SlutWalk or Tart Parade? The co-option of third-wave feminism by Australian news media

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Abstract

Previous studies into media representations of third-wave feminism suggest that contemporary feminists are not demonised to the same extent as their predecessors. However they also indicate the susceptibility of third-wave political goals to co-option by mainstream media. SlutWalk has received unprecedented media coverage for a third-wave feminist movement, and provides a valuable opportunity to explore how media discourses continue to shape our understandings of feminist goals and politics in the Australian context. Based on a discourse analysis of 64 articles, this paper explores how Australian newspapers capitalised on the controversial title and attire of SlutWalk participants but failed to engage with the third-wave feminist politics that informed the movement – particularly the third-wave politics of appearance. Overall, this paper argues that Australian newspapers favoured a de-contextualised and depoliticised account of SlutWalk. The intended subversive intent of some participants’ racy attire was lost and the outfits were subsequently co-opted as buying into the patriarchy or a symptom of raunch culture. Such a representation painted the movement as decidedly anti-feminist, thus limiting its legitimacy and ability to effect social change.

Key words: third-wave feminism, SlutWalk, discourse analysis, Raunch Culture
**Introduction**

During a January 2011 safety briefing at York University in Toronto, Canada, Constable Michael Sanguinetti advised students that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised" (SlutWalk 2011). Upon hearing this comment, organisers of SlutWalk Toronto sprang into action, declaring “SlutWalk is a ‘grassroots’ protest movement against victim-blaming and slut-shaming” (SlutWalk 2011). The ostensible aim of SlutWalk was to promote the idea that “no one is responsible for the violence perpetrated against them, no matter what they wear, who they associate with, or who they are” (SlutWalk 2011).

The protest caught the attention of feminist activists around the world, with over 200 satellite rallies organised in various countries – including Australia – by the end of 2011. Equally prominent was the level of media interest, due in no small part to SlutWalk’s intentionally subversive title and the scores of protesters who opted to further parody the officer’s remarks through their choice of stereotypically “slutty” attire. However, the very tactics that brought SlutWalk to the attention of the mainstream media have divided commentators. Some have lauded it as “bold, original, do-it-yourself protest movement we’ve been waiting for”, an effective display of “media savvy street theatre... irony, parody and appropriation” (Pollitt 2011), while others labelled it “botox feminism” (kmiriam 2011), the “pornification of protest” (Campbell 2011) or the “vacuous, self-indulgent, self-defeating posturing” of misguided youths (Phillips 2011).

Based on a discourse analysis of 64 Australian newspaper articles published in during 2011 and 2012, this paper explores representations of the third-wave feminist politics of appearance central to SlutWalk. It finds that in many cases, the media empties the march of
any political content and co-opts it as buying into the patriarchy. This co-option is made possible by the ambiguity of third-wave politics of appearance. It is telling that many of these criticisms come from within feminism. Indeed, inherent to them is the charge of triviality often levelled at third-wave feminism, a charge that fails to take into account this mode of expression as a valid form of third-wave feminist activism. In the next section, I directly compare and contrast SlutWalk with Reclaim the Night in order to compare and contrast the political flavour of the third-wave as opposed to second-wave feminism.

A Third-Wave Reimagining of Reclaim the Night?

Many writers have contrasted SlutWalk with the Reclaim the Night marches which began in the late 1970s. This paper does not wish to further position the two against one another; however the comparisons drawn can illuminate both the continuity and the differences between SlutWalk and its second-wave predecessor and thus provide some context for the subsequent criticisms of SlutWalk. Originating at the 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Belgium (Eley 2002:374), Reclaim the Night gained traction in England the following year as women reclaimed public space and expressed their anger at police for their failure to apprehend perpetrators of sexual violence and subsequent recommendations that women stay indoors at night (Chan 2004). In the years that followed, Reclaim the Night marches began in other Western countries, including Australia. “Like SlutWalk, Reclaim the Night was about women taking to the streets against gendered violence, collectively asserting their rights not to be harassed or attacked” (Sparrow 2011: 187). Indeed, the slogan made famous by Reclaim the Night also rang out during SlutWalk - ‘Yes means yes / No means no / Whatever we wear / Wherever we go’.
The most apparent and controversial divergence between SlutWalk and Reclaim the Night appears in matters pertaining to sexuality and bodily aesthetics – a divergence which arguably reflect the feminist thinking contemporaneous to each movement. Although the complexities of second-wave attitudes towards sex and sexuality are often vastly oversimplified in mainstream and scholarly debates (for more, see Ferguson et al 1984), it should be noted that these perceptions have influenced the third-wave which explicitly seeks “to embrace sexual desire and expression, freeing it from the limits of patriarchy and heterosexuality as well as from what they perceive to be the anti-sex sensibilities of second-wave feminism” (Shugart 2001: 195). Furthermore, the radical feminism underlying Reclaim the Night sees pornography and sexual violence as inextricably linked and thus includes the sex industry in its critiques. By contrast, SlutWalk subsequently defends and includes sex workers in its activities, reflecting the third-wave propensity for “an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political” sphere (Snyder 2008: 176). On that same note, organisers of SlutWalk Toronto encouraged participants to dress and behave as they liked: “whether a fellow slut or simply an ally, you don’t have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve, we just ask that you come” (SlutWalk Toronto 2011, author’s emphasis). As a result, participants of SlutWalk 2011 and 2012 marched the streets in a wide variety of outfits, with a highly publicised proportion “deliberately dressing in the most sexually provocative manner possible” (Phillips 2011) to further subvert Constable Sanguinetti’s espousal of the widely held myth that a woman’s sexually provocative appearance or behaviour is to blame for sexual assault.

SlutWalk’s call for attendees to ‘come as they are’ regardless of sex, gender expression, occupation or self-identified ‘sluttiness’ reflects third-wave feminist values such as sex-positivity, self-determination, pluralism and non-judgement, values that have largely arisen as
a response to the nullifying effect of second-wave collectivism on those who did not fit the
(white/straight/middle-class) mould, such as women of colour, trans women and sex workers
(Bronstein 2005 Snyder 2008, Lotz 2003). Similarly, the ironic deployment of the term ‘slut’
and associated costuming can be seen as “part of the younger generation's project of
reclamation” (Snyder 2008: 179).

Previous media analyses of representations of third-wave feminism have shown that these
values and tactics are easily co-opted in the mainstream media (Shugart et al 2001, Bronstein
2005). Hutcheon (1994: 32-3) noted that although irony can be a particularly potent means of
challenging patriarchal representations, audiences “who refuse to attribute irony see only
complicity”. Bronstein’s (2005: 795) US-based study found that third-wave feminists were
often depicted as “apolitical cheerleaders” more concerned with personal choice and looking
good than having any real commitment to political or social justice - a representation she
attributes in part to the third-wave’s embrace of ambiguity but also to a general tendency of
the media to interpret social resistance in the least challenging way possible.

The critique of apoliticism and superficiality is one regularly levelled at third-wavers and
young women more generally, both by conservatives and those who hold to more radical
feminist ideals. The concept of raunch culture, made popular by authors such as Ariel Levy
and anti-pornography activist Gail Dines, is a classic example of this. Levy’s (2005:5)
Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the rise of Raunch Culture argues that we are living in a
“raunch culture”, characterised by the mainstream proliferation of a “tawdry, tarty,
cartoonlike version of female sexuality”, once seen only in pornography. For Levy (2005: 44-
45), women who choose to dress in mini-skirts, low-cut tops or push-up bras signify a
“woman-backed trash culture”, “a rebellion against [second-wave] values of feminism,
egalitarianism, and antimaterialism”. I turn now to the discourse analysis of Australian newspaper coverage of SlutWalk.

**Methods and methodology**

This paper is based on a critical discourse analysis of 64 Australian newspaper articles on SlutWalk. Articles were sourced from the Factiva database using a keyword search for ‘SlutWalk’ in 2011 to 2012. The sample was further refined by the removal of articles which were duplicates, not Australian or too brief in their discussion of SlutWalk to be of value. It includes a mixture of news and opinion articles, published either in print or online.

This research seeks to interrogate the dominant discourses mediating mainstream reception of the SlutWalk’s stated feminist aims and politics. As such, it draws upon Van Dijk’s (2001: 352) critical discourse analysis approach, which seeks to “understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality” as it is often enacted and reproduced through language use. The critical nature of this approach makes it well suited to the feminist underpinnings of this research.

The co-option of third-wave feminism by referring to it as buying into the patriarchy was a prominent discourse. The discussion that follows will examine this discourse in more detail, and explore how this is made possible largely due to the ambiguity of third-wave feminist politics of appearance.
SlutWalk as buying into the patriarchy

The attire of SlutWalk participants is a prominent feature of the Australian newspaper coverage, featuring in 42 of the 64 news and opinion articles. Although other sources indicate many protesters wore normal, everyday clothing, the focus of much of the coverage and subsequently critiques is on those wearing fishnet stockings, stilettos and other “deliberately... provocative and revealing outfits” (Brien 2011). Indeed, 25 or 60% of the articles which discuss the appearance of protesters report as though raunchy attire is either worn by the majority or a requirement of the protest.

Such descriptions of participants are not often accompanied by the context of irony necessary to understand the clothing choices as a third-wave feminist political statement. Only 8 of the 25 articles which foreground scanty attire include the context for it to be interpreted as a feminist or subversive action, for instance: “Humour, theatricality and parody have been hallmarks of the worldwide marches” (Horin 2011), “SlutWalk appropriates an ugly, incendiary word used to justify an indefensible act” (Vuk 2011) and “Jamie Lauren Keiles, an organiser of SlutWalk Chicago, explained that a half-naked woman as a form of protest is different from a half-naked lady pandering to the male gaze” (Ardnt 2011).

In most of the articles analysed, reporters describe the outfits as “provocative” or “raunchy” but entertain no suggestions as to why. Additionally, opinion articles tend to pass one of two judgements. Whereas some position it as a “stupid, meaningless concept” (Tankard Reist 2011), others interpret it as a symptom of raunch culture or the ‘pornification of protest’. Within the latter articles, the actions of SlutWalk participants are co-opted as simply buying into the patriarchy or playing into the hands of men.
As per the origin of the raunch culture critiques, many of these criticisms come from those who hold onto more radical feminist views. Gail Dines, anti-pornography activist, author and vocal critic of raunch culture, is quoted in a number of SlutWalk articles. Indeed, one news article in *The Age* titled ‘Slutwalk campaign ‘harms’’ is written solely around Dines’ raunch culture critiques:

THE "slutwalk" phenomenon does more harm to women than good, warns international anti-porn campaigner Gail Dines... By dressing in fishnets and push-up bras and brandishing "slut" signs...the organisers were playing into the hands of raunch culture. "Men want women to be sluts and now they're buying in". (Griffin 2011)

Neither the reporter nor Dines mention the serious nature of the protest. These opinions are echoed in quotes from other prominent second-wave feminists, including Carolyn Worth, who is a Reclaim the Night veteran and manager of a Melbourne sexual assault centre: "I still have at the back of my mind this really uneasy feeling that this is what men would like" (Brady 2011). In *The Conversation*, Associate Professor Julie Stephens explains that despite attending many Reclaim the Night rallies, she opposes SlutWalk because it “taps into and celebrates the pornification of culture” (Stephens 2012). Rudi Maxwell elaborates this argument in an opinion piece for the *Northern Rivers Echo*:

...Simpering to the lascivious manufactured view of what men want isn't my idea of feminism at all, in fact I think it's several giant stiletto totters backwards...don't try and tell me wearing trashy clothing and high heels is a feminist action. Call it what it is: women competing for attention about their appearance. (Maxwell 2011)

In common, these commentators do not interpret SlutWalk participants to be making any kind of feminist statement through their choice of dress. Rather, they view participants as lacking agency, marching and dressing solely to enamour themselves to men. This denial of female
agency is also made explicitly by Dines as she states “you cannot call it a meaningful choice” (Griffin 2011). Such critiques fail to take into account the importance of freedom of sexuality and expression to third-wave feminism. Similarly, the ironic and subversive intent behind the raunchy attire is also lost. These commentators do not see it as an active attempt to play up the absurdity of telling women to regulate their dress as a serious method of sexual violence prevention but a “tart parade” (Sweetman 2011) - a shallow, commercialised attempt to win male attention.

This buying into the patriarchy discourse positions the movement as inherently anti-feminist. However, much like second-wave pro-censorship arguments, these critiques are built upon “the very cultural constructions of femininity feminists have rallied against” (Lumby 1997: xiv). Not only does this discourse interpret female appearance and sexuality primarily through its relationship to men but it presents women as passive dupes, thus countering the very gender stereotypes SlutWalk wishes to challenge. There is a moralistic, paternalistic tone to much of the raunch culture critiques, perhaps most evident in the musings of Sweetman (2011) who writes that, although supportive of SlutWalk in theory, he could not approve of his daughters “flashing excess flesh in public for the edification of a bunch of dribblers”. It is also interesting to note that very few articles observe or critique the attire of men on the marches, despite the fact that a considerable number of men took part.

Although they are the minority, a small number of opinion pieces penned by third-wave feminists and SlutWalk organisers directly challenge this buying into the patriarchy discourse and present a more positive view of the SlutWalk attire:

Dines’ take on SlutWalk misses the point; she sees it as little more than a dress-up party in which "girls" will tart up and celebrate their sexual proclivities. "... Give
young women (and men) a little more credit; we are not puppets of some patriarchal construct, and the walk... is not an inane "fun" event. (Bastow 2011)

SlutWalk isn't about marching for the right to wear underwear in the street... to embrace raunch culture or to prostrate yourself before a man for his approval. It's about the pure and simple fact that there is never any situation in which anyone, be they woman, man (or somewhere or nowhere in between), “asks” to be raped or assaulted. (Ford 2011)

Perhaps the strongest argument to suggest this clothing is a political statement comes from Guy Rundle in Crikey:

Though Reclaim the Night purported to be establishing autonomy by women dressing for themselves, this was in fact the cultural enforcement of older stereotypes that women needed to dress in certain clothes — drab, formless, originally masculine — to be taken seriously. SlutWalk exposes the assumptions in that position, and the manner in which they reinforce old notions of how women are to be regarded and judged.
(Rundle 2011)

Here, Rundle positions SlutWalk’s commitment to plurality and individual expression as a valid third-wave feminist response to second-wave politics and values. However, this is only one of many positions considered by Rundle. He also suggests that SlutWalk “is an entirely post-feminist event”, “uses feminist themes as a cover for young women to wage war against older women” and “has no compelling meaning beyond its own spectacle”.

Conclusion

From this analysis, it can be said that the SlutWalk protest – and attire of its participants – attracted significant coverage in Australian newspapers however the third-wave feminist aims and politics of the protest did not. Australian media commentary often failed to engage with SlutWalk as a feminist protest – indeed, many of the feminists sought for comment did not recognise it as a feminist act.

As has been found in previous studies, the third-wave values of sex-positivity and individual expression were often co-opted as buying into the patriarchy or playing into the hands of men. Descriptions of fishnets and miniskirts were rarely accompanied by the context required to understand these clothing choices as a valid third-wave feminist response to second-wave feminist ideology or as a subversive response to Constable Sanguinetti’s comments. Instead, the racy attire of some SlutWalk participants is constructed as a superficial tactic or an example of women objectifying themselves and pandering to the desires of men. This is an oversimplified, de-politicised representation consistent with the findings of similar studies into media representations of third wave feminism (Bronstein 2005; Shugart et al 2001). In comparison to the second-wave, the third-wave is presented as a more fun, yet ultimately meaningless, movement - no longer challenging the patriarchy but buying into it.

Overall, it is clear that newspaper coverage featuring this discourse has exploited the ambiguity of third-wave politics in a conservative way. Indeed, the multiple positions suggested by Rundle (2011) reflect the complexity and ambiguity of third-wave feminist politics. Similarly, that the ironic or subversive intent of the dress has been lost on much of the audience could be said to signify the dangers inherent in utilising a political tactic that
bears such a close resemblance to the very discourse it is challenging (Hutcheon 1994: 29). Of course, it could also be considered evidence of the strength of the dominant discourse that any challenge to it was lost.

Some may argue that this means SlutWalk is doomed to failure as a feminist protest. However, the successful spread of SlutWalk around the world is evidence that SlutWalk and the corresponding feminist politics have a great deal of resonance with women and men from many walks of life. That said, representations of SlutWalk draw attention to the ongoing struggle faced by feminist movements for accurate and favourable mainstream representation of their stated goals. Most specifically, it highlights the ease with which third-wave feminist politics of appearance can be co-opted as buying into the patriarchy. This suggests that care needs to be taken when communicating these goals in future.
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Notes

i Anderson and Doherty (2008: 16) define victim-blaming as “where the focus of discussion becomes the ‘contribution’ of victims to their own victimhood”.

ii Ringrose (2012: 93) describes slut-shaming as the ways in which femininity is sexually regulated, slut being the signifier for what is deemed “bad or excessive sexuality”.