

Is Rape Culture on Campus a Thing? Broughdale Banners Scream “YES”

The morning of Sept. 28 was especially chilling.

The sun refused to grace the day and rain drizzled all over Western University campus. At one instance you could hear crowds of people cheering, at another you could hear sirens from a nearing ambulance. The buses were slow, the traffic was hell, and the campus police were in full force.

But none of this stopped hundreds of Western students from gathering on Broughdale Avenue for a celebration like no other—the unauthorized ‘Fake Homecoming’ or FOCO. The small street was teeming with students as they danced in the drizzle and drank their worries away. As per custom, many students put up bed sheets with splattered writing outside their houses on Broughdale as a display of school spirit.

Etched on a bed sheet were the words: “Our Roommate is a Virgin, Pls Help.”

The high-spirited students surrounding the sign remained unfazed, happily getting photographed with it. After all, ‘virgin’ is a funny word, isn’t it?

When [CBC](#) interviewed the student who had put up the sign, his first reaction was a chuckle. The student said he often teases his roommate about being a virgin and that the sign actually ended up making his roommate “very popular.”

Another photo from FOCO surfaced online where male students proudly posed in front of a banner that said: “Queen girls Spit, Western Girls Swallow.”

In the interview, a student commented that it’s just kids “having fun.” While the student ultimately agreed the sign was demeaning, he said, “you can’t really control the kids here.”

The funny thing is, these uncontrollable kids are actually not kids at all.

In an interview with [CBC](#), London Mayor Ed Holder said the signs on Broughdale glorified rape culture. He also said that the students who put up these signs only pretend to be “well-educated” and asked them “to grow up.”

Rape culture is defined as perpetuating ideas of sexual objectification and disregard for consent. While seemingly trivial, the signs not only point towards the peer-pressure that persists in these unsanctioned parties but also normalizes reducing women to objects of sexual desire.

“You don’t think much of it,” said Kianna McNabb, a third-year English Studies student, who was present during FOCO. “It’s customary to write such things in humor. I would say it’s very steeped in the tradition here at Western.”

What is this tradition, exactly? One of the largest and most revered research universities in Canada, Western University has been featured in *Playboy* magazine as one of the top party schools in North America.

With signs like these adorning the student parties here at Western, the implicit message is both loud and terrifying: *it’s all about sex and anything goes*.

When asked if McNabb thought the signs are offensive, she agreed. “Now that I see the backlash against it, I do understand it is wrong. Unfortunately, not everyone thinks the same way,” she said.

This is not an isolated incident. During the 2016 FOCO celebration, “No means Yes” was splattered in writing on a house near the university main gates. The issue is not with graffiti on a house. The issue is with whatever goes on in the mind of a person writing this and the people who allow such banners to be paraded around. It’s hard to believe that such disregard for sexual consent can come from university-educated individuals.

In a public statement, Western's President, Dr. Alan Shepard, condemned FOCO. He said it was deeply upsetting to see such misogynistic banners in the Broughdale neighborhood and that "casual misogyny, passed off as a joke, is always corrosive." Many of the comments on Facebook said that the signs didn't mean anything—it was just a case of students having fun.

While the university has made several attempts to block FOCO celebrations, its efforts have been futile. But such problematic narratives are not confined to FOCO.

During his 2019 [convocation speech](#), Western alumni and noted musician, Stephan Moccio created a stir, stating that when he was first coming to Western, he saw signs thanking fathers "for dropping off their virgin daughters." He then proceeded to sing a sexually explicit jingle. In the video, Moccio's remarks are followed by some laughter, speaking volumes about how ubiquitous and normalized misogyny is.

A female student who was graduating that day left the ceremony midway, her day ruined by Moccio's remarks and his subsequent smirk.

"I walked out and I'm not sorry I did," she wrote on Facebook. "I'm embarrassed and ashamed that my doctorate degree comes from a university that consistently allows and celebrates these kinds of comments during a moment when we are supposed to be celebrating students."

Hours after the ceremony, Moccio's remarks were condemned as "unacceptable" by the former president, Dr. Amit Chakma, who issued an apology.

A Grammy and Oscar-nominated musician, Moccio's profile still adorns Western's alumni page.

In another problematic convocation speech, businessperson Aubrey Dan reminisced about how he transferred to Western because of *Playboy* magazine. "According to *Playboy* magazine, at

that time, the women [at Western] are among the best in North America, and obviously they still are,” he said.

Dan later apologized, calling the statement “a compliment.”

Imagine being a young female student present during the convocation, celebrating your academic accomplishments, and having to hear a 56-year-old man ‘compliment’ you while citing *Playboy*. Does it feel complimentary?

Such derogatory remarks are particularly problematic for they veil the misogyny and sexism that pervades the quintessential ‘college experience.’ But where do we limit this nebulous ‘college experience’ that covertly becomes synonymous with the glorification of rape culture?

A better question: how do we limit it?

Party culture is not necessarily synonymous with rape culture. Binge-drinking and loud music are not being criticized here. But when the degradation of women is made acceptable in the spirit of a ‘good time,’ it echoes serious problems about how we perceive women generally.

Anna Voremberg, managing director of End Rape On Campus defines [rape culture](#) as “the idea that women and other people’s bodies are for the taking and that conquest is the key to sexuality.” According to Voremberg, “Campus sexual assault is because of rape culture.”

Let us not forget the horrible narratives that emerged after Brock Turner, a Stanford University student, assaulted an unconscious student, Chanel Miller, at a frat party. Turner’s defense team kept blaming his actions on alcohol and the fact that he was at a college party at one of the biggest party schools. In a [letter](#), Turner’s friend defended him saying that “rape on campuses is not always because people are rapists. It is because these universities market themselves as the biggest party schools in the country,” conveniently shifting blame onto the idea that university party culture warrants assault.

Perpetrators cause sexual misconduct, not parties. But ignoring misogyny, sexism, locker-room talk—at parties or elsewhere because of peer-pressure—can produce perpetrators. Megan White, a fourth-year student in English Studies said, “If students believe putting up signs like “No means Yes” is warranted in the spirit of partying, we don’t know what else follows after that.” White said, “it has become increasingly important to educate students about civil conduct, and most importantly, feminism. Because people seem to have forgotten.”

Annie Nguyen, a fourth-year Film Studies student at Western said she wasn’t even aware such signs were put up until much later. “I feel that while the university criticizes such incidents, it is also concerned with protecting its reputation and so these issues are not widely addressed,” she said.

Urging Western’s officials to take action, Nguyen said: “These instances should be made common knowledge if we want to target such a harmful mentality among students. School is not just about academics, it’s also about character development”

This year, FOCO was attended by 20,000 students. If you walk down Broughdale Avenue a day after FOCO ‘festivities,’ you see shattered windows, crumpled beer cans near the sidewalk, and battered banners lying on the ground.

You would think these are the souvenirs of a well-enjoyed day. But the sun still refuses to shine.

Rape culture is a product of sexist and misogynistic ideologies, not partying. While many students dismissed the signs at FOCO as a trivial aspect of university party life, the signs are emblematic of serious ideological issues. Again, this is not just about one sign or one convocation speech—it is about the misogyny and disregard for consent that the students come to imbibe and

reproduce while normalizing it as the fun 'college experiences.' Feminism has come too far for rape culture glorification and the male gaze to still be a thing.

And yet, here we stand on Broughdale Avenue, waiting for the sun.