Article of the Week

1. *Mark your confusion*
2. *Show evidence of close reading*
3. *Write a 1 page response. You may use the suggested prompts at the end of the article or choose your own direction of response.*

# Calling It 'Bullying' Doesn't Do Amanda Todd Justice

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Talking about the suicide of 15-year-old Amanda Todd, it's tempting to look for quick answers, to condemn the technology she was using, to believe we can prevent future Amandas from making the same choice by speaking out against "bullying."

But calling it "bullying" or even "cyberbullying" doesn't do it justice. "Bullying" erases specific social factors and makes it seem [like something that you age out of](http://www.gender-focus.com/2012/03/01/panel-do-we-need-new-words-for-bullying/). Adding the "cyber" prefix doesn't necessarily make it more accurate. Technology was a catalyst, but webcams, cellphones, and the Internet aren't the key to understanding what happened to Amanda; systemic sexism is.

Girls in North America are under incredible pressure and subject to conflicting messages. On the one hand you're told to protect your purity in order to maintain your reputation. On the other hand, practically all the role models around you in the media -- in romantic comedies, advertising, even Disney movies- - are telling you that your worth is based on your desirability. You get the message that you are nothing without a boyfriend.

[Danielle Paradis at Flurt!](http://www.flurtsite.com/2012/10/amanda-todds-slut-shaming-suicide/) sums it up like this: "The prevalent culture around her sends mixed messages, such as take your clothes off to get the affection you desire, but don't do it in the wrong way or with the wrong people or you'll be seen as a dirty, worthless whore."

The men Todd met online told her she was "stunning" and "beautiful". That's why I have a hard time seeing Amanda and others talk about what she did as "mistakes" -- because it's so understandable given the context.

As [Krissy Darch wrote in her outstanding piece](http://www.vancouverobserver.com/blogs/feminista/why-isnt-anyone-talking-about-misogyny-involved-amanda-todds-life-and-death) on this issue, "In a context in which women are told in manifold ways that everything about them is wrong -- their emotions, their bodies, their fat, their lack of fat, their developing, their aging--when someone comes along and tells you that you are perfect and beautiful, that's some powerful stuff.

Meanwhile, boys are generally taught that there's no need to respect women and that one way to prove your masculinity is through sexual conquest of women (this is also tied in with homophobia as men police each others' masculinity with pressure to "prove" they're not gay).

The gendered pressures and expectations put on boys and girls are a system of systemic sexism in which kids like Amanda are collateral damage.Advertisement

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We saw a similar situation with 13-year-old Megan Meier, who committed suicide after being attacked on MySpace by a former friend posing as a boy. The night she died, [Meier told her parents](http://www.meganmeierfoundation.org/megansStory.php) about some of what was happening:

"They are posting bulletins about me. 'Megan Meier is a slut', 'Megan Meier is fat,'" she explained, in tears.

Likewise, in May, 13-year-old Minnesotan [Rachel Ehmke](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/08/rachel-ehmke-13-year-old-_n_1501143.html) also took her own life after months of harassment. She had never even kissed a boy, but she was repeatedly called a "prostitute" by a group of girls and having the word "slut" scrawled across her gym locker.

Many girls like Rachel, Megan and Amanda are stuck in a lose-lose situation: either you're a loser because you can't get a boyfriend or you're a "slut," though as Rachel proves, this label can be attached to you regardless of how you dress or behave. If you're a "slut" you're expected to feel dirty, guilty, inferior, damaged, and not worthy of respect or love.

If you have never been called a slut, try to imagine what it would be like if you were 15 and were convinced to feel this way. As someone who experienced that, I can tell you that I am still trying to fully shake the insecurity more than a decade later.

Instead of calling it bullying, which brings to mind "kids being kids," we can call it sexual harassment, or we can call it technology-facilitated slut-shaming.

But no matter what, if we don't take seriously the systemic gender inequality underlying these cases, if we don't teach boys to respect girls and girls to respect themselves, there will continue to be girls who slip through the cracks.

Possible Response Topics:

1. Reflect on your own experiences with bullying
2. Do you agree with what the author has to say about this situation?