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Treena Orchard & Doreen Mathura Sangaraganesan

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Exploring the links between slang and sexual and gender-based violence among university students in a Canadian city

Treena Orchard^a and Doreen Mathura Sangaraganesan^b

^aFaculty of Health Sciences, School of Health Studies, Western University, London, ON, Canada; ^bDalla Lana School of Public Health, Department of Public Health Science, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

Despite decades of research and education, sexual and gender-based violence remain distressingly prevalent on university and college campuses globally. The taboos associated with sex, gender inequity, and living in a patriarchal world where misogyny is glorified and criminalised are key socio-cultural determinants driving these forms of violence. Less is known about the ways in which sexual slang or terminology impact how students experience and talk about these events. This paper reports on findings from a participatory action study that explored sexual slang use among female and male undergraduate students ($n = 23$) with the aim of creating more responsive sexual and gender-based violence policies and practices. The terms identified ($n = 59$) provide a window into the daily lives of these young people, who display remarkable socio-linguistic adaptation and creativity. They also demonstrate how cultural appropriation, the exclusion of queer students, toxic masculinity contribute to ongoing incidents of sexual and gender-based violence on campus. These findings contribute new insights into sexual terminology among post-secondary students, particularly in the Canadian context where few studies of this nature exist. They also acknowledge the critical role universities can play in making meaningful structural change to prevent traumatic events from occurring.

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Introduction

I have a stake in these issues as a university student and victim of gender-based violence. This isn't just a research project. These are the lived experiences of my peers, and it is important that other people understand the constantly changing dynamic of being a young adult in today's sexual culture (Alicia, age 20, third year student).

Despite decades of educational campaigning about sexual and gender-based violence in post-secondary settings, traumatic experiences continue to occur at astounding rates (Coulter and Rankin 2020; Keith 2021; Jozkowski and Wiersma-Mosley 2017). These events take place with such frequency that they have been referred to by some writers as an 'epidemic' (Green et al. 2018) or a 'crisis' (Wooten and Mitchell 2015). Between 20% to 43% of women and 3% to 29% of men report having been sexually victimised at university

(Cantor et al. 2017; Forsman 2017). In some Canadian provinces, as many as 63% of female university students report experiencing sexual harassment (CCI Research 2019). These numbers are often higher among LGBTQIA+ and racialised youth, who are frequently targeted and rarely receive the culturally relevant support services they need to feel safe (DeKeseredy et al. 2017; Palmer, Williams, and Mennicke 2021).

Galvanised by the #MeToo movement along with the rise of diversity initiatives on many university campuses, voices in the fight to better protect students against sexual and gender-based violence are getting louder (Bloom et al. 2021; Hush 2020; Rentschler 2018). *Our Turn*, a national gender-inclusive movement to help prevent sexual violence, support survivors, and lobby for policy reform on campus, is the most notable Canadian example (Caitlin, Gilchrist, and Cooligan-Pang 2017). However, these impassioned responses have not translated into meaningful action in the Canadian post-secondary education system, where most universities do not have sexual and gender-based violence policies due to financial, institutional reputation, and culpability concerns (Hibberd 2017; MacLean Reaburn 2019; Rosenthal, Smith, and Freyd 2017).

These pressing topics are well-documented in the media and social research, but little is known about the relationship between sexual terminologies – commonly referred to as slang – and the broader sexual culture on campus, including sexual and gender-based violence. Similarly, few studies have examined how gender intersects with and informs these terms. This paper shares findings from a participatory action research study that examined these issues among twenty-three undergraduate students (16 female, 7 male) at a Canadian university known for its heavy partying and misogynous campus culture. The terms ($n = 59$) identified reflect socio-linguistic creativity, but also highlight the prevalence of cultural appropriation, toxic masculinity, and the exclusion of queer students in everyday parlance and the broader campus setting.

Slang and cultural appropriation

The term slang describes a diverse array of ever-changing words and phrases people use to establish or reinforce social identity and group cohesiveness, and the use of slang is central to various socialisation processes (Davie 2019; Eble 1996). However, certain slang words are sometimes taken up by people outside of the original socio-linguistic setting in problematic ways that constitute cultural appropriation. This is especially true with the adoption of Black terms and ways of speaking by non-Black youth and adults in ways that reflect their popularity (Aarsæther et al. 2015; Jackson 2019; Reyes 2005) but which may also be used to reinforce racist stereotypes (Martis 2020). Popular music, celebrity culture and male-oriented online spaces (Ging, Lynn, and Rosati 2020) are additional sites of cultural appropriation and sexist references to minority groups in campus settings, including women who are routinely referred to using derogatory terms like 'ho' and 'bitch' (Martis 2020; Navarro and Tewksbury 2017). Similarly, students who do not identify as straight or cis-gendered are often called 'fags', 'dykes', or 'trannies', yet sometimes these same words are often reappropriated by queer and trans students to resist the oppressive constructs of heteronormative masculinity (Borah and Nandi 2012). Because of this, these terms are flexible and have not only multiple meanings, but also a myriad of functions that are contingent upon the gendered, racial and cultural identities of the students who deploy them as well as the broader context in which they are used.

Sexual and gender-based violence on campus

The social factors that drive the violent behaviours and slang terms used on campus include students' freedom from parental supervision, intense forms of partying, and the predominance of heteronormative scripts that position men as the initiators of sexual encounters and women – and others – as fair game (Jackson and Sundaram 2018; Phipps et al. 2018). Bro culture is another key determinant, referring to the sexist, aggressive and racist behaviours that reflect some of the dominant codes of manhood seen in mainstream music, popular culture, social media and pornography (de Boise 2020; Keith 2021). Toxic masculinity is a central ingredient of bro culture that binds men together in the pursuit of obnoxious and dangerous activities (Jackson and Sundaram 2018; Phipps et al. 2018; Poost 2018). Such activities include physical and online intimidation (Lee 2019; Navarro and Tewksbury 2017), misogynistic as well as homo-and-transphobic slurs directed at women, racialised and diversely gendered students (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020; DeKeseredy et al. 2017; Martis 2020), and sexual predation, which has been reported among up to 29% of male university students (Anderson et al. 2021). In North America, male fraternities, whose members often engage in humiliating hazing rituals, are additional spaces within which such forms of masculinity is consolidated (Massey and Massey 2017). Minority groups are typically the targets of these violent acts, but toxic masculinity also harms male students by generating peer pressure to participate in violent activities and to go along with various aspects of bro culture identity even though the individuals concerned may not support them (Keith 2021).

Methodology

Study setting and design

The study that inspired this paper emerged from a class discussion at Western University about sexual terminology, sexual culture, and how the institution had responded to incidents of sexual and gender-based violence in an undergraduate course taught by the first author. Gender and heteronormative scripts emerged as prevalent in the cultivation of sexual slang and the attendant sexual behaviours that shaped the dominant campus culture. The exclusion of women, sexuality minorities, and racialised students were also raised as topics of special concern. In her efforts to respond to these issues in a meaningful way, the instructor designed a participatory-action initiative that sought to honour participant-centred knowledge and voice (Brown 2022). Intent on doing more than gathering youth perspectives (Coll, Sullivan and Enright 2018), the study aimed to destabilise harmful aspects of sexual culture on campus by helping cultivate new narratives about sex and the diversely gendered members of the student campus community. An additional aim was to encourage greater accountability from the university, which typically responds to incidents of violence and misogyny by issuing apologies or short-lived prevention initiatives instead of making the cultural change needed to make Western safer for those who attend and work there.

Seven undergraduate students, none of whom were enrolled in the course mentioned above, contributed to discussion about the study design, research questions and analysis to ensure the research aligned with their knowledge of sexual terminologies and campus sexual culture. Being attentive to the ways in which gender contributed to the exclusion of certain student groups was also high on the agenda of issues to explore and find ways to

respond to at the university level. The following questions provided the framework for the project: (1) what kinds of sexual terminology are used at Western University; (2) how does gender shape their content and deployment; (3) how do these terms affect the lives of our students; and (4) how can we mobilise our data to improve sexual violence policy and services on campus? This paper explores data related to questions one and two. The impact of sexual terminology on the lives of students is touched upon briefly in the discussion, which also features information about how the study findings have been mobilised.

Recruitment and data collection

Twenty-three students took part in the study, and were recruited using purposive sampling. Posters were placed at strategic locations where young people congregate on campus, including the Central Student Centre, eating establishments, and bus stops. The social media sites Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were also employed to generate interest. To be included in the study, participants had to be a current undergraduate student at Western University, be proficient in speaking English, and self-identify as belonging to one of the following four groups: cisgender women, cisgender men, LGBTQIA+, or gender fluid.

From July to November 2019 one in-person, semi-structured interview was conducted with each study participant. These discussions were conducted by the first author, and lasted between 35 and 90 minutes in length. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed by a trusted third party who has worked with the first author on previous participatory studies. The interviews ceased at twenty three because data saturation had been reached and collecting new data from additional participants would have been unlikely to yield new insights. The second author conducted a scoping literature review and assisted with data analysis.

The students received CAD\$15 for their participation and were informed that they would receive this honorarium even if they were unable to complete the interview. Before each interview, the potential for difficult issues or emotions to arise during the research was discussed. The first author let participants know that they did not need to complete the interview, they could stop at any time, and they were welcome to spend time with her after the interview to debrief. Information about local support was available for participants who expressed the need for support, however, neither this request nor a request to stop or reschedule any of the interviews was made. The project received ethics approval from the Non-Medical Ethics Review Board at Western University (Approval number 46,193). The names of all participants featured in the article are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken in line with to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six principles for thematic analysis, beginning with familiarisation with the data by closely reading the interview transcripts. The first author took the lead in the analysis of terminology and adjacent data, which were reviewed using line-by-line coding and an iterative, constant comparative process to identify more nuanced themes relative to the master codes that were developed from the broader data set, as well as the overarching study aims. Theoretical insights from

feminist and critical health research related to slang/sexual terminology, gender, masculinity and post-secondary responses to sexual and gender-based violence were employed during our subsequent intersectional analysis.

Results

Participants

Our sample consisted of twenty-three cis-gender undergraduate students who were in years three and four of their respective programmes of study. Sixteen participants were women and of those, nine were straight, three were bi-sexual, two were bi-curious, and two identified as lesbian. Among the seven male students, five were straight, one was bi-sexual, and one was gay. In terms of cultural and racial identities, most students were white (n = 12), followed by South Asian (n = 5), Middle Eastern (n = 4), Black (n = 1), and Indigenous (n = 1).

What's in a term?

Fifty-nine unique slang terms were identified, many of which highlighted tensions between different cultural and generational influences relative to issues of sexuality and gender. As Phoebe (age 21, fourth year student) said: 'We're the ones living it and creating our own definitions and our own meaning . . . It's generational knowledge, what we use to describe our relationships and identities.'

Racialised terms were reflected in the slang; however, the racialised identities of the participants did not directly impact the terms identified by participants. However, sexual orientation emerged as a key theme in the terminologies discussed in the study. Thirty-three terms aligned with heteronormative culture, and most of these referred to women in sexist and misogynistic ways that reflect foundational beliefs within a patriarchal society. Sixteen terms were applicable to mainstream sexual culture and relationships, and ten terms reflected the experiences of queer students. Cultural (re) appropriation, LGBTQIA+ exclusion, and toxic masculinity relating to incidents of sexual and gender-based violence were the most prominent themes identified during the interviews, each of which is explored in detail below following the definition of study terms.

- ANIMALS – Different groups of gay men categorised according to their physical traits and sexual preferences (i.e., bears, otters, wolves, cubs).
- BADDIE- Online term referring to a powerful, independent, attractive woman.
- BEAUT- Short for 'beauty' and used to refer to attractive women and sometimes men.
- BIG DICK ENERGY- Men who are sexually confident and exude major sexual vibes.
- BITCH- Sexist term that refers primarily to women as spiteful, annoying, rude and outspoken.
- BITCH BOI/Y- Humorous but degrading term for a guy who's emotional, pathetic or feminine.
- BOO- Someone you're seeing, talking to, or in an exclusive relationship with.
- BODY COUNT- A violent term used mainly by men to describe their number of sexual partners.

- BRO CULTURE- The dominant, often toxic, masculine culture on campus.
- BROAD- A 'tomboyish' woman who is hot and doesn't call guys on their toxic masculinity.
- BUTCH- Stigmatising term for women who express masculine features that has been reappropriated by lesbians and queer culture more broadly.
- CUNT- A synonym for vagina, this derogatory term is sometimes used instead of 'slut' and by men to insult women or sometimes other men.
- DATING- A term used to refer to a significant relationship that is often exclusive.
- DUTTY- A stigmatising word derived from the Indian pronunciation of the English word 'dirty' to refer to a woman who has an active sex life.
- DYKE- A derogatory term for lesbian that is sometimes re-appropriated by lesbian women.
- EASY- A defamatory word for girl who is known to have casual sex.
- FAG- A vulgar term derived from the word 'faggot' that is often re-appropriated by gay men.
- FAGGOTT- A derogatory term for a gay man that is sometimes re-appropriated by gay men.
- FUCK BOI/Y- A negative term for a guy who sleeps with a lot of women and leads them on.
- FWB- Short for 'friends with benefits' and is commonly used to refer to casual sex.
- GOING OUT- An older term used to refer to 'seeing' or 'talking' to someone.
- HEAD ASS- Someone whose 'head is in their ass' and being senseless, thoughtless, and stupid.
- 'HE'S SO GAY'- A synonym for 'faggot' that may also be used to refer to effeminate men.
- HO- Degrading term derived from 'whore' to refer to a woman who has a lot of sex. It's often reappropriated in positive and non-sexual ways among different groups of women.
- HOOK-UP- A term for casual sex or sexual intercourse, typically penetrative.
- HOT GIRL SUMMER- A liberating term to describe when women are living their best lives and prioritising themselves. Primarily used by straight and bi-sexual women.
- HOT ZONES- A term for the places where gay guys meet for sex.
- KILL COUNT- A violent slang term for the number of sexual partners someone has had.
- G- A local term used to describe throwing up from drinking
- NICE GUY- A deceptive term for a guy who claims to be nice but is actually controlling.
- PARTNER- A term traditionally used in queer communities to formalise and normalise significant relationships that is now commonly used across gender and age groups.
- PLAYER- A male who has a lot of sex and disregards his partners' feelings.
- POST-NUT CLARITY- A degrading term for men's post-coital regret about having sex.
- PUM- A slang term for vagina or 'pussy.'
- RELATIONSHIP- A committed and exclusive relationship between partners.
- SAD BOY/I- A derogatory term that describes a man who is open about his feelings.
- 'SATURDAYS ARE FOR THE BOYS' – A bro culture phrase referring to the allocation of Saturdays for male-only activities like watching sports and/or drinking.

- SCREWING – A slang term that’s a synonym for ‘having sex’ or ‘seeing someone.’
- SEEING SOMEONE- Term used instead of ‘relationship.’
- SHIP- A supportive term used to vouch for two people to get together.
- SIGNIFICANT OTHER- A gender-neutral term used instead of ‘boy/girlfriend/partner.
- SHORTY- A term for a young attractive girl that can be used as a catcall or as a compliment.
- SIDE PIECE- A defamatory term to refer to a ‘mistress’ or a woman on the side.
- SLUT – A derogatory term intended to shame women who enjoy sex that is being re-appropriated by some women to celebrate their sexuality.
- STAN- Positive term used to demonstrate support of someone or something.
- STUD- A term for guys with sexual mojo that’s also used to refer to gay women with game.
- TALKING- The early stages of a relationship that can include hook-ups or a FWB situation.
- TEA- A term that describes social or interpersonal drama, secretive information, or gossip.
- ‘THAT’S MY MAN’- Like saying: ‘he’s my boyfriend’ and showing pride in one’s partner.
- THING- A term for ‘casually seeing someone’ that can also describe a casual partner.
- THOT- The equivalent to ‘ho’ and ‘slut’ that stands for ‘That Ho Over There’, borrowed from the 2018 song Thotianna by Blue Face.
- TING-A term for a sexual/romantic relationship that is slightly more significant than ‘thing.’
- TOXIC MASCULINITY- Hyper-aggressive, sexist displays of masculinity.
- TRANNY- A derogatory slang that is a shortened form of ‘transgender.’
- TWINK- A fashionable, young man who’s gay and very outgoing about it.
- VERSED- A slang term for ‘versatile’ that refers to gay men who adopt multiple sexual roles.
- WHEELING- The ‘talking’ stages of a relationship, often talking with more than one person.
- WHORE- A demeaning term for women who have had multiple sexual partners.
- WIFEY- Reductionist term for a girl who is long-term investment material.

Cultural appropriation and reappropriation

Only one study participant identified as Black, however, twenty-eight of the terms identified were taken directly from Black cultural contexts, specifically Jamaica and Somalia. This may be because most students came from a nearby metropolitan area that is home to large numbers of people from these communities and where these linguistic influences are strong (Denis 2021; Wilkinson 2019). It also reflects the process of linguistic diffusion, whereby slang terms are carried over from one geographical setting to another through processes like population movement, social change (Davie 2019), and global celebrity media that draws heavily on Black culture (Martis 2020). This finding may also be linked to the problematic consumption of selective elements of Black culture that

are deemed 'cool' and 'woke', which often occurs without adequate consideration of how this form of cultural appropriation can feed back into anti-Black racism (Davis 2019), albeit in subtle and unintended ways.

When discussing campus sexual culture and relationships, the Jamaican patois term 'ting' was used frequently by male students to describe casual sexual relationships. Short for 'thing', this word is commonly used instead of 'relationships', which participants considered to be an old-fashioned term compared to their modern configurations of sexual and intimacy. Among the prime differences between 'tings' and 'relationships' was the fact that the former were more fluid and less driven by long-term expectations, which were deemed stressful and unrealistic given the frequency with which people break up or cheat on one another. 'Ting' and 'thing' were also used to assess the level of commitment among a romantic couple, as Martin (age 21, fourth year student) revealed:

We use ting a lot. For example, if you and this girl are vibing really hard you can say 'thing', but 'ting' is a little bit more serious. If it's tinging it's vibing. People will be like: 'are you guys a thing?' and we'll be like 'yeah' and they'll be like: 'but are you a ting?'

Although first and second-generation Jamaican or other Caribbean speakers might not differentiate between the use of these terms, which are both pronounced as 'ting', there were no individuals of Caribbean descent in our study. The distinctions between 'ting' and 'thing' were made by non-Black youth whose families had immigrated to Canada more than two generations ago, making this an interesting example of cultural appropriation and inter-generational linguistic adaptation.

Musical influences were also important drivers of cultural appropriation and misogyny, both of which were reflected in the terminologies as well as discussions of the sexual culture that shapes the participants' lives. Several young women discussed popular hip-hop songs, many of which contain degrading references to women (de Boise 2020) and impact the behaviour of men and themselves in questionable ways. Elle (age 20, third year student) discussed this in reference to a song by Canadian rapper Tory Lanez, who gained international notoriety when he was accused of shooting fellow rapper Megan Thee Stallion in the foot in 2020:

The lyrics literally say: "shake that fat ass on my balls little bitch, put your damn paws on the floor little bitch" That's what people like now ... like I listen to it and question myself like, 'what am I doing?' It encourages it [sexual violence] to happen more and more, at the clubs too. I think that's also what inclines men to do what they do.

These lyrics focus on a sexual position and although they do not denote overt forms of violence, Elle framed the song as problematic through the lens of sexual violence. She highlighted the fact that she too listened to music that demeans women, which highlights the insidious nature of internalised misogyny through the medium of popular music and celebrity culture. The clubs frequented by university students often play this kind of highly sexualised music and they are also the domain of problematic bro culture activities like heavy drinking, drug use, and sexual harassment that emulate the behaviours and celebrity styles popular among rap artists.

Women and minority study participants frequently discussed the reappropriation of stigmatising sexual slang in ways that reflected and served their own realities. The word 'ho', (a shortened version of whore), was mentioned most often as a word that was being taken back by young women in comedic, even empowering ways. Below, Alicia (age 20, third year student) relays the positive and playful connotations of this word alongside a subtly racist comparison of how Black people pronounce a particular version of the n-word:

It's not even a bad word, ho, is like 'girl you're just being a ho', like 'you're just living your life.' You can compare it to the n-word without the r- ending that Black people use interchangeably. It means there's a play on it, it's like a bit softer and also these words you can use not in a bad way. It's in the way you say it that changes what you really mean.

LGBTQIA+ Experiences

Eleven slang terms reflected gay/lesbian/bi experiences, most of which pertained to men, followed by women, and queer folk more generally. Nine participants identified within this category, and their insights constituted thirty-two of the total terms used. A common theme raised during interviews was the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ students, not necessarily by their peers but by the university as a whole (DeKeseredy et al. 2017). As Rees (age 21, fourth year student) shared: 'There's a huge LGBTQ base at Western University, but it's very suppressed almost ... It's not taken into account, their voices aren't considered when they're doing the actual policy making.' Skye (age 19, third year student) extended this observation in her discussion of how this exclusion impacted queer students:

Although Western tries to touch on the LGBTQ community, trans folks have not been a big topic. I think people think 'oh there's not that many of them' ... But they are real, they are on our campus. That also plays into the fact that they are even more at risk because we're learning about all of this diversity of other people but we're excluding LGBTQ.

The reappropriation of offensive terms was described by several queer students, who framed it as an empowering way to counter the marginalisation they faced in heteronormative contexts. Like Alicia's positioning of the word 'ho', Lance (age 20, third year student) drew a parallel between his reclamation of a former slur ('fag') and the intra-cultural use of the n-word among Black communities: 'A while ago I would never say "fag", like that's a bad word, but now sometimes I will say it to a gay friend that I know is ok with it. Like "aaah, fag" that kind of thing ... It would be synonymous to the n-word, the liberation from how horrible it's been.' To use 'fag' in this casual way Lance had to make sure he is in the company of another gay man or friend, which signals the fact that to use this term in this informal way in other settings might be risky. The word 'faggot' was identified as being potentially defamatory but also self-referential in positive ways in queer setting. It could also be used in a derogatory way towards heterosexual men who failed to meet idealised masculine standards, with the 'spectre of the fag' being used by male students to regulate heterosexual as well as gay men (Pascoe 2007).

Toxic Masculinity

There were only seven male participants in the study and yet the theme of toxic masculinity was reflected in approximately twenty of the slang terms. This finding reflects the importance associated with this theme by study participants as a whole and how prevalent toxic masculinity is within campus sexual culture (Jackson and Sundaram 2018; Phipps et al. 2018). Several participants confirmed this, including Joy (age 19, third year student), who equated these troubling behaviours with the university itself: 'Toxic masculinity literally is Western University.' She also talked about how the 'fuck boy' fraternity culture impacted the behaviour of male students generally as well as the reputation of the institution: 'It's the whole frat culture and even though some guys aren't even in frats they still like act like it ... The guys that are at Western, that's what we've become. If people want to party and be fuck boys they're going to come to Western because that's the dominant culture.'

Lhan (age 21, fourth year student) discussed some of the attributes and detrimental impacts of toxic masculinity in terms of how men saw themselves, learned to conduct themselves, and in relation to societal wellbeing. He also drew attention to the need to talk about these issues, which he saw as key to finding different ways to manage this corrosive force on campus:

It's hurtful, it's dangerous ... I think of toxic masculinity in the sense of locker room talk, bro stuff. The big example is kill counts, being the number of people slept and being seen as how cool or how masculine you are. That shapes men's vision of how they should live their lives and it influences a community. Keeping that going without breaking it prevents progress ... I think it's the conversation that need to be had.

Another male participant, Damien (age 21, fourth year student), also mentioned 'kill counts' in his discussion of toxic masculinity: 'Kill count is a quantitative way to measure that stuff. People brag about it because they perceive it as a measure of success. It's one of the ways that success can be measured: income, social popularity.'

This account of the cultural capital associated with toxic masculinity is chilling, so too is the translation of these harmful behaviours into a measure of success that young men can use to acquire social status. It brings to mind Bret Easton Ellis's book *American Psycho* (Fišerová 2019), whose main character is a serial killer who evades detection for most of the story using his good looks, financial prowess, and all-American male charm. A different participant, Stewart (age 19, third year student), discussed the dangers associated with trying to perform the behaviours associated with toxic masculinity, which he described as 'a facade you have to keep up and so it just starts to spiral, you know?'

Discussion

This paper has presented findings from a study of sexual terminology conducted with twenty-three undergraduate students at Western University. These terms used by participants offer a socio-linguistic lens through which to understand how these young people talk about sexuality through tropes of race and gender. Toxic masculinity, cultural appropriation, and the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ students were the most prominent themes

identified among the sixty terms, and our feminist intersectional analysis of the data both confirm and extend current research about sexual terminology within the context of campus sexual culture.

Our findings about toxic masculinity and bro culture align with those from other studies that document these dangerous behaviours in post-secondary settings, which are typically directed towards women, along with sexual, gender and racialised minority students (Jackson and Sundaram 2018; Phipps et al. 2018; Poost 2018; Martis 2020). Examples of toxic masculinity at Western University included consuming large amounts of alcohol, and the widespread use of misogynist terms like 'kill count', 'body count' and 'slut.' These behaviours are linked to bro culture on a global scale, evidenced by the recent distribution of t-shirts that said 'I was raping a woman last night and she cried' at an orientation night for new university students in the UK (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans 2020). Such sexist, dehumanising practices are further validated in the club scene, when venues partner with fraternities and other bro-driven campus groups to create themed drinking nights designed to humiliate and sexualise women (Becker and Tinkler 2021; Diaz-Fernandez and Evans 2020).

The widespread use of offensive words like 'cunt', 'pussy' and 'faggot' is also linked to toxic masculinity and the broader patriarchal culture from which it flows. Such terminology denigrates women, so-called effeminate men, and queer students (Beirne 2019) and they are part of the continuum of sexual violence and gendered inequities that pervade many campus settings (Coulter and Rankin 2020; Knirnschild 2019; Siegel 2019). These terms also echo the violent, sexist and racist slang promoted in male-oriented online spaces like *Urban Dictionary* (Ging, Lynn, and Rosati 2020). Unequivocally harmful to women and other minority groups, some male participants in this study viewed toxic masculinity as detrimental to themselves as well, including Stewart, who described it as an explosive façade that must be maintained.

Another participant, Damien, discussed this brand of masculinity as an important determinant of success within the context of bro culture, where it is associated with intra-male bonding and being seen as cool (Lee 2019). These rewards associated with hyper-masculinity echo Chang's observations of gendered power in Silicon Valley and how dominant masculine privilege 'accumulates' in bro cultures (2018:14). Such insights also correspond with social rituals like baby showers, weddings, or going to university, which are lauded events channelled through a predominantly heteronormative framework. As Ward (2020:145) argues, because this framework is not organised around a freely occurring sexual preference, but rather an obligatory system used to structure many of the world's societies, it must be maintained with compulsory force. This is reflected in the normalisation of vile masculine behaviours among male student peer groups to the point where they are considered part of the dominant culture. As Joy said, 'toxic masculinity literally is Western University.'

The sexual terminologies identified here also point to the prominence of cultural appropriation, with many terms being borrowed from particular socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, especially Jamaican patois. Although only one study participant was Black, twenty eight of the terms used originated in Black cultural contexts, which reveals the pervasiveness of cultural appropriation and the role language plays in racism on campus (Martis 2020). Blackness was also mobilised during the reclaiming of words such 'ho' and 'fag', which some women and queer participants described in positive terms as

being similar to how 'Black' speakers use a particular rendering of the n-word. Such parallels are complex, and signal, at one level, the profound sense of marginalisation shared by women and queer students. Yet, they can also be interpreted as offensive acts of cultural appropriation and the selective consumption of certain aspects of 'Black culture(s) ... without any claim to a notion of authenticity' (Davis 2019, 577). The casual mobilisation of Black terms by non-Black speakers also obfuscates the far-reaching systemic violence and hyper-sexualisation of both women and men, that governs the representation of Black people across socio-economic and political terrains (Davis 2019; Pietsch 2010).

Since the completion of the study, we have mobilised the study findings in a range of settings. We have contributed to internal policy discussions at the university regarding sexual culture on campus, including language as well as sexual and gender-based violence. Interviews with international, national and regional scholars who also work on these issues have been conducted. Social and print media stories are additional spaces in which we have shared the study findings, and we have provided support to students, staff, faculty and parents following recent incidents of violence at the university. Off-campus learning during the COVID-19 pandemic prevented our ability to meet with large numbers of students, staff and faculty to share our findings. However, we are in dialogue with student leaders and key administrators at the university to help inform the development of new Orientation week activities, campus-wide sexual violence training, and other initiatives designed to address these issues at a systemic level.

Limitations

The relatively small sample in this study included more than twice the number of women than men and although we aimed to have a diversely gendered study group, this did not transpire. All participants were cis gender, which may signal the need to employ more innovative recruitment strategies to access transgender, gender fluid, non-binary students. The absence of first- and second -year students was unusual considering that they typically experience sexual and gender-based violence most often among undergraduate populations. Seven participants were already known to the lead author, which may have led some of them to share socially desirable insights. However, all remarked that the interview experience provided an opportunity to get to know the first author better and they appreciated that she was undertaking a study about these vital issues.

Conclusions and future directions

Slang among university students is a many-layered form of communication that has complex social and communicative goals which both reflect and reproduce broader socio-economic, racial and sexual inequities. This discussion demonstrated how vital language is to the performance of hypermasculinity, Blackness, and the sexual and gendered marginalisation of women and LGBTQIA+ students. Although the experiences of white undergraduate student experiences dominate research on sexual and gender-based violence on campus, much more attention to the intersection of race is needed. The

insights of graduate students and international students should also be documented given their uniquely vulnerable role vis-à-vis these distressing conditions, in terms of career development and often living away from supportive networks.

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