With the exception that we removed Rotter's Locus of Control scale because of its low reliability.

[6] A marginally significant effect of condition emerged on the guilt subscale of the PANAS, $F(2,117) = 2.74$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, such that women who read about *SlutWalk* reported less guilt ($p = .04$) than women in the baseline condition. No other comparisons were significant.

common rape myths compared to women in the baseline condition. In Study 2, participants' emotions did not significantly fluctuate as a function of condition.

8. General discussion

Across two experiments, women were less likely to endorse common rape myths after being exposed to *slut* in a supportive relative to a typical context (Study 1) or baseline condition (Study 2). Although women's feelings of empowerment were lower after reading about any march (compared to baseline), empowerment did *not* differ between the *SlutWalk* and *RightsWalk* conditions, supporting our hypothesis that use of the word *slut* within the context of a social justice march does *not* diminish the positive impact of collective action. Moreover, these results support the context-specific position (Croom, 2011; Kennedy, 2002) that even deeply entrenched slurs, such as *slut*, can, under the right conditions, change form and lead to positive consequences, such as less endorsement of rape myths.

The decreased endorsement of rape myths within the *SlutWalk* and *RightsWalk* conditions is noteworthy. Rape myths, defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p.217), create a social climate that is hostile to rape victims, and supports rape culture (Burt, 1980). Although it is important to understand how to combat such beliefs in men, it is equally important to understand how to reduce the acceptance of such beliefs in women—as we did in the current research. Indeed, rape myth acceptance is common in both men and women (Chapleau et al., 2007), and some women internalize attitudes that promote harmful false beliefs about sexual assault. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004), for example, found that women who had experienced rape and had accepted rape myths were less likely than other women to publically acknowledge that they had been raped—an essential step in the process of healing and a move toward justice. The current work suggests that marches aimed at combating violence against women can reduce women's endorsement of rape myths. Future work should investigate whether marches such as *SlutWalk* also reduce men's acceptance of rape myths—beliefs that have been shown to predict men's rape proclivity (Bohner et al., 2006).

It is also noteworthy that women's reports of how negative the term *slut* seemed did not differ as a function of the manipulation in either study. There are several possibilities for the lack of movement on this one-item measure (i.e., "how negative is the label *slut*?"). One possibility is that the item did not refer to the context in which *slut* was used. Thus, it is possible that the women in our studies answered thinking about how *slut* is typically used—regardless of context—instead of thinking about how *slut* was used in the passage. While the term *slut* can be successfully re-appropriated, its negative semantic association is never completely lost, which is why it can be employed by the target group to reinvent. In other words, it is possible that slurs used in social justice marches need to retain their broader "negative" connotation so that the target group may use it as a starting point for changing the dominant discourse by first gaining the public's attention. In fact, slurs elicit greater emotional response (measured via electrodermal activity) than do neutral stimuli (Bowers and Pleydell-Pearce, 2011) and people have greater memory for taboo than non-taboo words (Jay et al., 2008).

The case of *SlutWalk* is unique in that the re-appropriation of this word is in its nascent stage—which is precisely why public criticism is still so high. According to Attwood (2007), the term *slut* was historically used to describe women of lower social class or those who worked in a kitchen; its use as a derogatory label applied to women who are sexually promiscuous (or sexually confident if reclaimed) is more recent. However, the malleability of *slut* is not unique. There is evidence for the malleability of slurs such as *bitch* and *queer*. The term *bitch* has been re-appropriated in popular culture through the feminist pop culture outlet *Bitch Media*. *Bitch* was founded in 1996 and is now a successful nonprofit multimedia organization (Bitch Media, 2013) that uses a traditionally derogatory term in a subversive manner to empower their target audience. Similarly, the term *queer* was once used to describe anyone who did not fit the social norm. It only became specific to sexual orientation in the late 19th and early 20th century when it was used to refer to a specific kind of homosexual man: one who retained masculine features yet was homosexual (Brontsema, 2004). Re-appropriation of the word *queer* began in the 1990s when the AIDS activist group who called themselves "Queer Nation" was able to successfully reclaim the slur. Today, *queer* is commonly used as a description of personal sexual identification—without the derogatory value it once had.

Uniquely, Study 1 revealed that in the case of *SlutWalk,* the out-group could use the derogatory label *slut* in a supportive context with few negative consequences. This may have occurred because in the context of a social demonstration everyone involved is viewed as an in-group member. In other words, it is possible that social demonstrations, such as *SlutWalk,* provide an umbrella context in which people feel relatively safe from the typical disempowerment that results from use of a derogatory label. Future research should further investigate the effects of out-group usage of a pejorative group label within social demonstrations.

Admittedly, the current paper used hypothetical vignettes to assess women's feelings and attitudes—the type of vignettes that are typical in much social psychological research. Although experiments like the ones presented here can help to give us more confidence in the conclusion that *slut* can be re-appropriated, research done in the lab does not always embody the characteristics of the real-world phenomena—nor do they include all of the trappings of an active social justice march. It is possible that actually participating in an event could evoke different feelings than what happens when people are projecting how they would feel. We reason, however, that the discovered effects would only be stronger if examined within an actual social demonstration. During a *SlutWalk* demonstration, activists would likely benefit from the great emotion and vast numbers of like-minded people marching for the cause, leading to even greater feelings of empowerment than those demonstrated in the current research. Conducting research during an actual social demonstration would allow researchers to investigate many factors that we were unable to include within our vignettes such as the impact of police presence, the prior

social and political climate of the city in question, and how the behavior of the broader crowd outside the march may influence how women experience derogatory group labels in the context of social demonstrations. Future work would do well to investigate the effects of slur usage during an active march, as well as to investigate additional social outcome measures such as the effect of slur re-appropriation on people's implicit attitudes towards women.

A final point worthy of discussion is the generalizability of the current research. Studies 1 and 2 used university convenience samples, typical of most social psychological research. Although there is no reason to believe that the attitudes of university students in the presented studies are significantly different from the attitudes of students at other Canadian or American universities, some caution should be taken when applying the findings to the broader population of North Americans. Certainly generational, political, regional, and ethnic differences in people's attitudes towards re-appropriation are possible. For example, perhaps only youth are comfortable with re-appropriating the term given today's relatively more permissive sexual norms compared to those of the 1940s and 50s. On the other hand, it is possible that people coming of age during the era of second wave of feminism (1960s), now in their 50s, are relatively more supportive of this re-appropriation than today's young adults. Similarly, perhaps conservatives, who strongly endorse notions of moral purity (Graham et al., 2009), are simply not open to re-appropriation attempts—at least relative to their more liberal counterparts.

In terms of race, as Cooper (2011) notes, *slut* has a different history for black than white women. For white women, the word in its pejorative form is used as a means of social control to punish those who step out of traditional lines of female chastity (Armstrong et al., 2014). But according to Cooper (2011), "the word slut has not been used to discipline (shame)…into chaste moral categories, as we [black women] have largely been understood to be unable to practice "normal" and "chaste" sexuality anyway." Thus, it is unclear whether black women would view the *SlutWalk* scenarios presented in the current studies as supportive re-appropriation contexts. Nonetheless, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that there is a context in which the term *slut* is empowering—or neutral at worst—for young white women. In our view, the use of undergraduate participants is a strength of the design because these are the women who typically encounter pejorative uses of *slut*, and who are told they should dress differently to avoid rape and assault. Further research should investigate attitudes toward re-appropriation of *slut*, and its effects on female empowerment within different geographic contexts, ethnicities, and generational cohorts.

Despite public criticism of using the "profane" to spur social justice, the current data suggests that slurs, such as *slut*, are an ideal vehicle for sparking social change. Although *SlutWalk* may not directly revolutionize current gender hierarchies or relations (Kapur, 2012), and even though it employs a term that describes female sexuality in male terms (Dines and Murphy, 2011), *SlutWalk* brings the issues of sexual assault and victim blame to the fore of public discourse (Carr, 2013). Slurs, such as *slut*, grab the public's attention—generating much public discussion—and lead to positive social consequences such as reducing endorsement of common rape myths.

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