



Pathways of Self-Determination: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study of Slut-shaming Vulnerability in a Group of Young Adults

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Abstract

Slut-shaming is a sexual stigmatization that consists in a form of discrimination against those who do not respect gender stereotypes of external appearance and/or sexual behaviors and attitudes. Individuals may also be exposed to slut-shaming merely due to fortuitous elements unrelated to the sexual dimension. Slut-shaming is perpetrated through ostracism, rejection and sexual stigmatization and may have negative effects on psychophysical well-being. The primary aim of the present study is to explore the victimization of young adults through slut-shaming. A sample of thirty-six participants (aged 19–28) was recruited and focus groups and interviews were conducted to explore participants' slut-shaming experiences. Constructivist grounded theory was employed to understand how young adults deal with slut-shaming and analyze sociocultural factors involved in slut-shaming dynamics. Several individual, social and cultural factors are involved in sexual stigmatization processes. A core set of 6 categories related to slut-shaming exposure was identified: exposure to slut-shaming, antecedents of slut-shaming, socio-cultural context facilitating slut-shaming, LGBTQIA+ and slut-shaming, negative effects of slut-shaming, and reactions to slut-shaming. Results emphasized that, even if young adults showed a generally high level of awareness of sexual discrimination and stigmatization processes, slut-shaming victimization is not uniformly experienced by them. Young adults' narratives seem to show conflicting feelings and thoughts regarding the possible strategies that could be employed to deal with slut-shaming exposure and pervasive internal and external forms of oppression.

Keywords Slut-shaming · Grounded theory · Gender norms · Stigmatization · Gender · Young adults · Focus group · LGBTQIA+ community

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Introduction

Identity and relationships are pivotal in self development processes and their reciprocal influence is difficult to differentiate (Knudson-Martin, 1996) since we are who we are, we act in a certain way as social actors and, at the same time, social relationships have an impact on what we think about ourselves and who we are. Social relationships, whether they have been chosen or not, shape self identity and affect psychic functioning and psychological well-being; intimate relationships, characterized by attachment bonds, as well as associative friendships, characterized by a certain grade of causality and disengagement, have an impact on the self in different ways (VanLear et al., 2006).

During adolescence and young adulthood individuals are heavily influenced by significant partners, peers and even acquaintances, so that negative mirroring may lead to establishing a negative self-identity (Pines, 1984). Various verbal and non-verbal behaviors, attitudes, and ways of appearing may represent cues to criticize and make negative comments about someone. In particular, sexual expression can be considered a critical element that may serve as a pretext to criticize someone. The act of criticizing and stigmatizing individuals for their perceived or actual sexual behavior or attitudes is known as slut-shaming, and it can manifest itself in various forms such as insulting, shunning, and discriminating against individuals who are believed to be sexually promiscuous (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021). Slut-shaming can also involve making assumptions about an individual's morality or worth based on their sexual behavior. Slut-shaming exposure is associated with various negative effects both on an individual and social level. Individuals exposed to gender discrimination may show psychophysical distress (Reskin et al., 1985) and forms of internalized sexual oppression (Armstrong et al., 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2012) and may also unintentionally reinforce sexism (Barton & Huebner, 2020; Becker, 2010).

Moreover, studies claim that slut-shaming reinforces gender stereotypes (Rahimi & Liston, 2009) and perpetuates a culture of sexual shame and stigma (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

Gender norms have a significant role in slut-shaming and have a negative impact on everyone regardless of gender (Miano & Urone, 2023). Sexual stigmatization has direct repercussions on people's reputations, especially because certain sexual behaviors are still widely condemned on the basis of gender prejudices relating to sexual morality. Furthermore, a specific consequence arises in association within slut-shaming behaviors: individuals who are exposed to slut-shaming are also likely to be exposed to victim-blaming, a process by which those who have experienced aggression and violence are seen as responsible for the violence committed against them or for having provoked their aggressor (Banyard et al., 2007; Moyano et al., 2023).

Along with gender stereotypes, another factor involved in the slut-shaming process is a sexual double standard that results specifically in opposite judgments with regard to identical behaviors performed by individuals of different sex (Ringrose et al., 2013). This sexual double standard is applied to various

behaviors, but it specifically concerns sexual behaviors. Confirming this fact, research data shows that there is a double standard when it comes to heterosexual and cisgender men and women being openly sexually active (England & Bearak, 2014; Flood & Pease, 2009): for men, having sex frequently, with multiple partners, and in casual settings, is connected to the label of ‘stud’ or ‘player’, which is mostly perceived positively, usually enhances men’s status and does not damage their reputation (England & Bearak, 2014), confirming the persistence of traditional discourse on gender and sexuality (Endendijk, et al., 2020; Farvid et al., 2017). Instead, women who have multiple partners in casual settings or are sexually available—or even are just considered as such, despite reality—are negatively labeled as ‘sluts’ (Fjær, et al., 2015).

Individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles and expectations may be criticized and judged by both men and women regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation. Men who engage in non-traditionally masculine behaviors, such as being emotionally expressive or showing vulnerability, can be subjected to mockery and harassment (Hanson et al., 2022; Levant et al., 2013) and be labeled as ‘fags’ (Pascoe, 2011). Nevertheless, women are more exposed to slut-shaming and seem to have worse negative effects (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Furthermore, women appear to be more harsh in their critique of other women who engage in casual sex compared to men who do so (England & Bearak, 2014), and tend to react negatively towards women who are sexually active or express their sexuality in a way that is not considered acceptable by societal norms (Mahalik et al., 2005; Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). In the same way, in order to establish hierarchy, young girls may bully their peers, defining them both as ‘sluts’ or lesbians—wrongly used with a negative connotation—and spread rumors about them, depending on their physical appearance and perceived behavior: since the label of lesbian was associated with a lack of conformity to traditional gender roles, the targeted individuals were actively avoided and isolated (Fasoli et al., 2015; Miller, 2016). According to the literature, there are several motivations for women to shame other women because of their sexual behavior. It can bring social benefits (Webb, 2015) as well as increase their self-esteem or bring down their competitors (Clayton & Tramifow, 2007). Regardless of the motives, all of this ends up contributing to the strengthening of gender stereotypes and to the suppression of female sexuality (Webb, 2015).

Individuals who identify themselves as belonging to a sexual minority may be more vulnerable to slut-shaming because, by definition, they do not fit gender norms and heteronormativity. The LGBTQIA+ community is a group of individuals with heterogeneous experiences relating to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. The LGBTQIA+ acronym, that includes several umbrella terms, fails to accurately and exhaustively represent the different peculiarities of the members of its community (Hegarty, 2017; Hegarty & Rutherford, 2019; Scott, 2016). Nonetheless, feeling part of a community has positive effects on the individual. In fact, the support perceived from the members of the LGBTQIA+ community can be considered a protective factor contrasting the negative effects of exposure to discrimination (Chang et al., 2021; Nimbi et al., 2021; Rosati et al., 2021).

LGBTQIA+ people are at a higher risk of discrimination in the forms of slurs, mean jokes, verbal and/or physical threats, physical harassment and so on (Rankin et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015).

When it comes to slut-shaming, there are many ways that LGBTQIA+ people experience this phenomenon based on their gender identity and their sexual orientation. Gay men, or men who engage in same-sex sexual relationships, are usually considered sexually promiscuous and are more likely to be exposed to slut-shaming (Blackwell et al., 2015; Jaspal, 2017). Likewise, highly sexually active lesbians are less positively perceived compared to gay men who are also highly sexually active (Zaikman et al., 2016), similarly to heterosexual women. The bisexual orientation is often subject to stigmatization because of the stereotype that bisexuality is synonymous with promiscuity (Baumeister, 2000). Moreover, Herek (2009) has shown that bisexual individuals face higher rates of sexual stigma and discrimination than their heterosexual or homosexual counterparts.

A woman's reputation and value still actually seems to be linked to a bodily dimension that, even in the most liberal contexts, remains relegated to the service of the patriarchal system (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Bay-Cheng's (2015, 2019) theories regarding the diffusion of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals propose a new perspective on the phenomenon of slut-shaming and on categorization of women as either 'sluts' or 'virgins', regardless of women's real sexual experience and/or behavior. According to D'Emilio and Freedman (1988) the *Virgin/Whore Dichotomy* describes the perception of female sexuality, with 'virgins' as women abstaining from sexual behavior and 'whores' as always sexually available. However, the advent of neoliberalism is influencing young women's view of their own sexuality (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). But postfeminism and neoliberalism seem to convey contrasting messages: if on one hand the aim is to empower women as active agents of their sexuality, on the other hand their bodies and behaviors are still heavily controlled and criticized (Gill, 2008). In fact, women's sexual agency, defined as individuals' capability to control their experiences linked to sexuality, has recently become another factor influencing women's sexual reputation (Bay-Cheng, 2019). The Agent is the woman who lives freely, experiences her sexuality based on her will and takes full responsibility for her actions, to the point in which sexual agency becomes performative and ends up masking other forms of discrimination and limiting women's freedom (Bay-Cheng, 2019), making people wonder if freedom is real or just culturally determined (Gill, 2008).

Slut-shaming should be analyzed further. Existing studies have explored some general aspects of women's sexual experiences, with particular regard to casual sex, sexual fantasy and openly manifesting sexual desires (Anzani et al., 2021; Farvid, et al., 2017; Hackman et al., 2017; Lindley & Galupo, 2020; Lindley et al., 2022; Kamke et al., 2022) and the repercussions of slut-shaming on adolescent well-being (Goblet & Glowasz, 2021; Kamke, et al., 2022). Moreover, some studies have focused mainly on considering only women or young cisgender women as the individuals most vulnerable to slut-shaming (Armstrong et al., 2014; Farvid et al., 2017; Payne, 2010; Papp et al., 2016; Ringrose et al., 2013).

The aim of this study is to investigate young adults' experience of slut-shaming behaviors and exposure in everyday life. In particular, risk factors and negative

effects associated to slut-shaming are explored with regard to individuals and their cultural dimension in order to understand the dynamics of stereotypical discourses. In addition, protective factors able to reduce vulnerability to slut-shaming have been identified. A qualitative analysis was conducted in order to discover and describe issues in the naturalist field (Flick, 2013).

Method

A qualitative study design with constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2013) was used to collect and analyze data. Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a qualitative methodology that studies social phenomena by involving participants who have relevant experience in the research process, with the aim of creating a co-constructed definition of the question under consideration. Constructivist perspectives highlight that knowledge and definitions are constructed by participants and researchers who are reciprocally considered as part of the process and not as neutral observers (Charmaz, 2008, 2014; Flick, 2013). Steps in the research process of the study are summarized in Table 1.

Participants

A total of 36 participants (aged 19–28; $M=22.11$, $SD=2389$) with different sexual orientations and gender identities were recruited through snowball sampling (see Table 2 for specific demographic data).

All participants completed a Google Forms survey assessing their educational level, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and contact information.

At the beginning of each focus group or interview participants filled out a consent form with information about the risks and benefits of participating in the study. Participation was voluntary, therefore the participants were not compensated. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Palermo (n. 164/2023).

In the 1st phase, 2 inclusion criteria were required in order to be included in the sample: being at least 18 years old and being interested in discussing the impact of gender stereotypes in everyday life. During the second phase, a theoretical sampling was used for the saturation of the categories (Charmaz, 2014) and only those individuals who identified themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community were recruited.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect data on slut-shaming experience in everyday life, we conducted both interviews and focus groups, a particularly appropriate technique to research gender-related issues, since it tackles most of the aspects that can be found in an everyday social exchange (Wilkinson, 1999). This method allows the collection of data

Table 1 Research process summary

Research steps	Tasks
1. Research preparation	Reflection on the proposed study and its methodology Open-ended and non-judgmental questions were created to facilitate the emerging of participants' stories
2. Initial recruitment and heterogeneous focus groups	Recruitment of participants through snowball sampling Conduction of 3 different and heterogeneous focus groups (n = 30)
3. First data analysis	Conduction of initial, line-by-line coding of the initial focus groups data Emergent codes (n = 137)
4. Theoretical sampling and interviews with members of the LGBTQIA + community	Memos guided directly to theoretical sampling Recruitment of participants belonging to the LGBTQIA + community Conduction of 6 interviews with members of the LGBTQIA + community
5. Second data analysis	Conduction of line-by-line coding of interviews data Emergent codes (n = 53)
6. Third data analysis	General line-by-line coding produced a total of 190 emergent codes Conduction of initial coding of focus groups and interviews data through constant comparison methods Refined codes (n = 157)
7. Fourth data analysis	Conduction of focused coding and axial coding Emergent subcategories (n = 23)
8. Fifth data analysis	Conduction of theoretical coding using constant comparison methods Emergent 6 main category

regarding participants' interactions on themes previously chosen by the researchers, while maintaining a relatively naturalistic setting (Morgan, 1998).

The analyzed data was collected from three focus groups and 6 interviews conducted by the 1st and 4th author, based on different semi-structured questions that allowed participants to express themselves, describe their experiences and share their opinions. The interviews and focus groups were video recorded, lasting between 75 and 120 min, and were afterwards transcribed verbatim by 2 trained post-grad interns of the research group. Transcribers only listened to recordings of the interviews, and before the analysis one author reviewed the transcribed data and cleaned up all the transcripts. Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo Version 12 software to assist with data organization during the coding process (Maher et al., 2018).

The coding team consisted of the second and third author and one of the interns, and they carried out the coding of the transcripts independently using an iterative data analysis process. Moreover, none of the coders was involved in

Table 2 Demographic information of participants

Pseudonym	Assigned sex	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Age
Mario	Male	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Giulio	Male	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Luca	Male	Cisgender	Heterosexual	23
Giacomo	Male	Transgender	Bisexual	20
Margherita	Female	Cisgender	Homosexual	20
Carlotta	Female	Cisgender	Homosexual	20
Maria	Female	Transgender	Bisexual	20
Anna	Female	Cisgender	Asexual	23
Beatrice	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	21
Sasha	Female	Non-binary	Pansexual	19
Isabella	Female	Cisgender	Bisexual	20
Celeste	Female	Non-binary	Queer	26
Matilde	Female	Cisgender	Homosexual	23
Marta	Female	Cisgender	Bisexual	21
Elena	Female	Non-binary	Pansexual	23
Patrizia	Female	Non-binary	Bisexual	21
Andrea	Female	Genderqueer	Bisexual	25
Vittoria	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Emma	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Gaia	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	27
Benedetta	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Antonia	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	21
Carmen	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Carla	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	21
Ludovica	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	20
Asia	Female	Cisgender	Heterosexual	21
Enzo	Male	Cisgender	Homosexual	28
Lucia	Female	Cisgender	Pansexual	23
Matilde	Female	Cisgender	Homosexual	23
Nadine	Female	Non-binary	Pansexual	27
Greta	Female	Cisgender	Bisexual	24
Leila	Female	Cisgender	Homosexual	23
Luciano	Male	Cisgender	Demisexual	22
Desirée	Female	Cisgender	Bisexual	24
Stella	Female	Non-binary	Demisexual	21
Elsa	Female	Genderqueer	Queer	26

research design and data collection. All three coders were European cisgender women, 2 of them were heterosexual and one belonged to the LGBTQIA + community. The 1st author and the 4th author, as methodology experts, acted as supervisors of their work.

The open-coding analysis entailed a repeated reading of the transcripts. Line-by-line coding was employed to identify concepts: each line of the transcripts and all sentences were labeled. Line-by-line coding allows the comprehensive coding of the gathered data and the identification of implicit and explicit statements, which are used to develop the initial code (Charmaz, 2014). This process guarantees that the major themes originate directly from data (Charmaz, 2014). During the first coding stage, the team members worked independently. Afterwards, the codes produced individually by each coder were discussed with the whole research team, and it was determined whether to include them or not in the first version of the codebook.

Subsequently, we carried out axial coding to refine the codes and build categories. The aim of this coding strategy is to cluster the initial codes more systematically, in order to identify broad categories that capture the sense of the observed phenomena through a combination of inductive and deductive thinking processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For this purpose it was necessary to refer to the personal sensitivity and theoretical knowledge of the researchers (Charmaz, 2014). We established weekly meetings with the entire team to examine relationships between categories and codes, and to improve the codebook when existing categories needed to be refined. Memos written by all of the members were used during the data analysis process to make the observation process and the relationships among initial code and the emerging categories explicit (Charmaz, 2014; Lempert, 2007). Coders and supervisors worked together, discussing their different opinions until a general consensus was attained.

Selective coding is developed in relation to axial coding and permits an overview of categories into a coherent narrative storyline (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2008, 2014), which is the characteristic feature of coding according to GT, was used to compare data within and among each transcript, aiming to identify common and different topics. In order to develop categories more accurately and understand which ones to treat as significant concepts, it is possible to move back and forth between the first draft categories and data in theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014).

The overarching narrative of this study is expressed through multiple factors, such as the social community, other forms of victimization, sexual competition, and the stigmatization process, in shaping young adults' slut-shaming experience.

Results

Each young adult's experience is unique, however the analysis of research data led to the identification of several recurrent topics, that were employed to summarize these experiences in order to respond to urgent research questions and make new theoretical contributions.

Open-coding analysis was applied to divide interviews and focus groups' transcripts into 986 meaning units, which were clustered in order to create mutually exclusive categories. The analysis produced 157 initial codes from which 23 subcategories emerged, under 6 main categories (see Table 3). The categories are described below.

Table 3 Emerging categories and subcategories

Category	Description	Subcategory	Example
I. Exposure to Slut-Shaming	Posts addressing the different characteristics of slut-shaming's dynamics	1. Types of insults	<i>Personal insults.</i> I think that those are very personal offenses. If you call me slut, you know I'll be deeply hurt... you know that I suffer because of my weight, because of my body, and you call me "cow". Slut, cow... If I know that you have a weakness, a soft spot- something that's painful for you: that's where I'll hit you. You call me whore to destroy me from within
		2. Slut-shaming directed at men	I was at a party and there were other guys- maybe they had other ideas- but I just wanted to have some fun, while they were probably searching for a good laid. Later someone told me that they were making fun of me, calling me a fag- but not only that. They said that I was dressed as someone that wants to be a slut with men
		3. Slut-shaming in social networks	<i>Socials are our image.</i> When you post some types of photos, you'll be judged because of it. So if you post a photo of yourself in bikini, you are a "slut", no way around it
		4. The different actors in slut-shaming	<i>Slut-Shaming between women.</i> Once a girl I had bonded with confessed to me that the first time she saw me—we were fourteen or fifteen—she had thought: "That girl is such a slut. Such a whore". Just like that, at first sight

Table 3 (continued)

Category	Description	Subcategory	Example
II. Antecedents of slut-shaming	Posts addressing the factors that precede the enactment of slut-shaming	5. Appearance and behavioral antecedents	<i>Exterior appearance.</i> Once I followed a friend's advice and I wore a low-necked jumper, but it's not like it was too much or anything. And then a friend saw me and he said: "What are you doing? You are dressed like a scrubber". And it was just a low-necked jumper. It was different from my usual outfits, but not so much
		6. Antecedents linked to not acted behaviors	<i>If you don't do what I want, then there's denigration.</i> Simping is common among people- males try to approach females showering them with excessive attentions, ultimately to get laid. So "Oh my God, I treat you like a goddess, give it to me", and when you do I throw you away, but if you don't then you are a slut
		7. Antecedents related to the social context	<i>Dating rules.</i> I remember that time I told a friend of mine that I'd had sex on the first date. I still remember her expression. I mean, I'm telling you this thing I'm happy about- because for me it was a beautiful experience, because I felt like doing it. 4 h into our date he said: "Let's go to my house", and, yes, we had sex. There's nothing so scandalous for me, so I told her about the whole thing without a care in the world. But she was like: "Oh no, I wouldn't do these kind of things". Like the previous story didn't matter at all. Even if we'd had a good time she still told me: "No, I wouldn't do these things. No, I wouldn't do them again, no, no"
		8. Antecedents related to gender stereotypes	<i>Conforming to what others think about you</i> Somehow she conformed to the image that others had of her. The more people considered her stupid, the more she felt judged and stupid because of it. So she started to behave in ways that confirmed that image. But she was nothing like that... she was very profound and even intelligent... She wanted to study medicine, and she thought she couldn't do it because everyone thought she was stupid, so she confessed it to me as if it were a secret

Table 3 (continued)

Category	Description	Subcategory	Example
III. Socio-cultural context facilitating Slut-Shaming	Posts addressing specific characteristics of the socio-cultural context that are relevant for the correct understanding of the slut-shaming phenomenon	9. Infer sexual orientation	Yes, because when you look at a girl with shaved hairs: "Ah she's a lesbian", she has colored hairs: "She's a lesbian". There are specific characteristics
		10. Women-men double standard	I think that, from a male point of view, you can perceive the title of "womanizer" in different ways. While from a female point of view it's always an insult, it's never a praise or a flattering remark. When you say that to a woman... when you say she is a seductress/vixen, you don't say as something positive. It's always something negative
		11. Harassment	<i>Insistence and threat of violence.</i> He came into my room and laid on the bed with me. I looked at him and said: "I didn't want to make out with you. So, clearly, I'm not going to have sex with you either". But he didn't give up. He didn't even know me. And then I said: "Next time I'll get you drunk, so we'll finally fuck"
		12. Talking about sex	<i>Normalize talking about sexual experiences.</i> Saying swear words or talking about sexual topics... A woman who talks about sexual topics more freely is seen badly, like a disgrace. I think these kinds of topics should be addressed freely regardless of gender
13. Sexualization			<i>Sexualization of friendly behavior:</i> We are depersonalizing women. On a billboard I saw a girl in a bikini, quoting: "She is at your disposal". Advertising signs often convey this message: I can do what I want with you, whether I know you or not. Then- I noticed something recently: now men are also increasingly present in advertising signs. And I happened to hear some forms of harassment by women against men, like... "Oh you were so helpful, why don't you get bare-chested... let's have a night at the disco...". I mean, for example, if you are, I don't know, a guest of a tv show... and you stand there bare chested, then I can touch you all I want, because you are no longer a person, you are a television product, and nothing else. You are for my use and consumption. In my opinion, men are also becoming our, so to speak, objects in the end
14. Motivations for slut-shaming			<i>Slut-shaming to gain approval.</i> Those girls, you know, they probably say those kinds of things about other girls just to avoid being judged by the boys. But that aggravates the situation

Table 3 (continued)

Category	Description	Subcategory	Example
IV. LGBT-QIA + and Slut-Shaming	Posts addressing the characteristics peculiar to slut-shaming directed at members of the LGBT-QIA + community	15. Specific negative consequences	<i>Inopportune comments and questions.</i> We are seen as something completely different, you know? I mean when I go out with a girl, someone will tell me: "Oh but why don't you try something different?"
		16. Specific protective factors	<i>Awareness and pride.</i> It's all about pride: the more you attack us for something, the more pride we'll feel because of it
		17. Risk factors that increase exposure to minority stress	<i>Homosexuality seen as something temporary.</i> I have relatives that still ask me: "Will you think about marrying a man?". I've been with my girlfriend for 8 years now
V. Negative effects of Slut-Shaming	Posts addressing the damaging consequences of slut-shaming	18. Consequences acted by the social net	<i>Peer rejection.</i> They completely excluded her from every activity of the school trip. Her school mates—but also people from other classes, that didn't even know her—they left her alone with her boyfriend, completely rejecting her because they had had sex
		19. Negative affects	<i>Depressive symptoms and self-harming behaviors.</i> I remember taking with this girl... she told me that she had been self-harming for years. She also thought about killing herself
		20. Inhibition	You suffer- I suffer, because I end up closing off and not being able to express myself freely, and that's painful. For example, I'm in a relationship with someone, but I'm afraid to share this information with others. I mean- the simple idea of sitting in restaurant, surrounded by people that could realize that we are in a relationship, makes me feel bad

Table 3 (continued)

Category	Description	Subcategory	Example
VI. Reactions to Slut-Shaming	Posts addressing the different reactions enacted in response to slut-shaming	21. Recognizing slut-shaming as a problem and talk about it	Just- talking about it means understanding that there is a problem. Talking about slut-shaming in different situations- talking about how women behave at work or decide what to wear in the morning- just talking about it means understanding that there is a problem, and that it's been there for a long time. Patriarchy and sexism have always been there, but that it doesn't mean that it can't change
		22. Positive re-signification of the insult	Sometimes gay guys use that word (slut) to call each other, but not as an insult or to insult sex workers. They don't use it with a negative meaning, so they destroy the original meaning itself
		23. Oppression or protection	<i>Protection attempts that do not solve the problem.</i> I was thinking about an episode: this friend of mine had gotten a tattoo on her lower abdomen and she was showing it to many people, including some guys I knew. Rather than saying to her that it's normal, and, I mean: "Do it if you feel like doing it, there's nothing wrong with it". I told her: "Don't do it again, because people talk". Sometimes it's difficult to just say: "It's not your fault". It's more like: "Find a strategy to defend yourself", rather than changing the system

Exposure to Slut-shaming

Through the participants' stories, the dynamics of slut-shaming experiences were explored so that actors, aggressive behaviors and relational context of slut-shaming could be identified. Slut-shaming is enacted in different ways and employs several types of insults and/or comments, originating from gender norms imposed on men and women. Female individuals, however, are more exposed to slut-shaming experiences than male individuals, because female stereotypes are more detrimental for both sexes.

Perpetrators of slut-shaming do not have a specific identity: people from all genders, age and closeness to those exposed to sexual stigmatization can be involved in the slut-shaming process. Abusers may be close friends, peers, acquaintances and even strangers; they may be younger, older or of the same age of the individuals exposed to slut-shaming, who may belong to the same community or have nothing in common with the perpetrators.

Most insults and negative comments usually focus on the individual's appearance and behaviors: ranging from veiled insults to personal ones, which are meant to be hurtful by pointing out something that is particularly upsetting for the victim. The following quote from a woman named Benedetta highlights how much suffering these personal insults can generate.

Benedetta: I think that those are very personal offenses. If you call me slut, you know I'll be deeply hurt... you know that I suffer because of my weight, because of my body, and you call me 'cow'. Slut, cow... If I know that you have a weakness, a soft spot—something that's painful for you: that's where I'll hit you. You call me whore to destroy me from within.

A recurrent topic in the conversation with the participants concerned the fact that even if a girl does not have sex she can be called 'slut'. This led the participants to reflect on how arbitrarily the label of 'slut' is used.

Carmen: Once a girl I had bonded with confessed to me that the first time she saw me—we were fourteen or fifteen—she had thought: 'That girl is such a slut. Such a whore'. Just like that, at first sight.

Homophobic negative labels were reported to be used as an insult in slut-shaming directed at men. According to the participants, while the most common insult for a woman is 'slut', the corresponding term for men is 'fag', linked to 'fag-discourse', and it is a particular form of homophobic insult that results from stereotypical gender roles. Contrarily to women, men are more likely to be attacked when they are less sexually active, because they are violating the male stereotype. In other words, all individuals who contravene gender stereotypes are more vulnerable to sexual stigmatization, regardless of their gender identity.

Slut-shaming was initially analyzed within face to face relationships, but since virtual reality has become a common relational context, slut-shaming within social networks needs to be considered as a pivotal non-physical context that seems to facilitate and sometimes increase the chances of getting slut-shamed. It

was generally agreed by the participants that a woman posting a picture of herself, especially wearing revealing clothing, was very likely to become a victim of slut-shaming.

Antecedents of Slut-shaming

The slut-shaming phenomenon presents several antecedents, which, we should note, must not be considered something that may justify the perpetrators, nor even less be used to ascribe responsibility to individuals exposed to slut-shaming. Research participants have identified several main antecedents of slut-shaming: physical appearance, sexual behavior, relational scripts and gender stereotypes. One of the most relevant antecedents is connected to the appearance and behavior of the molested individuals. Outward appearance refers to clothing and physical appearance, such as skimpy clothes or showy make-up; the most sanctioned behaviors are linked to extroversion and sociability: for example, if a girl speaks in a disinhibited manner or spends her time with an all-male company, these behaviors are deemed unrespectable. Furthermore, the consumption of alcohol has been highlighted as a behavior that increases the exposure to slut-shaming. Individuals may also be judged negatively for their interests and hobbies, especially if they are considered frivolous and superficial (i.e., watching reality or dating shows, etcetera). One of the participants, Ludovica, shared a story involving a friend who was discredited and denigrated for her interests.

Ludovica: Somehow she conformed to the image that others had of her. The more people considered her stupid, the more she felt judged and stupid because of it. So she started to behave in ways that confirmed that image. But she was nothing like that... she was very profound and even intelligent... She wanted to study medicine, and she thought she couldn't do it because everyone thought she was stupid, so she confessed it to me as if it were a secret.

Individuals are not only ostracized for what they do, but also for what they do not do or avoid doing, so that slut-shaming may be directed towards those who show poor sexual behavior. For example, even girls who seem to be aloof, cold or less inclined to show affection through warm gestures, such as hugs or kisses, are often called 'frigid', increasing their vulnerability to slut-shaming. This particular type of stigma often arises after someone is rejected: various girls recounted experiences in which, after dating someone (more frequently a boy) they were denigrated because they failed his sexual expectations. Moreover, slut-shaming behaviors may consist in false rumors, hinting that a girl may have had sexual intercourse, with the aim of damaging her reputation.

Relational scripts about dating and sexual behavior represent another antecedent that is fundamental for an understanding of the phenomenon of slut-shaming. Each social context produces its own relational scripts regulating dating: unwritten rules indicate when it is time to kiss or have sex with a partner. Not respecting the scripts exposes people to the risk of denigration. In one of the focus groups, one participant,

Gaia, reported the story of a girl who engaged in sexual intercourse after a few hours of dating, and, after telling a friend about it, she was heavily criticized by her.

Gaia: I remember that time I told a friend of mine that I'd had sex on the first date. I still remember her expression. I mean, I'm telling you this thing I'm happy about—because for me it was a beautiful experience, because I felt like doing it. 4 h into our date he said: 'Let's go to my house', and, yes, we had sex. There's nothing so scandalous for me, so I told her about the whole thing without a care in the world. But she was like: 'Oh no, I wouldn't do these kinds of things'. Like the previous story didn't matter at all. Even if we'd had a good time, she still told me: 'No, I wouldn't do these things. No, I wouldn't do them again, no, no'.

Relational scripts can be more or less strict on the basis of different characteristics of the socio-cultural context, such as religious aspects. Participants stated that the pervasiveness and severity of slut-shaming is much stronger when it occurs in particular contexts. Living in less urbanized cities or small towns is seen as a major risk factor for those who are stigmatized, because of the restricted social circle: the limited possibility of meeting new people makes it harder, in these contexts, to get rid of bad reputation or to be indifferent about it.

Lastly, the participants' stories highlighted the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes, which are strongly linked to slut-shaming. People often feel pressured to conform to the idea that others have of them, and this process may lead to a confirmation of gender stereotypes, supporting patriarchal culture. This type of discourse may also be internalized and carried out by women, who consequently often tend to show insufficient support for each other. Furthermore, internalized oppression processes have been highly identified within the lesbian community, since lesbian women are one of the main targets of slut-shaming attacks precisely because they do not adhere to female stereotypes.

Socio-cultural Context Facilitating Slut-shaming

Each socio-cultural context is characterized by gender norms and sexual roles, and usually individuals who contradict social expectations are negatively judged and socially penalized. With regard to stigmatization processes, sexual behaviors are targeted as specific elements involved in slut-shaming and individuals are judged mainly for their sexual attitude and actual or presumed behaviors. During the focus groups and the interviews participants reported several experiences of different forms of harassment linked to slut-shaming, such as sexual harassment, catcalling, and others. Sexual double standards, homosexual discrimination and hyper-sexualization represent socio-cultural cues that may lead to slut-shaming exposure.

As a consequence of sexual double standards men and women are judged differently for performing the same acts. When it comes to sexual activity, the woman's reputation is often at risk while the man's is more likely to remain unaffected. For example, a young woman reported having sex with her boyfriend during a school trip and, while the young man did not receive any negative comments and

was mostly left unbothered, she was targeted by her classmates with insults and isolated for the rest of the trip. Furthermore, talking about sex, even with friends, may be detrimental, especially for women. In the following quote Anna reflects on this aspect.

Anna: Saying swear words or talking about sexual topics... A woman who talks about sexual topics more freely is seen badly, like a disgrace. I think these kinds of topics should be addressed freely regardless of gender.

It is conventionally more accepted for men to talk about sex, while a female individual talking explicitly about sex risks being considered promiscuous and/or sexually available, damaging her reputation and increasing the odds of being exposed to slut-shaming. Moreover, participants highlighted that sex and sentimental education are severely lacking in the educational system.

Social context relies heavily on gender stereotypes and the participants often referred to episodes of discrimination based on sexual roles. This was especially evident for appearances, attitudes and behaviors stereotypically associated to homosexual individuals; thus people may be labeled as homosexual for not following conventional gender stereotypes. It does not take much for a boy with a different gait or who pays attention to self-care to be labeled as homosexual, and the same applies to girls with a stereotypical masculine attitude who are labeled as lesbians. Unfortunately, there are several cases of superficial evaluation leading to negative judgements and, subsequently, resulting in aggressive acts, harassment and slut-shaming.

Hyper-sexualization dynamics are another element involved in slut-shaming, and they lead to the identification of every behavior as a sexual one. For example, simple friendly behaviors (i.e., small talk with a colleague, paying a compliment, etcetera) by men or women towards the same or the opposite sex tend to be mistakenly interpreted as sexual. One participant, Vittoria, noted that social media also contributes to this process, together with the objectification of women's bodies and, more recently, of men's bodies.

Vittoria: We are depersonalizing women. On a billboard I saw a girl in a bikini, quoting: 'She is at your disposal'. Advertising signs often convey this message: I can do what I want with you, whether I know you or not. Then—I noticed something recently: now men are also increasingly present in advertising signs. And I happened to hear some forms of harassment by women against men, like... 'Oh you were so helpful, why don't you get bare-chested... let's have a night at the disco...'. I mean, for example, if you are, I don't know, a guest of a tv show... and you stand there bare chested, then I can touch you all I want, because you are no longer a person, you are a television product, and nothing else. You are for my use and consumption. In my opinion, men are also becoming our, so to speak, objects in the end.

With regard to possible motivations that may drive people to engage in slut-shaming, it seems that women tend to attack with higher frequency other women who are seen as a threat and/or those who are already negatively labeled, often

in order to elevate their own reputation and gain approval. Furthermore, similar insults often come from men who use slut-shaming to denigrate the same qualities that they seek out in women, such as appearing sexy and available to sexually engage.

LGBTQIA + and Slut-shaming

Individuals belonging to a sexual minority contradict gender stereotypes, which in itself represents a risk factor for sexual discrimination and therefore for slut-shaming exposure. During the first research phase, opinions collected from both heterosexual and homosexual participants underlined that LGBTQIA + people experience specific forms of sexual stigmatization. During the second research phase, the phenomenon of slut-shaming in the LGBTQIA + community was investigated through the application of theoretical sampling. The participants who identified themselves as members of the LGBTQIA + community pointed out the specific stressing factors affecting them.

In particular, it was underlined that a heteronormative society is likely to make the coming-out process more complicated and lengthy. Concealing one's gender identity or sexual orientation is the most frequently used strategy to avoid aggression, which increases the difficulty to find healthy and adaptive ways of expressing gender and living one's sexuality freely.

Some participants described that a strategy like 'passing' may be better understood by referring to the social construction of gender identity that originates from the crystallization of identity into stable aspects. Homosexual individuals who are considered by others as heterosexual do not correct their wrong assumptions, and the same may happen with gender and sexual identity.

Nadine: Pretend nothing happened. Let people believe that I'm a woman, that I'm heterosexual, that I'm monogamous and so on. I think passing is an effective strategy...

Matilde: It's effective, but it's also oppressive.

Enzo: Basically, you betray yourself.

With regard to gender stereotypes, participants noted that the most attacked individual characteristics are often related to stereotypical femininity, which is considered as an element of identity both for men and women. Gay men, for instance, may be criticized for their feminine manners, and addressed as 'sluts' or called other derogatory terms that are usually addressed to women. Therefore, within the context of a very heteronormative society, being recognizable as part of the LGBTQIA + community can increase the risk of slut-shaming, especially because being visible often implicates being less stereotypical and less prone to respect gender norms. Moreover, several misconceptions were mentioned as specific elements concerning LGBTQIA + individuals, such as being perceived as promiscuous and always seeking sex, with bisexual, transgender and polyamorous people being severely affected by this prejudice.

Both specific negative consequences and protective factors were highlighted by the participants. Negative consequences concerned various forms of harassment, helplessness, fear, shame and devaluation of self, related to inappropriate and malevolent questions and comments. Likewise, specific protective factors against the above-mentioned forms of violence and discrimination were identified: increasing awareness and pride, education on relevant topics such as sexuality and gender issues, promoting peer support and use of irony as a form of defense against insults.

Giacomo: It's all about pride: the more you attack us for something, the more pride we'll feel because of it.

Negative Effects of Slut-shaming

Slut-shaming consequences experienced by individuals were explored by research participants, leading to the identification of 3 main types of negative effects of slut-shaming: isolation, victim-blaming and inhibition. While the first 2 consequences stem from actions enacted by the social circle, the third one regards individual behavior.

Having a negative reputation, as a consequence of having been exposed to slut-shaming, leads to peer rejection, which ends up ostracizing and further stigmatizing someone. On one hand, the peer group refuses those who have been slut-shamed, and, on the other hand, individuals tend to isolate themselves in order to avoid further recurrence.

The isolation process appears to be directly linked to an increased exposure to different forms of harassment. Moreover, once a person becomes the object of harassment, they are even less likely to find peer support. A participant shared the story of a friend who was labeled as sexually promiscuous: the girl got drunk at a party and was afraid of being left alone with a boy who was trying to have sex with her. After being asked to stay with her and protect her, her friends refused because they thought that there was nothing to take care of because of her bad reputation. Events like this show how dangerous the stigma produced by slut-shaming can be, exposing individuals to both general and sexual harassment. These attitudes reinforce the process of normalizing violence and victim-blaming. In addition, self isolation represents a maladaptive response to negative affects and negative inner states, such as devaluation of self, shame, fear, emotional distress, the feeling of being violated, some depressive symptoms, and self-harming behaviors related to slut-shaming experiences. The friend and protagonist of the story reported by Ludovica (see point 3.2) also experienced serious consequences for her psycho-physical well-being.

Ludovica: I remember talking with this girl... she told me that she had been self-harming for years. She also thought about killing herself.

One of the most discussed issues is related to the theme of inhibition. Those exposed to slut-shaming seem to show behavioral inhibition in several contexts regarding a wide range of activities, in order to avoid being further stigmatized. For example, some girls reported avoiding wearing revealing clothes even when they really liked them, as well as being seen with a group of only male friends or staying

out until late. Participants agreed that most people, even those who have never been slut-shamed, tend to avoid these behaviors, fearing other people's judgment. Even when the individuals manage to get over their inhibition, the ensuing negative comments can cause a feeling of repentance towards their decisions and make them feel worse. In the following quote, Lucia recounts how this sense of inhibition affects various aspects of her life and generates a strong feeling of distress.

Lucia: You suffer—I suffer, because I end up closing off and not being able to express myself freely, and that's painful. For example, I'm in a relationship with someone, but I'm afraid to share this information with others. I mean—the simple idea of sitting in a restaurant, surrounded by people that could realize that we are in a relationship, makes me feel bad.

Reactions to Slut-shaming

Individuals may find various resources to cope with sexual stigmatization. When participants were asked to reflect on what could be of help against slut-shaming, three main elements were identified: a cultural, an individual and a relational one. On a cultural level, raising awareness about the phenomenon was immediately mentioned as an essential protective strategy against sexual stigmatization. Participants stated that despite being a form of hate speech with potential negative consequences, slut-shaming is not always recognized as a societal issue and is often minimized and normalized. Starting a discussion about it is considered fundamental in order to recognize it and fight against it. It should be noted that part of the participants reported the existence of some forms of positive resignification of insulting terms, in order to assert agency: among some young women, the word 'slut' is sometimes used in a friendly, affectionate way. Nevertheless, some participants were not entirely comfortable with the new connotation of the term. One participant, Leila, who identifies as homosexual, described this process of resignification of the 'slut' word inside her community.

Leila: Sometimes gay guys use that word (slut) to call each other, but not as an insult or to insult sex workers. They don't use it with a negative meaning, so they destroy the original meaning itself.

With regard to individual and relational protective factors against slut-shaming, when asked what could be done to react to slut-shaming, participants pointed out how difficult it is to strike a balance between protective behaviors and oppressive actions. For example, avoiding doing something is considered a form of protection, but at the same time this reaction to sexual stigmatization proves oppressive for the individual. Also in this case it is possible to identify gender differences between young women and young men, and a common example is represented by the protective attitudes of parents towards their daughters. Parents are more likely to tell their daughters to change their clothes in order not to receive negative comments, while being less concerned about their son's appearance. Friends can also assume similar attitudes towards each other, giving advice on when and who to go out with, and how

to behave in certain situations. Nonetheless, these behaviors, even if they are meant to be protective, end up being restrictive of the individual's self-determination.

The contradiction between protection and self-determination, from the participants' point of view, seems to lessen when the safety of a significant other is involved.

Isabella: I was thinking about an episode: this friend of mine had gotten a tattoo on her lower abdomen and she was showing it to many people, including some guys I knew. Rather than saying to her that it's normal, and I mean: 'Do it if you feel like doing it, there's nothing wrong with it'. I told her: 'Don't do it again, because people talk'. Sometimes it's difficult to just say: 'It's not your fault'. It's more like: 'Find a strategy to defend yourself', rather than changing the system.

If the dilemma between protection and autonomy concerns themselves, young women choose self-determination, without a doubt, but just as surely, if the dilemma concerns their beloved ones, they choose protection. Young adults find it difficult to understand how to deal with this issue because on one hand they think that everyone should be free to express themselves and act out of their own will, while on the other hand it is undeniable that, unfortunately, this freedom can expose the individual to objective risks given the nature of contemporary society.

Discussion

Slut-shaming appears as a complex and pervasive social phenomenon based on the stigmatization of sexual behaviors, physical appearance and personal attitudes when they are perceived as disconfirming of gender stereotypes. Furthermore, even fortuitous and non-sexual elements may trigger sexual stigmatization (Armstrong et al., 2014; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Miller, 2016). Exposition to slut-shaming consists in negative comments about someone's sexual life and, almost always, in being labeled as sexually promiscuous. This form of abuse may expose individuals to several negative consequences regarding both the personal and relational sphere that may have, in turn, detrimental effects on psychophysical well-being (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021).

Participants' experiences with regard to slut-shaming were collected through focus groups and interviews and, in order to summarize slut-shaming dynamics, relying both on participants' experiences and on theoretical knowledge, a brief analytic storytelling (Saldaña, 2021) was employed to effectively communicate and explore the implications of the collected data.

Main Results on Slut-shaming

The research data may be considered with regard to this study's aim, namely the exploration of risk factors, negative effects and protective factors associated to slut-shaming exposure.

Risk Factors for Slut-shaming

Risk factors for slut-shaming were identified in 4 of the 6 categories: exposure to slut-shaming, antecedents of slut-shaming, socio-cultural context facilitating slut-shaming, and LGBTQIA+ and slut-shaming. In particular, various psychosocial variables, such as appearance, behaviour, cultural beliefs, sexual double standards, over-sexualization and the harmful widespread tolerance of different forms of sexual harassment (Armstrong et al., 2014; Fasoli et al., 2018; Miller, 2016; Willem et al., 2019), have been associated with slut-shaming exposure, which tends to increase the risk of being sexually stigmatized. More specifically, the odds of being exposed to slut-shaming seem to increase when an individual's physical appearance or sexual behaviour are judged as indicators of sexual availability or are disconfirming of gender stereotypes (Miano & Urone, 2023; Miller, 2016; Neville-Shepard, 2019). It bears noting that even when an antecedent of slut-shaming is a personal characteristic, sole responsibility for the aggressions must always be ascribed to the perpetrators, in order to avoid victim-blaming processes (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Setia et al., 2020). Moreover, participants have underlined that homophobic insults directed at men are mostly aimed to attack those behaviours considered stereotypically feminine: men who do not follow stereotypical gender roles risk being called "fags", since being gay is associated with giving up traditional male power and is seen as an attack on stereotypical masculinity (Pascoe, 2011). Furthermore, participants pointed out that social networks have become a preferential channel for slut-shaming, a phenomenon characterized by such a level of pervasiveness that most of the participants had to deal with it several times since early adolescence (Miller, 2016; Papp et al., 2015, 2017). Several specific risk factors of being sexually stigmatized expressly concern minority stress as a specific discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals (Chan, 2022; Gísladóttir et al., 2017). Participants lamented the detrimental impact of gender stereotypes and heteronormativity; in particular, stereotypically feminine characteristics were identified as a specific risk factor, exposing transgender women and gay men to higher odds of being exposed to slut-shaming (Austin, 2016).

Negative Effects of Slut-shaming

Negative effects of slut-shaming on the individual's well-being and psychological health were identified. These negative effects impact both the personal and the social sphere of individuals exposed to slut-shaming, who are likely to: experience negative affects (e.g. anxiety, depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem), show behavioral inhibition and suffer from several other types of negative consequences, such as peer rejection, that can ultimately lead to isolation and to increased exposure to harassment (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021).

Protective Factors from Slut-shaming

Finally, participants stated that protective factors may be identified in raising awareness about sexual stigmatization and a widespread solidarity towards individuals

exposed to slut-shaming. In regard to the LGBTQIA+ community, the most effective protective factors are related to relational support and the feeling of belonging to a community (Ehlke et al., 2020; Rimmer et al., 2021; Verrelli et al., 2019). An unsolved question highlighted by participants concerns the difficulty of striking a balance between protective behaviors and oppressive actions (Armstrong et al., 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). In fact, even though young adults have stated that everyone should be free to express themselves without fearing any form of stigmatization, they have recognized that acting freely without considering the actual risk for one's own safety would not be advisable.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has 2 primary limitations that should be considered in order to better design future research. Firstly, the sample presented a limited age range and was mostly homogeneous with regard to assigned sex, limiting the possibility to generalize the results. Secondly, the phenomenon of slut-shaming on social networks (Miller, 2016; Papp et al., 2015, 2017) wasn't properly addressed. Consequently, future research should focus on studying more heterogeneous samples, making it possible to extend theory through intersectional elements (Costanza-Chock, 2018). In particular, it would be advisable to study samples with different age ranges, with specific regard to preadolescents, who could present a higher risk of being exposed to slut-shaming because of their developing self-identity (Hackman et al., 2017; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Furthermore, future studies could also focus on all-male samples to gain a better understanding of male gender stereotypes, which are often less considered than female ones (Paasonen & Sundén, 2021). Future research could also concentrate purely on individuals who identify themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, aiming to highlight the heterogeneous aspects of its members' personal experiences (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual, non-binary and pansexual) (APA, 2022).

Finally, future studies should focus more on the phenomenon of slut-shaming on social networks, addressing the peculiarities of this particular context of harassment, such as the possibility for sexual rumors to spread uncontrollably (Dobson, 2019).

Practice Implications

The results of this study aim to offer guidance on what variables to focus on when designing interventions aimed at adolescents and young adults who may be at risk of slut-shaming exposure. Data from this study may be valuable for helping professions dealing with slut-shaming experiences. In order to offer help to young adults at a very early stage, both professional educators and significant adults should be aware of the warning signs of slut-shaming exposure. These results may be useful in leading perpetrators to be less aggressive. Moreover, in clinical practice our study may provide guidance regarding early detection of both victimization and sexual stigmatization behaviors. Finally, special attention has to be paid to interventions addressing LGBTQIA+ people, who may be exposed both to slut-shaming and

minority stress (Meyer, 2003), a risk condition that sexual minorities could suffer from because of the stigmatization process affecting people considered to be in a minority social position (Marshall et al., 2011; Woodford et al., 2015). Supporting individuals belonging to sexual minorities implies identifying and reducing the negative impact of risk factors associated with sexual stigmatization and internalized homonegativity, which refers to an internalized negative attitude towards one's gender identity and/or sexual orientation and, more broadly, towards oneself (Herek, 2016; Ingoia et al., 2020; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Miano et al., 2021; Thorne et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Slut-shaming is a widespread phenomenon that may have a severe negative impact on individuals exposed to sexual stigmatization. Slut-shaming represents a risk factor related to poor psychosocial adjustment, but its detrimental effects depend on protective factors and may be moderated by them. Slut-shaming is strongly linked to sociocultural dimensions, and through the participants' stories it was possible to outline culturally determined patterns of slut-shaming connected to the binary concept of gender, which opposes femininity to masculinity (Butler, 2004; Constantino-ple, 1973). Widespread gender stereotypes were analyzed by the participants, paying special attention to those relating to female sexuality (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Even though an actual core category was not outlined through transcript analysis, the concept of female stereotype leads to the identification of a common thread that has enhanced the comprehension of the dynamics at the base of slut-shaming and may be synthesized by the impactful statement of a participant: 'femininity is the problem'. Promising evidence derived from the research data concerns participants' awareness regarding sexual stigmatization exposure: young adults seem to be very keen on recognizing indicators of insidious forms of aggression as well as more visible violent behaviors. In particular, young adults have underlined just how harmful widespread tolerance of different forms of sexual harassment can be, thus representing a risk factor for slut-shaming. Finally, it bears noting how participants manage to deal with slut-shaming experiences, often showing a high level of mentalization that allows them to find adaptive ways of coping with ostracism, rejection and stigmatization. Nonetheless, there is still much to do: adolescents and young adults have to be supported by their community in their struggle against discrimination, while promoting favorable changes on a cultural, relational and individual level.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Consent for Publication The authors consent and approve of this article.

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