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The Taming of the Slur

In an article in the *New York Times*, Stephanie Rosenbloom examined how a word, which originated in the Middle Ages, has emerged from a schoolyard barb to become commonplace in popular culture, marketing and casual conversation.

It's the word "slut."

"She is the one who will go home with you, the sure bet, the kind of girl you can lie down with and then walk all over. She is ogled, envied and often ostracized."

In his duet with the rapper Eminem, Nate Dogg describes his hunt for "a big old slut" in the single "Shake That." The ample-bosomed puppet in the Broadway musical "Avenue Q" is called Lucy the Slut. Novelty shops and Web sites sell Slut lip balm, bubble bath, soap and lotion. A cocktail is known as the Red-Headed Slut. A teenager on MTV's "Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County" demanded that a rival admit she was a slut, which she did.

Rosenbloom notes that "slut" is tossed around so often and so casually that many teenagers use it affectionately and in jest among their friends, even incorporating it into their instant messenger screen names.

Like "queer" and "pimp" before it, the word slut seems to be moving away from its meaning as a slur. Karell Roxas, a senior editor at Gurl.com, a Web site that addresses issues that affect teenagers, notes that today teenagers will say, "Hi, slut!" the way earlier generations would say, "Hi, chick!" Even among adults, we use phrases like "coffee slut" or "TV slut" to intimate voraciousness.

Altoosa Rubenstein, editor in chief of *Seventeen* magazine, notes that "Today, 'slut,' even 'ho'...is used in a fun way, a positive way." Rosenbloom notes that cultivating an exhibitionistic, slutty appearance – donning the trappings of promiscuity – has been a growing influence on fashion and popular culture for a decade. Women wear T-shirts with provocative slogans. Stripping and pole dancing is an *au courant* way to exercise. Paris Hilton is now deemed an "American cultural icon" on Sephora.com, where she sells \$49 perfume.

This is part of a much larger cultural turn, of course. In *A Return to Modesty*, Wendy Shalit observed that we have lost our respect for one of the great classical virtues – that of sexual modesty. In *Real Sex*, Christian author Lauren Winner begins by saying, “I write for those of us who have no memory of chastity.”

But the “taming of the slur” is perhaps one of the more telling developments in our culture’s moral slide, and perhaps one of the more influential. Leora Tanenbaum, author of *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, who interviewed more than 100 women between the ages of 14 and 66 who had been pigeonholed as sluts, found that the label can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to greater promiscuity.

And now that label that has been self-imposed on an entire generation.

One can only wonder how long it will be until that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as well.

James Emery White

Sources

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Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

Lauren Winner, *Real Sex* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

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