'We're here, we're queer, we will not live in fear!': A Content Analysis Exploring Gender Disparity in the Public Reappropriation of LGBTQ+ Slurs

By Nicolas Hall

Introduction

According to the Williams Institute, approximately 4.5% of the United States' population identifies as LGBTQ+, with 58% of this population identifying as female and 42% identifying as male (2019)[1]. As minorities, members of this community have faced many hardships throughout history, such as the use of language as a weapon against them. The use of slurs (e.g. faggot and dyke) and their social definitions have shifted from having no connection to the community to directly affecting and demonizing these individuals members of the LGBTQ+ community for decades.

Despite the social reality of homophobic language in our society, some scholars suggest that these terms are being reappropriated[2]. The rate of reappropriation in a private sphere comes with difficulties, some of which include ethical issues in regards to interviewing people about their personal identities, risking a possible trigger or discomfort for these participants, and ensuring a diverse, representative sample. In protests and rallies, however, some people are comfortable showing their reclamation of slurs; although, this phenomenon presents gender disparity, and past research has not explored this. Additionally, in online articles, pictures of

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[1] While I recognize the validity of people who identify outside of the gender binary, these statistics and this paper will be working within the binary to explore the disparity enacted by a patriarchal, binary system.

[2] Linguistic reappropriation: "...taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce another group's lesser status." (Galinsky et al. 2013)

protests, and announcements of events, there are many more cases of queer women showing public displays of reappropriation than men (Currans 2017).

To explore this apparent phenomenon, this paper conducts a content analysis on six LGBTQ+ news and organizational websites (e.g. The Advocate, Pride, The Bay Area Reporter, Queerty, LGBTQ Nation, and Out) and the number of articles present that use the terms "dyke" and "faggot" in either positive, neutral, and negative ways in order to determine whether there is gender disparity in the reappropriation of language. From this analysis, there were significantly more articles portraying "dyke" in a self-proclaiming light than the other attitudes and significantly more articles portraying "faggot" in a derogatory light. To contextualize these findings, this analysis relies on queer, gender, and feminist theories. Additionally, this paper will discuss how reclaiming these terms can be a form of empowerment for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

Background

The power of language is extensive and transhistorical[3], and all members of society have experienced this power. However, while language and its power are very real, they are not tangible. Language, modern and ancient alike, is a social construct, like so many other aspects of our lives. Social constructs are "determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes"(Ehrlich and King 1992) on a non-biological or universal basis. When we discuss gender, language, and sexuality (all of which are social constructs), we are discussing the rule of the patriarchy (Tong 2014). When more oppressed people begin to recognize social constructionism and the unjust constructs in today's world, they also begin to de/reconstruct.

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[3] Transhistorical: transcending historical bounds (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

However, reconstruction means going against the currently dominant group and the culture they have created.

The roles and scripts designed for sexuality in this construction can be dangerous to those who do not wish to adhere to these roles or scripts, such as queer folk. Queer sexuality has been observed through an individual, psychological perspective, a communal, sociological perspective, and, more recently, an intersection of the two (Johnson 2015). The intersectional perspective can better aid in exploring the process of reappropriation, which includes individual reappropriation and community backing.

Feminist theory, from first-wave to modern-day, is considered an interdisciplinary, expansive, and adaptive perspective. When applying it to reappropriation, there are many frameworks and ideas that all contribute to this main practice. Radical Feminism, born in the 1960s and '70s, explores the importance of fighting the male-dominant system through organizations and demonstrations, which exceeded the progress of the women's movement. Cultural Feminism explores gender discrimination based on biological differences in reproduction and inferences the nature of women. Postmodern Feminism explores the idea of "otherness", the self, reason, knowledge, and language. These and other forms of Feminism have a strong base of social constructionism as well, agreeing that our society's sexist norms and attitudes have no universal basis (Tong 2014). Much of the recent feminist theory also explores how masculinity and homophobia relate as a cause-and-effect relationship, as well as why people often use deliberate misgendering as a form of policing. With the violation of gender norms being one of the biggest reasons why LGBTQ+ slurs are used (Slaatten and Gabrys 2014), queer people, especially more effeminate men and more masculine women, are often seen as trying to

imitate the opposite sex and thus "give reason" to be policed with slurs that often hold a misgendering connotation. The explored intersections of history and culture, and gender and sexuality can also aid in diving into the definitional timeline of both "dyke" and "faggot" to stress the existence of social constructionism and tie everything together for the argument of linguistic reappropriation.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

Linguistic Reappropriation

The reappropriation of slurs has been a practice by many oppressed groups for decades. For the black community, the n-word is a prime example of reclaiming a slur (Andrews 2014; Galinsky et al. 2013). For women, "bitch" has been one of the more commonly reclaimed words (Mitchell 2015). For the LGBTQ+ community, the spotlight shines its brightest on "queer" (Zosky and Alberts 2016). What all of these examples have in common is a group consensus, a shift in power, and community uproars in past and present-day society.

Sexism and misogyny are both considered transhistorical phenomena (Pelligrini 1992), meaning they have existed through multiple eras in time. This form of oppression can only be tolerated for so long before women start to protest and demand gender equality. Within the past 100 years, women have done just that. Since the dawn of first-wave feminism in the 1920s, women have been defying patriarchal norms and expectations, and have responded to the simplest form of oppression (e.g. hate speech) with the simplest form of empowerment (e.g. reappropriation).

Words and their definitions are all constructions made by society, and as such, are open to change. However, successful changing words and their definitions can be difficult.

Reappropriation, like many attempts at change, starts with an idea. That idea then turns into action and gains communal backing. This is where some complications arise. Research has shown greater success in language change if there are greater support and backing by the collective, as opposed to just the individual level (Ehrlich and King 1992; Galinsky et at. 2013). With more support from one's community, comes greater confidence when reappropriating slurs, and with greater confidence, comes backing from outside the community. When members of society, who are also outside of that specific community, start showing support for progressive movements and forms of protest, change can begin. Before we know it, pop-cultural, familial, and institutional change start to happen in society. However, without this communal support, recognized reappropriation of slurs can be very difficult to acheive and the slur continues to hold its derogatory stature in society.

Just as sexism and misogyny are products of the patriarchy, homophobia eventually comes up in conversation as well. Since the beginning of the Stonewall Riots in Manhattan 1969, the LGBTQ+ community has begun its uprising and demand for equality (McCarthy et al. 2019). One of the better-known and large-scale examples of reappropriation happened during the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis in New York City when members of the community began to riot in the streets screaming, "We're here, we're queer, we will not live in fear!" (Dazed 2016). Queer was previously a derogatory term for members of the LGBTQ+ community and has since been successfully reclaimed; "queer" is now more commonly used as an umbrella term for the community and is even by some for their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Because of the public displays of reappropriation and the following community support, the attitudes towards the term is growing more positive for the use of the word as an identity for individuals

(Zosky and Alberts 2016). After a successful reclamation of slurs, more support goes towards the move for positivity, progress, and equality, and less support goes towards the oppression of these groups. Eventually, people outside of these communities even start policing those who perpetuate hate speech for the cause.

Women

The feminist movement and its differing waves have been tracked since the original suffragette movement in 1920. Since then, new waves and ideas have erupted, but what has remained the same is the strength and bravery these women possess to confront patriarchal standards in society. No progressive effort, however, is safe from attack. As the publicity of the women's movement grows, so does the backlash from those who disagree. As the easiest way to perpetuate hate and diminish the confidence of the fighters, slurs have been, and still are, thrown at the women who live as representations of gender equality. Some are defeated and fall back unto themselves, while others use this hate speech to further their cause and shift the power from the oppressors to themselves (Galinsky et al. 2013; Ehrlich and King 1992).

Many slurs are thrown at women as an attempt to drag them down and harm the movement. Some examples are "bitch", "cunt", "slut", and "whore" (Currans 2017; Mitchell 2015; Muscio 2018; Montell 2019; Pelligrini 1992; Rupp 2014). Women's bodies are used against them as they are shamed for having sex (or not), wearing revealing clothing, talking/acting a certain way, or, essentially, living their lives how they wish (Currans 2017; Mitchell 2015; Muscio 2018; Montell 2019; Pelligrini 1992; Rupp 2014). Women are becoming more confident, as individuals and a collective, to use these slurs for their fight. Many have been questioning the power behind these slurs and are taking feminist and sociolinguistic approaches

to explore the dynamics of the English language (Montell 2019). One of the reclaimed slurs, "bitch", is now commonly used as a form of camaraderie between women, between members of the LGBTQ+ community, and between both communities. "Slut" is also fairly reclaimed, as thousands of people (mainly women) have marched through the streets for the famous "SlutWalks" - now referred to as the "March to End Rape Culture" (Currans 2017). "Cunt" is a word where the conversation has started, but the process itself is a different story. As another, derogatory word for the vagina as well, women have been demonized for their bodies, how they choose to use them, and what biologically happens that cannot be completely controlled or prevented (Muscio 1998).

Feminists are often denoted as man-hating lesbians who are often referred to as another slur with a little more specificity: "dyke". Queer women have especially been the victims of verbal and physical attacks when showing public affection with their partners, presenting themselves as more masculine, and when they reject a man's sexual advances. Nowadays, "dyke" is another prime example of a reappropriated slur. Just like "slut", "dyke" has its parades and is a driving force for public protest (Currans 2017). Society, today, views female sexuality as a different phenomenon than male sexuality. Some research suggests female sexuality as being more fluid and more complicated than previously thought (Peplau and Garnets 2000). There is also a large viewership of lesbian pornography, due to the rampant sexualization and fetishization of lesbian/queer women by both men and women (Pornhub 2018). Queer women overall are also given more liberty for public displays of affection with each other than queer men are, due to the advantage taken of the male gaze, historical queer and women's movements, and more research on female sexuality (Currans 2017; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Rupp 2014).

Men

As the dominant sex in a patriarchal society, men do not have any derogatory terms or names against them that exist for oppressive use. However, some men exist outside of the normative realm and do have derogatory terms that intersect with that non-normative identity and their gender. Queer men are one of the main targets for hate in American society, with slurs like "gay", "fairy", "fruit", and, more commonly-used, "faggot".

There has been quite a bit of research regarding this term, but no research has been conducted on its reappropriation. It is still overwhelmingly perceived as hate speech by the LGBTQ+ community, with a few outliers reappropriating on a private, individual level. Reappropriation is more difficult for queer men because it is a question of their ability to be a "real man". When a man comes out as queer, his masculinity is almost immediately questioned and he is asked question after question to gauge his "manhood". This is another aspect of the patriarchy that impacts all men, the concept of fragile masculinity (Corbett 2001; Pascoe 2012; Plummer 2001; Plank 2019). For women, in a normative sense, their femininity is considered far less fragile than the masculinity of men. With queer women who present themselves as more masculine (e.g. butch or dyke), they meet a larger mix of responses, but, overall, masculine women are more accepted in society than feminine men. If a man does or says something that is considered effeminate, or if he comes out as not straight, his masculinity cracks and maybe even shattered based on how he presents himself in a gendered role.

"Faggot", like all other slurs, is a tool used by the oppressive group to demean queer men and uplift the oppressors. Research shows some reasons why this term is often used in a gendered context. Men are more likely to call other men "faggot", and largely because they

disapproved of the other man's behavior, a perceived violation of gender norms, and it is a form of "playful" teasing (Slaatten and Gabrys 2014). Another big reason is a result of the patriarchy's influence on young boys' minds. Since masculinity is dominant in our society, boys who are physically smaller or less-developed than the majority of other boys around them may turn to other ways to prove their masculinity. These boys are sometimes called "faggots" themselves because of their slower development, so, in turn, they call other boys "faggots" to ennoble themselves and "prove" themselves as men (Corbett 2001; Plummer 2001). The same tactic holds for when a boy may lose something like a competition or a bet, or they may be incorrect about something when answering a question or giving information. In which case, if and when they respond to their loss or they are corrected, these boys throw out "faggot" to show their aggression and manhood in a situation they - or others - perceive as a lapse in their masculinity (Corbett 2001).

Not many changes happen over time, unfortunately. High-school-aged boys exhibit very similar - often the same - displays of hate speech, toxic masculinity, and compulsive heterosexuality. High school is a time of self-discovery in multiple aspects, especially one's sexuality. These young men become more aggressively socialized to uphold gender norms, and when they see another young man not upholding these norms, they unleash the slur. If a boy is acting differently than the crowd, perhaps more creative or artistic, they take pride in their studies or do not like to participate in athletic activities, then they are a "faggot" (Pascoe 2012; Plummer 2001). These boys who like to throw out the word are trying to prove their masculinity and heterosexuality since we socialize boys to associate aggression and power as being a "real man".

There seems to be a slow shift in reasoning when men use "faggot". When they are young, it is to criticize another boy for acting soft, timid, and girly, and being behind the puberty curve. As young men, pride in academics, creativity, being "different", and being an outcast/loner prompt a derogatory critique. As adults, "conforming too closely to adult expectations at the expense of peer group loyalty", a lack of interest in athletics, and maybe a question of actual sexual orientation lead to "faggot" being thrown around (Plummer 2001). Men are not the only ones noticing this, women are as well; what the men think is them proving their masculinity, heterosexuality, and virility translates to many women as unnecessary hatred and immaturity (Pascoe 2014).

Given all this research, there is no wonder why queer men are often scared to come out about their sexuality or reappropriate such a negative term. In today's society, male sexuality is less accepted as being fluid or open to non-heterosexuality, and there is not as much as the same amount or type of research on male queerness.

Methods

When starting the research process, I was hoping to conduct interviews in person and/or through social media with individuals. However, given a tight schedule and facing the possibility of offending or triggering participants, interviews were not in my best interest. So, instead of researching linguistic reappropriation at a private, personal level, I decided to explore the phenomenon in the form of public displays. Initially, I hoped to find the websites and pictures of national LGBTQ+ organizations, parades, and marches/rallies. With this data, I planned to code mission statements, objectives, values, speeches from marches and rallies, and signs from

attendees that included these slurs or mentions of hate speech in a reappropriating light. Unfortunately, I found almost no examples that could heed significance.

I then moved my search to reputable LGBTQ+ news websites, and I found them by simply searching for popular LGBTQ+ news sites. I found from multiple online sources that Advocate (www.advocate.com), Out (www.out.com), Pride (www.pride.com), Queerty* (www.queerty.com), LGBTQ Nation (www.lgbtqnation.com), and The Bay Area Reporter (www.ebar.com) are among the top 15 for LGBTQ+ news and stories. I found The Washington Blade as a source as well, however, the pages took very long to load and eventually cut out, so I decided to exclude it. Within these sites, I decided to separately search within each of them "dyke" and "faggot" to preliminarily see what findings they would yield.

These six sources provided me with the official research question presented in this paper. I found the beginning of my data with a wide disparity in the reappropriation of "dyke" by queer women and "faggot" by queer men. I also came across another website, No Homophobes, that counted the number of tweets including the word "faggot", "dyke", "so gay", and "no homo". Unfortunately, the website did not code how these words were being used, so it did not yield much significance besides the fact that these words are deeply included in today's popular culture and social media. With the evidence from the six websites I decided on, I started to count the number of articles that mentioned "dyke" as self-proclamation, unspecified, and derogatory, then the same with articles on "faggot". With the numbers I would later have, I would then compare the two as rates of reappropriation.

In each article, I initially began my search and coding with the headlines, and any article that was not blatantly clear with its tone or concept, I went into the article and read on, but I only

had to do this for a few articles. With what seemed like endless pages of results, I skipped to the last page of each set of search results and found eventually the results skewed from the words entirely. So, when trying to find how to organize and filter my data, I considered doing so by time, perhaps with a year or two of results. However, with the number of articles each website posts daily, ones about the slurs were not common enough. I confirmed this by doing some preliminary searches per slur with "2019", and the results yielded very low significance. Half of my websites (Advocate, Pride, and Queerty*) also had no tool to filter the articles by year. So, to reconcile this, I decided to continue counting until the articles skewed from discussing the slurs. After doing this for a while, I was coming across the same results over and over again, so I discontinued my data collection. For each news source, I ended my data collection after three pages of search results per slur.

In the middle of my data collection, Out temporarily went offline, so I thought I had to exclude the site. However, it returned to normal function a couple of days later and is currently online, so I was able to have it remain as part of my sample. With regards to the number of relevant pages, LGBTQ Nation's search results skewed quicker for articles on "dyke" than it did for "faggot" and Queerty* only had one page of results for both slurs. For the rest of the news sites, I was able to continue with my data collection until it became saturated.

Coding

Based on the patterns I was seeing in the articles from each news source, I decided to code the data as having attitudes that were self-proclaiming, unspecified, or derogatory. Self-proclaiming attitudes of articles included those which discussed rallies, marches, or parades, the slur being used by someone on social media or in popular culture in a reappropriating

fashion, or interviews of queer people who used the term as a positive attribute. Articles outlining derogatory attitudes included acts of hate speech and violence, reports of people in power using it to demean others, or discussions with conclusions on the oppression and negativity behind the slur. Finally, articles with unspecified attitudes included those which discussed the term but held no opinion or conclusion, simple references to the term without much or any context, or as an overall acknowledgment of the term's existence.
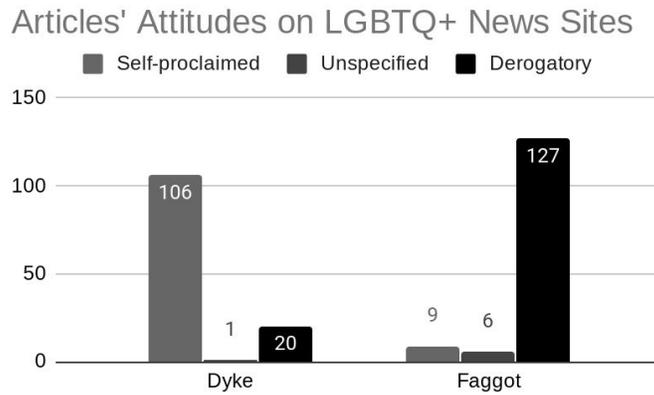
Data

Table 1. Illustrates the self-proclaimed, unspecified, or derogatory attitudes of the content of the articles on LGBTQ+ news sites and the comparison between articles on "dyke" and "faggot".

As illustrated in Table 1, out of 269 total articles, 106 articles (about 39%) about the term "dyke" illustrated self-proclaimed attitudes and 127 articles (about 47%) about the term "faggot" illustrated derogatory. Out of a total of 127 articles about the term "dyke", besides the 106 self-proclaiming articles, 1 illustrated unspecified attitudes and 20 illustrated derogatory attitudes. Out of a total of 142 articles about the term "faggot", besides the 127 derogatory articles, 9 illustrated self-proclaimed attitudes and 6 illustrated unspecified attitudes. Overall, there are far more "self-proclaimed dyke" articles and far more "derogatory faggot" articles, and the highest count of all 6 categories is "derogatory faggot" articles.

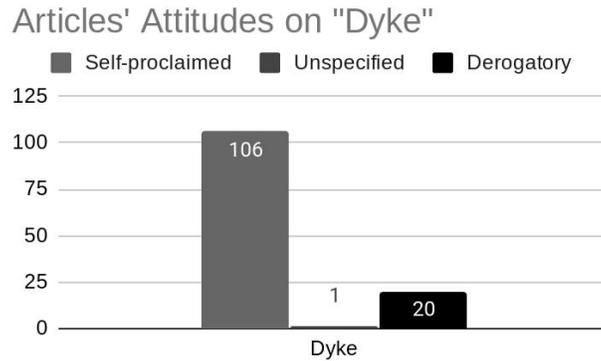**Dyke**

Articles' Attitudes on "Dyke"

Table 2. Illustrates the self-proclaimed, unspecified, or derogatory attitudes of the content of the articles on LGBTQ+ news sites on "dyke".

As illustrated in Table 2, out of a total of 127 articles about "dyke", 106 (about 83%) held attitudes of self-proclamation, an example of which is "Hooray for Dyke Day L.A." (Advocate 2017). 1 article (about .8%) held unspecified attitudes, "When is the Word 'Dyke' Appropriate?" (Out 2015). 20 articles (about 16%) held derogatory attitudes, for example, "SHUT UP, DYKE: Ex-Gay Venus Publisher Charlene Cothran Needs to Go Away" (Queerty* 2009).

Faggot

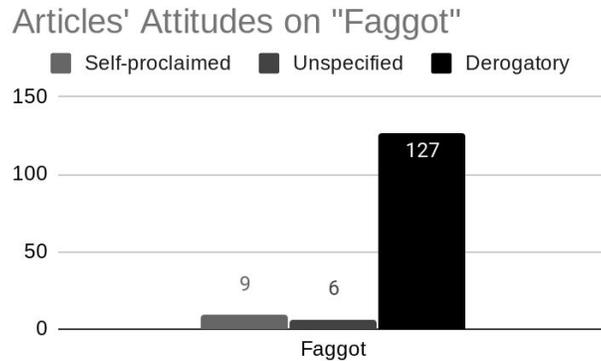Articles' Attitudes on "Faggot"

Table 3. Illustrates the self-proclaimed, unspecified, or derogatory attitudes of the content of the articles on LGBTQ+ news sites on "faggot".

As illustrated in Table 3, out of a total of 142 articles about "faggot", 127 (about 89%) held derogatory attitudes, an example of which is "School investigating bus driver for telling

students 'faggots will burn in Hell'" (LGBTQ Nation 2017). 6 articles (about 4%) held

unspecified attitudes, for example, "Remembering Vito Russo" (Bay Area Reporter 2016) which

pays homage to a famous gay rights activist. 9 articles (about 6%) held attitudes of

self-proclamation, for example, "'Drag Race' Star Morgan McMichaels Broke Her Hand

Punching a Nazi" (Pride 2017) where she was quoted saying, "This faggot will not be

victimized!"

Conclusion

The LGBTQ+ community has been the target of hatred and discrimination for decades

due to the patriarchal, heterosexist rule of society. Jump-starting from the 1969 Stonewall Riots

in New York City, fighting for equal rights has been an ongoing battle for the LGBTQ+

community. One of the most empowering forms of combating the hatred is the reappropriation of

slurs, which got its own jump-start from the queer uprising in the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic

also in New York City. With people shouting, "We're here, we're queer, we ill not live in fear!",

in the streets, "queer" became the prime example for others in the LGBTQ+ community to take

their respective slurs back along with the power it comes with. After all, with the knowledge of

language being constructed by a patriarchal society, the LGBTQ+ community can use this

knowledge as a tool to reshape the meaning and use of slurs as they did with "queer" (Zosky

2016).

Now, there are many parades, rallies, and marches for the LGBTQ+ community to

publicly show their pride and retaliation against the hatred. Recently popular and individual

demonstrations are Dyke Marches and Dykes on Bikes, which take place nationwide. These

demonstrations are specifically orchestrated and catered to queer women who reclaim "dyke" as

acts of pride and defiance against hate speech. However, the same has yet to happen for queer men and the slur "faggot".

From the data collected showing clear, significant differences in attitudes about both slurs, one can see how "dyke" is far more likely to be reappropriated than "faggot". Historically, women have been participating in demonstrations demanding equal rights since the late 1910s (Tong 2014). Feminist movements have provided backing for women's rights and, over time, have become more diverse and intersectional. With the rise of Lesbian Feminism in the 1970s and '80s, more intersectional feminisms have been growing their support for queer feminism, which now provides a more confient movement (Tong 2014). Wheareas men, historically, have not had the need for fighting for gender equality on their end, since the United States is a patriarchal society; so queer men had only the gay liberation movement of the 1970s (McCarthy et al. 2019) to cling to for the fight for equal rights.

Alternatively, the sexualization of queer women's sexuality is rampant in Western culture, with "lesbian" being the top searched and watched term in pornography (Pornhub Insights 2018). While the sexualization of queer men does exist, it is not as widespread as it is with queer women. While it is not the more preferable excuse for women to be open about their sexuality, it does aid in their exploration and produces a lower chance of violence compared to queer men (Rupp 2014; Peplau and Garnets 2000). This disparity also comes from the nature of patriarchy which rests on male power; and queer men are seen as a threat to that power structure because of their presumed lack of masculinity, which translates to lacking power in a patriarchal society (Corbett 2001).

Queer men, on the other hand, have a more difficult time coming to terms with their sexuality internally and externally. As illustrated in the data, there are many more instances of "faggot" being used as a derogatory term than as a self-proclaimed term. This is widely due to phenomena like toxic and fragile masculinity. If any hint of queerness is presented or perceived in a man, his masculinity is immediately put into question and/or destroyed, and this is seen throughout men's lives (Corbett 2001; Pascoe 2012; Plummer 2001; Slaatten and Gabrys 2014).

With my specific research, I faced quite a few limitations. Initially, I wished to conduct interviews to learn how reappropriation exists in a private, personal sphere. However, this runs the risk of offending or triggering the participants, which hinders obtaining approval to conduct the interviews, and finding a representative, diverse sample is difficult with limited access and resources. Also, with the research I was able to do, not many articles took other factors into consideration such as race, economic class, or different ability. While this research does solely rely on the intersection of gender and sexuality, other factors do exist and play their roles.

For future research, it would be interesting to see more intersections applied. How is queer reappropriation different in the black community, the differently-abled community, or varying economic classes? Also, cultural differences may play a part. A cross-cultural perspective would be very intriguing, along with observing reappropriation at a global scale - while that would be a difficult, but amazing undertaking.

Linguistic reappropriation has been a monumental step in the social fight against hate and discrimination. For the queer community and other oppressed groups, this process is long but beneficial. While queer women are more open to reclaiming "dyke", that does not mean it is impossible for queer men to reclaim "faggot". With the reappropriation of "faggot" would

require a deeper change in our patriarchal society, and a deconstruction of toxic and fragile

masculinity, the reward, as we have seen, is worth it.

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