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Social Movement and Reaction: the Joe Rogan Experience and Making Sense of #MeToo with Standup Comedian Podcasters

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SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND REACTION: *THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE* AND MAKING

SENSE OF THE #METOO MOVEMENT WITH STANDUP COMEDIAN PODCASTERS

by

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND REACTION: *THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE* AND MAKING
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This thesis explores standup comedian podcaster reactions to the #MeToo Movement

(2017-2020). The Joe Rogan Experience podcast is used as a database to explore commentary on

#MeToo from 12 standup comedian podcasters (SCPs). The exploration seeks to answer if and

how SCPs represent a dominant social group using discourse to pushback against, accept, or, at

the least, critically reflect on the #MeToo movement as it relates to appropriate sexual conduct

and appropriate reactions to inappropriate sexual conduct. With the understanding that frames

provide schema for making sense of issues, a rhetorical framing analysis was conducted to

looked at how standup comedian podcasters used rhetoric and techniques of argumentation

which—through repetition and pattern—ultimately culminated in frames for understanding

#MeToo. Three subthemes of SCP discourse (discussions on the accused, on the accuser, and on

public reaction) and eight frames were found, all centering around the central SCP theme of

whether or not #MeToo went 'too far' as a social movement. The combination of frames mostly

represent a discursive backlash to #MeToo's calls for action to listen, reflect and contribute to

change (Flood, 2019). These frames are summarized and then positioned within a discussion of

media influence and effects, leading to a conclusion that discursive backlash to #MeToo from

standup comedian podcasters may have led to similar resistance among their overwhelmingly

young adult male audiences

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The Joe Rogan Experience and Making Sense of #MeToo with Standup Comedian Podcasters

This study is interested in examining how American standup comedian podcasters came to understand the #MeToo movement (late 2017 - early 2020), and it considers whether or not their popular commentary can be labeled as acceptance or backlash to the movement. This interest statement comes at the intersection of four rationalizations. First and foremost, standup comedians play an important role in making sense of cultural phenomenon, for at least some of the American public. In fact, 21st century humor scholars have been building on more than 50 years of discourse analysis, ethnography, experiments and philosophical research in comedy and standup (Mintz, 1985; Bingham & Hernandez, 2009; Guenther, Radojcic & Mulligan, 2015). They've found that American standup comedians, and American comedy more generally, can be considered cultural forces, whether those forces are reinforcing or transforming the attitudes of their audiences. The standup comedian as influencer, then, will remain a key aspect of this study's contextual framework.

Secondly, American standup comedians have been some of the highest profile celebrities to be accused of sexual misconduct in the #MeToo Era, such as top-bill performers Aziz Ansari, Bill Cosby, Chris D'Elia and Louis CK. This proximity to the accused, perhaps, helps further explain the proliferation of standup comedian commentary on #MeToo. And, of course, the popularity of these standup comedian commentators is why their prolific #MeToo commentary matters.

Thirdly, the interest statement suggests a focus on standup comedians solely within the podcast industry. This, in itself, is for two reasons. First, standup comedians are increasingly crossing over to the podcast platform. This crossover is dynamic and may be for a variety of

reasons, such as increasing audience reach, experimenting with material for standup or other performances, reflecting on current events within standup and general culture, bonding with fellow standup comedians and other on-air guests, and most importantly, "authenticating" themselves with their fans in a way that is less possible during their standup comedy or other performances (Meserko, 2015; Symons, 2017). Secondly, the podcast platform has grown into a valuable cultural industry. The number of listeners grow each year (104 million monthly listeners; 68 million weekly listeners), and comedy podcasts in particular continue to maintain their popularity as a top podcast genre (Nielsen, 2018; Edison Research, 2019). For example, standup comedian Joe Rogan's podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, has over 10 million YouTube subscribers. In fact, his episodes regularly receive more daily views than any prime-time TV host seen on cable news programs like Fox News and MSNBC. Fox's Sean Hannity receives about 3.12 million nightly views and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow 3.06 million nightly views. Meanwhile, Joe Rogan's episodes receive approximately 3.5 million views over the course of a 24-hour cycle (Variety, 2019; Social Blade, 2020).

Fourthly, academic and mainstream media circles have known for decades that the on-stage standup comedian has a place in American society as an amplifier of social criticism. Few academic scholars, though, have paid close attention to the allure of the standup comedian while they are off the stage. [1] Off-stage standup comedian discourse that we can consider published material include podcasting speech, non-podcast interviews (like morning and late-night TV/radio talk programs), and social media (especially Twitter and Instagram). This study

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[1] Stanford PhD candidate Becca Lewis (2019) is one academic who has considered comedian podcaster Joe Rogan as part of an Alternative Influence Network (AIN). She sees the AIN as an informally centralized YouTube news network. She has not explored Rogan's actual discourse from his podcasts, but rather has connected him and many of his guests as nodes within the AIN. Lewis (2019) sees the AIN as attractive and highly influential to young individuals because the YouTube influencers frame their programs as an 'authentic,' 'alternative' and 'rebellious' form of consuming news, and in direct opposition to the news narratives of traditional mainstream media.

emphasizes standup comedian podcasters because it seeks to represent those standup comedian voices which seem particularly loudest within the burgeoning podcast world. The study seeks to look at whether and how these popular voices accept or resist the #MeToo movement.

Moving on from rationalizations for research, this study sees that theories of social psychology and rhetoric can provide a critical orientation for interpretive, qualitative analysis. For example, it is likely that various social identities, and the individual's attachment to those identities, play a role in the standup comedian podcaster's reaction to celebrity #MeToo allegations. In general, issue-relevant social identities tend to play a major role in one's response to social phenomenon (Branscombe, 1998; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). For the standup comedian podcaster, we should specifically contextualize their #MeToo commentary with appropriate understandings of how their gender, their comedian, and their celebrity identities might play a role.

Below, then, is my research literature review, methodology, results and discussion of how standup comedian podcasters made sense of the #MeToo Movement. Chapter 1 reviews #MeToo and its impact. Chapter 2 highlights relevant social movement, backlash and identity scholarship. Chapter 3 continues with an examination of media and its influential role in culture. It also turns to the role of the celebrity standup comedian in American society and the 21st century emergence of the standup comedian podcaster. After the literature review, original research methodology is discussed in detail in Chapter 4, with a selection of primary texts for analysis. At the end of this discussion, the reader should have a strong understanding of why it is socially and scientifically relevant to research off-stage standup comedian discourse related to the #MeToo movement. Chapter 5 then explores the findings from textual analysis, offering the central themes and frames of standup comedian podcaster discourse on #MeToo. The thesis comes to a close in

Chapter 6, where the study enters a discussion exploring the implications of findings and the relationship between social identity and social movement reactions.

CHAPTER 1: The #MeToo Movement

In order to garner a fruitful interpretative orientation for examining #MeToo commentary and considering it as acceptance or backlash to the movement, this chapter attempts to contextualize rhetorical analysis with media, academic, and popular understandings of #MeToo. The #MeToo movement proved to be a relatively successful method of dissent and progressive advocacy for the contemporary feminist movement in terms of momentarily popularizing the discussion of appropriate sexual behavior. Victims brought to social media their stories of experiencing sexual assault, sexual harassment and/or other varying forms of sexual misconduct. Millions of people supported them. Many men lost their positions of power as a response to revelations of their inappropriate sexual behavior, ranging from coercion and harassment to assault and rape. However, as you will see in this chapter, little progress has been made in the changing of popular opinion. Confusion remains on understandings of appropriate sexual behavior and appropriate reactions to inappropriate sexual behavior.

1.1. Origins and Scope of the Movement

Scholars, journalists and activists have put forth varying origin stories and motivational frames for the #MeToo movement and its offshoots. Humanities scholar Camille Gibson and associates (2019) mapped a dynamic explanation for #MeToo's historic cultural explosion, starting with Tarana Burke's original 'Me Too' activism on Myspace in 2006, which advocated for victims to come forward under a "protective context of support" (p. 219). More than ten years later, on October 15th, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano shared her experience of sexual violence on Twitter and asked her followers to respond by commenting 'Me Too' or sharing a tweet with the

hashtag '#MeToo', particularly if they also experienced sexual violence in any of its shapes and forms.

 According to CBS News (2017), Milano's tweet received over 53,000 comments in 24 hours, and in 48 hours there were nearly one million tweets with '#MeToo'. Over the course of one year, the hashtag would be used over 19 million times (Pew Research Center, 2019). The message quickly spread beyond Twitter, too. Within 24 hours of Milano's tweet, there were a combined 12 million 'Me Too' Facebook posts, comments and reactions from approximately 4.7 million users. Lastly, a *GQ* survey (2018) found that 59% of American men aged 18-55, or approximately 75 million men, were aware of the #MeToo movement by 2018. But these origins and statistics do not answer *why* this message was able to spread far in popular culture and media, overcoming the pitfalls of prior movements that failed to surface critical attention.

Beyond the social media origins, Gibson et al. (2019) argue that the celebrity accusations were what seriously caught mainstream media's attention, and that mainstream media helped extend awareness of the Me Too movement beyond social media audiences. Powerful men throughout America's cultural industries were being accused of sexual assault or harassment by women within and outside of Hollywood, and this made for sensational news. Aside from Hollywood mogul-producer Harvey Weinstein's fall from grace, the mistrial of America's charming father figure, Bill Cosby, as well as former president Donald Trump's handling of his sexual assault and harassment allegations amidst his rise to the presidency, resulted in activating an already hyper-active online community to take justice into their own hands (Gibson et al., 2019).

Increased funding by President Barack Obama for streamlining Title IX federal law, which declares that ""no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from

participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance," has also been shown to play a role in increasing the public's attention and desire to help sexually abused victims (ACLU, 2020). Gibson et al. (2019) believe that this policy-change highly empowered women and increased confidence in their speech. President Obama's attention to Title IX policy also encouraged institutional crackdowns on sexual assault in the workplace, rather than solely in educational settings (Gibson et al., 2019).

Scholar Michelle Rodino-Colocino takes another approach when dissecting the #MeToo movement, as she argues that the movement grew popular because it countered cruelty and empowered people through empathy (2019). She argues that the use of social media in movements like #MeToo grow popular because the platforms are seen as safe, digital spaces for practicing transformative empathy (empathy consisting of listening and self-reflection) (Rodino-Colocino, 2019).[2]

1.2. Goals of the Movement

Whether the central force pushing #MeToo into the national spotlight was the digital safe space, the celebrity allegations, or the increased awareness from revived Title IX funding, Rodino-Colocino (2019) saw expression and transformative empathy as the central goals of the #MeToo movement. Scholar Michael Flood (2019) refers to the movement's goals similarly, and further, he sees it as women demanding men to listen, to reflect, and to contribute to change. Flood (2019) interprets men's contributions to change as either adjusting their own perceivably

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[2] We can also take from Foucault's and Massey's ideas of the 'third space' to better understand why social media became so liberating for those oppressed. They consider third spaces as a potential site for negotiating meaning and providing alternative perspectives. Foucault and Massey today might argue that women and other victims have felt oppressed and constrained in physical spaces of discourse, and for this reason, a migration to the virtual space of Twitter became necessary to express themselves.

inappropriate sexual behavior or convincing peers to adjust theirs. Rodino-Colocino also stresses #MeToo's calls for action to bring people and their stories together, with the assumption that "nothing [is] as powerful as knowing you're not alone" (2019, p. 97). She also advocates for shared expressions, like those encouraged by the MeToo hashtag, because increased agency among voices online exposes "systems of oppression and privilege" (2019, p. 97). Lastly, she argues that our critical dialogue should not only focus on persecuting individual actions, but should also target and persecute the systematic problems in gender relations allowing it (Rodino-Colocino, 2019).

In general, it can be difficult to come to a consensus as to what the true motivations and goals of the #MeToo Movement are. As it grows, like with other social movements, the visions and calls for actions may diverge from the visions of the movement's initiator/s. This study, in respect to the work of existing #MeToo scholarship, adopts Rodino-Colocino (2019) and Flood's (2019) interpretations of the #MeToo goals (or calls for action). In this sense, the original goal of the #MeToo movement was to give women a safe space for expression and empathy. As the movement developed, a second goal emerged, which asked men to listen, reflect and contribute to change. In summary, Flood describes #MeToo calls for action as comprising:

> Three key tasks. First, #MeToo asks men to listen to women, in order to recognize men's violence against women as common, serious, and wrong. Second, #MeToo asks that men reflect on and change their own behavior and everyday relations with women and other men. Third, #MeToo asks that men contribute to social change, both by challenging other men and by contributing to wider efforts to shift the systemic gender inequalities that form the foundation of sexual harassment and abuse.

1.3. Reactions and Impacts of the Movement

While many scholars have pointed to the #MeToo movement's effective communication strategies for spreading awareness and seeking social change, Fileborn and Phillips (2019) completed a contradictory case study analysis on #MeToo reactionary discourse from a few American opinion leaders—a handful of political commentators, editorial and op-ed columnists from popular mass media outlets (2019). They found that while *supporters* of the #MeToo movement have opened up the definition of sexual violence to include the "murky gray area" experiences of victims (2019, p. 99), such as quid pro quo power exploitations and ignorant, crude remarks contributing to a hostile or uncomfortable environment (Gibson et al., 2019), some government agencies and opinion leaders continue to reinforce existing black-and-white definitions of sexual violence, where "something either does or does not meet the criteria" (2019, p. 102).

For example, Fileborn and Phillips (2019) suggest that popular journalist Caitlin Flanagan's disapproval of #MeToo allegations hides behind her stereotypical notions of sexual violence. The stereotypical notion of sexual violence is one of a sudden and forceful assault, especially by a stranger (Gibson et al., 2019). In this sense, Flanagan disapproves of the #MeToo movement because many of the grey-area allegations she is made aware of do not meet the criteria of sudden or forceful assault. Fileborn and Phillips (2019) also highlighted other patterned counterclaims against #MeToo activists, noting the use of 'witch hunt' theory amongst many opinion leaders and journalists. Here, victimhood shifts from the accuser to the accused, resting the burden of proof almost exclusively on the alleged victim, while also shifting the discourse to focus on the 'unfair' social and career repercussions of the accused men.

With the backlash commentary of some mainstream opinion leaders in mind, we may also want to look at the responses of ordinary people to the movement. This may help better gauge any tangible success, where success equals the average man taking the movement seriously, listening, reflecting, and if necessary, adjusting perceptions and behavior.

Looking beyond mere awareness of the #MeToo movement (as noted in Section 1.1.), to what extent has the movement significantly affected American attitudes and beliefs? In early 2018, Pew Research Center found that 50% of Americans think getting away with committing sexual harassment/assault is a major problem in the country. Likewise, 46% of Americans think women not being believed is major problem in the country. On the other hand, 34% of Americans believe that there's a major problem with employers firing accused men before finding out all the facts. 31% of Americans believe that there's a major problem with women falsely claiming sexual harassment/assault.

These views fluctuate based on gender, political party and age. For instance, 55% of women say that men getting away with sexual harassment/assault is a major problem, compared to only 44% of men. Furthermore, 40% of men believe that allegations are less relevant if they are from years ago, compared to about 20% of women. 51% of men said the #MeToo movement had gone too far, compared to 36% of women. Political partisanship is an even larger indicator, with 62% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents think that men getting away with sexual assault/harassment is a major problem, compared to 33% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. A poll conducted by Ipsos and NPR (2018) found that 75% of Republicans also believe that the movement had gone too far, compared to 43% of independents and 21% of Democrats. Furthermore, 60% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents believe that women's claims not being believed is a major problem, compared to only 28% of Republicans

and Republican-leaning independents (Pew Research Center, 2018). Overall, Democrat women are the most concerned with instances of sexual harassment/assault, and Republican men are the least concerned.

Regarding beliefs that may especially affect behavior, the NPR/Ipsos poll (2018) notes that 56% of Republicans and 39% of Democrats find it difficult to know what is considered sexual *assault*. Further, 65% of Republicans and 39% of Democrats find it difficult to know what is considered sexual *harassment*. Likewise, Pew research (2018) found that 64% of Republicans and 42% of Democrats feel that the increased focus on sexual harassment and assault has made it harder for men to know how to interact with women in the workplace; this is especially true for adults aged 65 and older, and the least true for those younger than 30.

In an effort to further remind readers that awareness and discussion of the #MeToo movement does not equate to changes in hegemonic understandings of sexual inappropriateness, gender studies scholar Michael Flood (2019) argues that:

> If the task is to listen to and believe women, there are numerous forms of resistance to this. Men may recognize only the bluntest forms of violence, emphasize that harassment is perpetrated by a deviant minority, raise concerns about false allegations, and protest that #MeToo has 'gone too far'(p. 287).

In this sense, awareness can lead to negative reactions seen through forms of resistance and backlash. Kelly (2010) and Flood (2019) explain this resistance and backlash as a desire to maintain male reputation, authority and impunity.

Beyond attempts to change attitudes and beliefs surrounding appropriate sexual behavior and reaction, the #MeToo movement also sought a fairer justice system to hold sexual offenders legally accountable. As a result, by August 2018, 32 lawmakers left office in relation to facing accusations of sexual misconduct (Pew Research Center, 2018). Furthermore, Arizona,

California, Maryland, Tennessee, Vermont and Washington are among some of the American states to place limits on nondisclosure agreements, improve testing of rape kits and extend the statute of limitations "for victims who want to file civil lawsuits against their abusers" (Beitsch, 2018).

In summary, #MeToo has raised awareness about women's issues regarding sexual assault and harassment and has led to *some* policy changes. There are divisions on the overall understanding and importance of the #MeToo Movement, though. These divisions generally reflect political party, gender and age lines. Some states have made change at the government level, many celebrities have been "canceled" or temporarily put on social hiatus, and there remains cultural confusion on what constitutes sexual assault or harassment. Furthermore, Americans remain uncertain about the appropriate judicial and cultural reaction to accusations against men, especially high-status ones.

CHAPTER 2: Social Movement and Backlash

To begin contextualizing #MeToo and its reactionary discourse, social movement and social identity theory acts as a good starting point. Social movement theory encompasses a wide range of notions. When thinking of any socio-political movement, we may often imagine a sort of collective resistance to power (in one of its many forms). Analyses of the underpinnings of social movements are relevant and necessary, but it also remains necessary to analyze the *counter-movements* posed against the initial social movement, too. This can otherwise be referred to as a backlash (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). A backlash movement is reactionary, yet, it is equally as social as the initial movement, with both requiring what theorists refer to as a critical mass (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008).

Critical mass theory simply argues that there must be a mass amount of people advocating a position for that position to be taken seriously by a socio-political system (Krook, 2015). We may suppose, however, that a louder presence and voice can undermine the dominant system only to a limited degree, and in doing so, may hurt the minority position more. According to the theory of intrusiveness (Krook, 2015), minority positions are tolerable—even dismissible—when the volume of minority voices are low; but, when the volume rises and becomes more salient, the majority may become threatened, and as such, attempt to reaffirm their dominance. At this point, the likelihood of a backlash becomes higher.

2.1. Methods of Discursive Backlash

There are a variety of threats that may manifest, or trigger, a social backlash, and there are a variety of ways in which the backlash may be expressed. One of the central reactionary expressions is to increase performances of power and persuasion; performances of power and persuasion can be achieved through coercive or noncoercive means (Mansbridge and Shames,

2008). Here, power may refer to the capacity to maintain "preferences and interests causing, or raising the probability of [desired] outcomes" (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008, p. 624). We can refer to this as 'power as capacity,' though it may also be called 'power-to' or 'power-over' (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008).

For those who partake in backlash, there may be an emotional sensitivity around the phenomenon stemming from threat and fear (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). This can make it difficult for the individual or the collective to distinguish between acts of harmful, coercive persuasion and harmless, noncoercive persuasion. Coercive persuasion includes ridicule, stigma and ostracism. Ferree (2004) refers to these forms of coercive power as tactics of 'soft repression.' Mansbridge and Shames (2008) provides an example of this soft repression tactic within the gendered power structures of the business world, noting that "men who make sexually explicit comments and criticisms of the women with whom they work often succeed in regaining some male privilege in the workplace" (p. 626).

Goss and Heaney (2010) note one other method of backlash: to identify and to take advantages of the weaknesses in opponent's narratives in order to justify any perceived inequality. As an example, Goss and Heaney remind us that when feminist initiatives become more salient, socially conservative media and politicians have tended to critique calls for gender equality as equivalent to calls for the "dismissal of motherhood, devolution of marriage, and the rejection of femininity" (2010, p. 30). This method of persuasion frames gender equality as destructive to the 'natural' gender dichotomy necessary for a thriving human culture.

2.2. Social Identity and Reaction

Amidst the dynamic acceptance and resistance to social movements like #MeToo, social identity theories offer valuable perspectives for understanding social movement and backlash.

Specifically, critical social identity theorists argue that negative reactions (attitudes or behaviors) to social movements might be based on perceived threats to an individual's social group, identity and/or way of life (Hogg and Reid, 2006). Under this theoretical frame, gender identity would presumably play one of the central roles in one's meaning-making and reaction to the #MeToo movement (a movement overwhelmingly targeting the behavior of men). This study focuses on gender identity and its intersection with the celebrity and comedian identity. However, other aspects of the social identity of an individual may influence reactions as well, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

Amidst social movements like #MeToo that principally highlight relevant social identities, negative reaction and polarization often occurs through forms of individual discourse and behaviors that favor the individual's ingroup (Koudenburg et al., 2019). Social movements that highlight misconduct often result in fierce polarization and resistance from those social groups exposed for their misconduct, and therefore, at risk of power denigration (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). Amidst the hostility and polarization of views both between and within social groups, extreme positions may prosper and reinforce division (Moscovici, 1976). According to Turner (1985), this is due to a motivation to distinguish oneself, or one's ingroup, as both positive and definitive.

According to social identity theory, when one's social identity becomes salient, such as amidst inter- *or* intragroup conflict, perceived group identity norms guide one's attitudes and behavior (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). When this happens, individuals may become 'depersonalized' (Turner, 1985; Turner and Reynolds, 2012). Here, the individual chooses, consciously or subconsciously, to interact as "members of the same social category," rather than as autonomous individuals (Koudenburg et al., 2019).

Koudenburg et al. (2019) further found that polarizing effects between and within social categories are especially likely when a negative group norm is made salient, such as amidst the circulation of sexual misconduct allegations by one group toward another. Salient negative norms "urge people to take a stance in the debate" (Koudenburg et al., 2019, p. 152). Therefore, negative perceptions coming from society-at-large will typically result in some heightened sensitivity within the ingroup being perceived negatively. The social disapproval acts as a threat, and thus, a stimulant for group reaction. Depending on the observed reactions coming from the social group that an individual belongs to, and the individual's attachment with that issue-relevant group, the individual may choose to act with the group in accepting, negotiating with, or resisting the identity threat.

In 1998, Scholar Nyla Branscombe explored more specifically how group attachment may affect individual well-being amidst group threat. Through a case study between cis men and women, Branscombe (1998) wanted to see if group attachment dictated the consequences on individual well-being that may come from positive or negative social constructions and understandings of one's social identity group. She found that men who identified highly with their social group made greater effort to justify controversial group behavior and fend off threats coming from both within and outside the group (Branscombe, 1998). Further, she found that efforts to fend off social group threats may also help in maintaining a positive group image, and even, in legitimizing group superiority (Branscombe, 1998).

Men with *lower* attachment, in contrast, had "more difficulty justifying their group's privileges," even choosing to "distance themselves from the in-group" (Branscombe, 1998, p. 181). While her research may not be generalizable for all social in-group/out-group relations, her

focus on the cis male and female social identity benefits this study's research, exceptionally. She notes that:

> Structural disparities not only result in greater material wealth for one group over another, but they also produce social institutions where dominant group members are favored, are considered the norm or standard, and are accorded greater value than members of non-dominant groups (1998, p. 167).

It is for this reason that we often see individuals applying social identity maintenance strategies. Many dominant group members do not want to see their privileges thwarted, even when they do not support the structural relations that allow for such privileges. High-status group individuals may also have privileges that are so institutionalized that they assume these privileges to be of normalcy, and therefore, struggle to cope with the social intrusions on one's reality and way of life (Branscombe, 1998; Hogg and Reid, 2006).

As follows, one central strategy for dominant group members is to "de-emphasize the extent to which their group is advantaged, or emphasize the extent to which their group is disadvantaged," in order to disguise institutional, morally corrupt natures of their power/dominance (Branscombe, 1998, p. 168). When individuals do not make attempts to de-emphasize their group's dominance, collective guilt may become salient, subsequently highlighting an 'unworthy' nature to their privileges, and thus, decreasing perceptions of self and well-being. As Branscombe (1998) notes, popular perceptions of one's social identity/s play an important role in individual perceptions of self and well-being; decreased perceptions of self and well-being may, then, result in distancing oneself from their group.

Privileges, as Branscombe (1998) also notes, may become individually perceived as unworthy when, "it is made salient that one's group membership alone could be responsible for

the positive outcomes received" (p. 168). Group members who understand their dominance might de-emphasize this privilege, because "thoughts of privileges may undermine personal explanations for success" (Branscombe, 1998, p. 170). In this sense, an individual may choose not to acknowledge the role of their social identity, playing up their personal qualities, such as 'hard working,' as explanations for their high-status longevity.

Dominant groups may also emphasize perceived disadvantage of their own group and illegitimacy of any outgroup threats by "derogating the threatening out-group" (Branscombe, 1998, p. 181). For example, men frustrated with the #MeToo movement may quickly label those involved as 'snowflakes,' 'social justice warriors,' or members of 'Cancel Culture.' In some conservative and alternative social networks, these terms have become common pejoratives to undermine calls for change (Lewis, 2019).

Inoculation is one other strategy that individuals use to thwart off threats. Developed from scientific vernacular regarding disease and vaccination, inoculation in the social psychological sense refers to protecting attitudes from change amidst counter-attitudinal influences (Pfau, Ivanov, Houston, Haigh, Sims, Gilchrist, Russell, Wigley, Eckstein & Richert, 2005). When exposed to counterattitudinal arguments in the form of direct or indirect attacks, individuals will often examine the information and determine it as strong or weak. When the opposing argument is perceived as weak, the individual will then seek out supporting information and refutations to further strengthen their threatened position against the (weak) counterargument and counterattitude. It becomes a systematic refutation of a specific counterargument and counterattitudinal challenge (McGuire, 1961; Pfau et al., 2005).

In this sense, arguments and counterarguments play "pivotal roles in the process of resistance" (Pfau et al., 2005, p. 415). Furthermore, an individual relies on interpersonal and

mediated discourse when attempting to resist counterattitudinal influence and strengthen individual attitudes against oppositional threat (Pfau et al., 2005). As Pfau et al. (2005) suggest, we may refer to these accessible and reliable discourses as an individual's associative network. Based on the results of Pfau et al.'s (2005) laboratory research, we can also comfortably say that the stronger—or, more connected—one's associative network, the more difficult it should be to change their attitudes.

Lastly, individuals in dominant groups may also yield to a "black sheep" line of argumentation, suggesting that group members who behave grossly and negligently by no means represent typical, acceptable group behavior. Acknowledgement of deviant group behavior may reflect "attempts to maintain the in-group's overall positive value" (Branscombe, 1998, p. 168; Flood, 2019). Thinking about group-based privileges in a more alternative fashion may also help encourage group pride and cohesion (alternative in the sense that an individual may highlight "alternative positive dimensions" of their otherwise devalued group) (Branscombe, 1998, p. 170).

Cumulatively, research finds that for men, "thinking about privileges resulted in less pride and attachment to their gender group," and, "thinking about [male] disadvantages resulted in higher self-esteem" (Branscombe, 1998, p. 173). Further, individuals in dominant groups may use a variety of strategies to maintain pride and resist perceived threats to their identity group. Regarding #MeToo and male sexual dominance, men may justify controversial sexual behavior, dispel controversial sexual behavior as deviant from the group norm, de-emphasize ingroup sexual advantages, or emphasize outgroup sexual advantages. They may also seek to derogate or attack outgroup members and initiatives, in some cases inoculating oneself with outgroup talking points in order to better prepare oneself for arguments against them. Conversely, especially for

those individuals with lower attachment to their male identity, they may also choose to distance themselves from the group. Indeed, attachment to one's relevant identify generally dictates how they choose to respond to social phenomena. Attachment to social identity defines you as a person and guides perceptions, understandings and framing of one's reality (Branscombe, 1998; Kuypers, 2010).

In conclusion, amidst social controversy surrounding a dominant group, attached individuals will often make efforts to justify group action and strengthen group solidarity, and unattached individuals will often make efforts to distance themselves from the group entirely. These efforts take many shapes and forms, some of which were explained above. In regard to the #MeToo phenomenon, Koudenburg (2019) and Branscombe's (1998) findings help explain the influx of male commentary discourse on the #MeToo movement. Those males with a platform, such as comedian celebrity podcasters, may find themselves using discursive strategies to justify or condone behavior, so as to support or separate themselves from the group.

CHAPTER 3: Culture, Media, and Influence

A conceptualization of culture, and some of its key components, helps if this study hopes to adequately contextualize #MeToo-related standup comedian podcast discourse (SCP discourse) within the contemporary pop culture and countercultural understandings of gender relations and sexual appropriateness. This study takes from social cognitive theorists Anthony Lyons and Yoshihisa Kashima (2001) to define culture as "a process of dynamic production and reproduction of meanings," where a shared culture equates—but never becomes fixed—to "shared understandings about the world and human's place in it" (p. 373). I am developing this definition of culture for the present study by replacing 'shared understanding of *humans' place* in the world,' with 'shared understanding of a *particular peoples'* place in the world.' This definition considers cultural relativism and the nationalistic and ethnocentric tendencies of contemporary cultures and peoples. It also prefaces any further discussion of culture as mostly within the American context, as the discourse analyzed will be of reactions from American podcasters in regard to American #MeToo news. Further, in this definition of culture, discourse acts a dynamic meaning-making instrument for the production and reproduction of shared understanding (Lyons & Kashima, 2001). Moving on from culture as a dynamic meaning-making process, or "culture-as-process" (Lyons and Kashima, 2001, p. 377), this review seeks to further consider how culture is produced and reproduced. What role do stereotypes, or generalizations play in the production and reproduction of culture, how might media play a role in the process, and why does it matter for this thesis?

3.1. Culture, Stereotypes, and Group Think

When analyzing media discourse and determining reactions as stereotype-consistent (SC) or stereotype-inconsistent (SI), we might first ask how and why stereotypes form in the first

place. For example, relevant to gender and #MeToo studies, Fileborn and Phillips speculate that patriarchal gendered relations "structure our understandings of [sexually violent] behaviors" (2019, p. 104). They argue that historical power dynamics of male entitlement and misogyny act as the central source for why many women feel far more often "dissatisfied, if not victimized, in the aftermath" of gray area sexual encounters (2019, p. 103). Harasty (1997) also found that when discussing with a person or group of the same gender, the dialogue about the gender outgroup tends to skew stereotypical.

Lyons and Kashima (2001) believe stereotypes are an example of cultural reproduction, where stereotypes are "cultural knowledge," or, "socially shared representations" of social groups and social phenomenon (p. 373). D. Sperber (1996) similarly thought that stereotypes exist because they are culturally relevant information, and, when this information is circulated, it manages to find a culturally most probable form. This view of stereotypes as a standardization of information, nonetheless a dynamic and unfixed process, falls in line with Richard Dawkin's (1989) meme theory, which took from Darwinian theory to suggest that the serial reproduction of information eventually converges into a standardized view.[3] Indeed, from the cultural evolutionary perspective, stereotypes act as memes, or units of information passed from one person to another (Dawkins, 1989). This is because it requires less cognitive energy to recall culturally standardized probabilities than it is to consider inconsistent information and reformulate one's attitudes.

What is especially important to note here is the relevancy of stereotypes to our understandings of sexual assault and violence, and the ways in which these stereotypes persist.

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[3] We can further take from Stuart Hall's (1973) decoding model to suggest that culturally relevant information spreading throughout the culture carries with it dominant, negotiated, and resistant interpretations. The dominant interpretation, then, would be seen as the standardized meme view that Dawkin (1989) refers to.

We see that people prefer stereotypes because they offer efficient information flow. What are the implications of this, though? Reinforcing stereotypes of sexual violence would certainly deplete #MeToo's attempts to change hegemonic understandings. Further, related to group norms, the stereotypical understanding of "man" and "woman" often results in naturalizing, or universalizing, the men vs. women dichotomy. By reiterating normative appeals to a 'prototypical' man or woman in group spaces, it may be hard to allow for the acceptance of feminist-friendly understandings of gender as socially constructed.

Cultural psychologists have similarly shown that repeated interactions with one's social group may lead to a "habitual exposure to a particular discourse style," where epistemologies are "internalized and reinforced" (Imai, Kanero and Masuda, 2016, p. 73). Others refer comparably to this phenomenon as an instance where developing locally shared views leads to a perceived validation of one's position (Koudenburg, Greijdanus and Scheepers, 2019). Group members implicitly or explicitly attempt to consensualize views on ingroup and outgroup norms (Koudenburg et al., 2019). Increased interaction with one's social category often leads to shared identification of positive ingroup behaviors and negative outgroup behaviors (Koudenburg et al., 2019).

If members of a social group are typically consuming media discourse that reinforces their existing understandings of culture and thought (Feldman et al., 2014), then there may be opposition to outgroup influences attempting to challenge such understandings (Imai et al., 2016). The combination of media exposure, culture and thought within one's social group can often be expected to result in resistance to outgroup influences and could potentially shape behavioral patterns so that they are in accordance with group norms and expectations (Imai et al., 2016).

With the above understanding of media as cultural discourse, and with the understanding of the relationship between language and culture as one of production and reproduction (i.e., language produces culture, culture produces language; and, language reproduces culture, culture reproduces language; Imai et al., 2016), we can better see how media discourse might produce and reproduce cultural stereotypes. In fact, with this understanding, we may also see how media discourse generally influences public opinion and meaning making.

3.2. Media and Framing the Discussion

Humor is a central framing strategy for standup comedians, but other forms of media certainly operate under more typical framing and commentary style. In both mediated and non-mediated commentary, framing strategies are not exclusive to conscious decision-making, as framing is an unavoidable, regularly unconscious aspect of human communication. They are unavoidable because, as Guenther et al. (2015) state, frames "provide schema for making sense of issues" (p. 217). In this way, frames are not only unavoidable in communication; they also are unavoidable in thought and original sense-making (Kuypers, 2010). Therefore, frames can be observed in many instances of message, including self-talk (i.e., thinking), monologue (i.e., lecturing, reporting, commentating, and performing standup comedy—among others), and two-way conversation (i.e., casual talk, interview, and debate—among others).

As this present study seeks to examine commentary on the #MeToo movement, we can further look at communication framing in social movements and social commentary. In terms of social movements, a leader or representative of the movement will use frames "typically oriented toward promoting a specific form of mobilization" (Guenther et al., 2015, p. 217; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). In terms of social commentary, such as in news media or podcasting, a reporter or commentator's framing is typically oriented towards a promotion of a particular understanding or

attitude on the current event or issue being commented on (Scheufele, 1999). When looking at framing strategies, we can see that the speaker employs certain rhetorical devices in attempting to frame and normalize their sense-making.

According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), such rhetorical framing devices include analogy and metaphor, story and myth, tradition and ritual, slogan and catchphrase, comparison and contrast, and, lastly, spin and bias. According to Hallahan (1999), situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news can all be framed in a particular way using the above rhetorical devices. The framing then primes the listener or viewer to think about an issue in terms of how it has been framed, or presented, to them (Hallahan, 1999).

These strategies are not exclusive from comedy; people can have humorous metaphors, humorous stories, humorous catchphrases, etc. Comedians can, of course, use metaphors, stories, catchphrases, etc. and other methods of framing without adding a humorous element. Indeed, comedians, like all people, require these tools of framing. That a podcast host became famous as a standup comedian does not dismiss the standup comedian podcaster from the principles of framing, namely, that it is unavoidable in the nature of discourse. This seems especially true if the standup comedian podcaster is choosing to present or comment on current events, like in journalism and news, particularly those events with clear and significant political ramifications (Scheufele, 1999).

When analyzing the discourse from standup comedian podcasters, this study is sure to investigate instances of framing. This study will further attempt to interpret the frame's role in purposely or inadvertently persuading the audience to think about the event in a particular way, or, in line with the views of mediated personalities. In keeping with the above views on framing,

the present literature review seeks to further review examples of framing strategies in communication that can be used to present or comment on information, such as #MeToo news.

For example, when commenting on the latest celebrity allegations of sexual harassment, the commentator may use comparison and contrast in presenting their opinions on the news. Comparison and contrast can be used to spin a previously popular understanding of something. Regarding #MeToo commentary, the commentator may compare the allegation to another allegation in the news, or to a stereotypical view of sexual harassment, and then use that comparison to approve of or dismiss the allegation.

The commentator might also use slogan and catchphrase as a persuasive way to sum up their point in a memorable and perceivably logical manner. The use of slogan and catchphrases are particularly helpful to audiences familiar with a community jargon. For example, if a commentator learns of a new celebrity allegation of sexual harassment, and then the host reports to the audience the details of the allegation, the host may then end his commentary by proclaiming, "that's another instance of Cancel Culture," or, "wow, more social justice warrior nonsense!" In these cases, the commentator appears to feel comfortable using these catchphrases to sum up their opinion because their audience already understands the contextual meaning of these phrases (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). Critics of social movements that aim at power figures are particularly prone to using jargon such as 'Cancel Culture' and 'social justice warrior' when attempting to explain away social movement justification (Lewis, 2019).

Further, the commentator might use a story in reacting to #MeToo-related news. Stories, while typically brought up as an anecdote, may serve as examples for making sense of broader phenomena (Bigsby, Bigman and Gonzalez, 2019). Exemplification theory suggests that the surfacing of exemplars can act as a schematic tool for interpreting, and then making broad

assumptions, about the events or phenomena under study (Zillmann, 1999). For instance, regarding commentary on sexual misconduct accusations like those circulated in the #MeToo era (2017-2020), highlighting a few exemplars of women dishonestly accusing men of sexual misconduct may invite the public to generalize the information from those exemplars to other sexual misconduct accusations in the #MeToo era. Zillmann refers to this phenomenon as "judging the whole by some of its parts" (1999, p. 69). This may be because examples of untruthful sexual misconduct allegations tend to be emotionally charged and easily accessible in people's mind. People tend to recall recent, easily accessible information to form judgement (Bigsby et al., 2019; Sun, Krakow, John & Weaver, 2015; Zillmann, 1999). As a result, people likely judge (or make sense of) other sexual misconduct allegations based upon the exemplars of untruthful allegations, which leads them to question the motivations and truthfulness of other sexual misconduct allegations. In conclusion, stories can serve as exemplars for broadcasters publicly making sense of new events, and as such, as powerful frames for their audiences own sense-making.

Lastly, causal frames may also influence people's understandings of sexual misconduct and #MeToo. Individuals can attribute negative behavior of others to external factors or internal factors. In the case of sexual misconduct, one may blame external factors by claiming that "men will be men," or, "that's just the way it is." Alternatively, one may blame internal factors by claiming sexual aggression is a personal decision within one's control. Whether people attribute the negative behavior of other individuals to internal or external factors partly depends on the group identity of these individuals. According to the theory of attribution bias (Weiner, 2006), people often attribute problems of in-group members to external factors (factors out of personal control). Those same people may then attribute problems of out-group members to internal

factors (factors within personal control). For example, if an athlete on a New York baseball team was confronted with news about an alcoholic teammate being accused of sexual harassment, he may attribute his teammate's behavior to external factors out of his control (i.e., he was an alcoholic, and alcoholism is a disease that makes it hard for him to control his behavior). Now, say that the NY baseball player was confronted with news about an alcoholic player on the rival Boston team. Because of in-group/out-group problem-attribution bias, the NY player may blame the Boston player's alcoholism and sexual misconduct on personal factors completely within his control. Through such logic, blame is taken away from the teammate, befallen to the unfortunate human condition of mental illness and addiction, but blame is given to the rival, who should then be held accountable. Weiner's (2006) "theory of perceived responsibly and social motivation" notes that the accountability or responsibility that one gives to an individual or group's behavior "lead[s] to corresponding treatment attributions, which then function as the basis for action (or inaction)" (Sun et al., 2015, p. 4).

In this sense, someone who attributes their own group's negative behavior to permanent external factors (nature of man) might render the problem unsolvable, leading to a perception that social action is not worthwhile or sensible. Meanwhile, someone who attributes their own group's negative behavior to internal factors (personal responsibility), or at least modifiable external factors (social constructs), might be motivated towards "collective, participatory behaviors aimed at pushing policy change and improving community well-being" (Sun et al., 2015, p. 7). In conclusion, external attribution bias related to group members who were "#MeToo'd" (i.e., accused of sexual misconduct allegations) may help other individuals within the group stave off threats to their group identity. Internal attribution bias, on the other hand,

may motivate group individuals to confront the problem of male-female sexual misconduct with possible solutions.

In summary, this section has helped in forming a critical analytical lens focused on rhetoric, framing and persuasion. While the above rhetorical (public sense-making) devices and their examples help conceptualize framing's role in attempting to orient the audience towards a particular understanding of a current event or issue, at best it is only a glimpse of the scholarship on framing and rhetoric. However, this study does not see it fit to list and define every rhetorical device imaginable. Moving on, the following section maps standup comedians and podcasters as the framers of their commentary.

3.3. The Celebrity

Now that I have displayed some of the key aspects of how media and media personalities can influence audience sense-making and attitudes, this study can now bring in the celebrity element of media's influence on audiences. If it has not yet been made clear how media discourse can play a role in audience meaning-making processes, a review of potential celebrity influence might further persuade. To begin, it should be understood that unless people have the privilege of seeing their celebrity heroes in person, i.e., at some sort of public performance or occurrence, the only way to access the celebrity is through mediated content (reality or fictional).

The celebrity appeal has been discussed as far back as 1956, on par with the rise of mass media, generally. Sociologist C. Wright Mills famously proclaimed that "the professional celebrity is the result of a society that makes a fetish out of competition" (1956, p. 74). A few years later, historian Donnel Boorstin referred to the celebrity as a "person known for his or her well-knownness," or, a person known for being known (1961, p. 57). By 1972, journalist and sociologist Franceso Alberoni was referring to celebrities as a *powerless elite*, due to their lack of

formal, institutional power. It remained clear that celebrities maintained social influence, but there still was no overt, celebrity force creating institutional change.

Brown and Fraser (2003) examined celebrity appeal by comparing historical and modern notions of hero. Successful leaders have traditionally been the cultural heroes, Brown and Fraser note (2003); yet today, many heroes include entertainment celebrities. Therefore, we might consider today's celebrities as leaders, despite their lack of institutional leadership and power. Still, institutionally powerful or not, celebrities can be serious champions of pro-social behaviors by providing examples of how to think and act (Brown & Fraser, 2003). Examples of pro-social behaviors may be provided by the entertainment celebrity through both their authentic (i.e., interviews) or fictitious (i.e., performative, acting) appearances.

While many entertainment celebrities have increased their advocacy efforts through non-traditional platforms like social media, there is no certainty that a celebrity's message will influence or shape an individual's attitudes or behaviors. An individual changing their attitudes or behaviors to reflect the celebrity's attitudes or behaviors tends to occur when the individual feels a strong identification or attachment to the celebrity (Brown, 2015). As such, it is important to review the processes of audience involvement with celebrities and how this predicates the celebrity message's persuasive efficacy.

3.4. Persuasion and Social Influence

While the appeal of a celebrity media persona can lead to source liking, it often takes more than liking and favorability to be persuaded by the celebrity's message. Brown (2015) posits that the persuasive efficacy of the celebrity's message relies on the processes of involvement the audience has with the celebrity, and in relation, their level of attachment or identification to the celebrity. Today, communication scholars believe that source-liking is only

at the base level of audience involvement with media persona, and that it takes much more than liking to attach or identify with a celebrity media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Brown & Fraser, 2003; Brown, 2015).

Just like other forms of personal identification, celebrity identification operates on the principles of social psychology. Socio-psychological theories of identification date as far back as Freud (1922), who recalled identification as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. Laswell (1965) highlighted mass identifications, such as nationalistic and ethnocentric identities. Burke (1969) believed identification occurred when one individual perceived that they share the interests of another individual. Lastly, Brown (2015) believed that individuals may identity with celebrities not because the celebrity seems similar to them, but because the individual desires to be similar to the celebrity. In each definition, identification can be seen as a critical function of social influence and change mediated through source-liking and emotional tie (Jackson, 2008), which in themselves are mediated through criteria like nationality, ethnicity, culture, and shared or desired personality attributes.

Modern celebrities maintain unique and loyal fanbases with supporters in the millions, whether that fanbase is quantitatively measured through a million content subscribers, a million content views, or a million content likes. Access to millions of supporters is not access to the entire public sphere, but it can be enough to mobilize individuals and build social movement or social backlash infrastructure (Thrall et al., 2008). Some celebrities hold much more social influence than others.

Indeed, the rhetorical practices of the celebrity—intended or otherwise—play a role in how influential their messages can be to audiences. Celebrities who engage in long-form discussion and debate, such as in podcasting, are likely more persuasive on the related issue than

the celebrity who simply brings attention with a mere endorsement or statement of support (Brown, 2015).

Other scholars see the entertainment value of the celebrity's message equally as important as the critical value of their discussion and debate. In 2008, political scientist David Jackson highlighted what he saw as an increase in influential entertainment figures, stemming from the "increasing mixture of entertainment and politics" (p. 72). Thrall et al. (2008) similarly believed that modern celebrities are "central players in driving political messages home through entertainment channels" (p. 377). Likewise, scholars Brown & Frasier (2003) highlight the proliferation of entertainment media as a key mechanism for expanding the public figure's—as opposed to the public official's—influence.

Lastly, as McGuire (2001) notes, one other strength of celebrity identification in influencing the individual to change their attitudes and behaviors comes from the fact that the celebrity who you incessantly follow will generally bring you more awareness to particular social issues. In other words, a key mechanism of celebrity influence should be seen as the availability of and exposure to issue-relevant information that comes with the celebrity's attention. By following your favorite celebrity, you may be exposed to information related to current events, such as social movements.

While exposure to new information can influence individuals to shift or reinforce attitudes and behaviors, the framing of such information may be equally as important to how audience individuals choose to react. It could be the celebrity's novel interpretation of old information, rather than exposure to new information, that influences the audience member's perspective on the relevant cultural issue or phenomenon and how they choose to react to it. Regardless of the information being new or old to the audience, the celebrity persona's framing

of the information may shift or reinforce audience understandings of the relevant issue. As such,

I expect that the framing and rhetorical methods used by celebrity standup comedian podcasters

play an important role in how their audiences make sense of the #MeToo movement, especially

for the avid/fanatical factions of the audiences. While there may be a variety of factors leading to

the celebrity's social influence on making sense of current events, such as their relation to

entertainment or merely their celebrity appeal, this study will largely focus on the factors of

framing and rhetoric. Some of the key methods of framing and rhetoric were spotlighted in the

Section 3.1.2.

3.5. The Standup Comedian Podcaster

If this study hopes to analyze celebrity responses to #MeToo, contextualized alongside

the backdrop of social movement and backlash theories, social identity theories, and media and

the celebrity's role within, focusing on a celebrity subgroup and media platform might help with

sifting through the abundance of discourse. This study seeks to critically review the (celebrity)

standup comedian discourse coming out of the podcast industry, for a variety of reasons. For one,

although it may be easy to write off opinionated standup comedian podcasters as outlier or

alternative voices, the reality is that these podcasters draw in millions of listeners a week

worldwide (Nielsen, 2018). Because of the rise in standup comedian-hosted podcasting, this

study hopes to contribute to the recognition of standup comedian-hosted podcasts as a serious

force of cultural influence.

A proper definition of the standup comedian podcaster would help in understanding the

group of persons whose discourse I plan to analyze. A standup comedian podcaster is someone

who's known as a standup comedian to the public, and someone who also hosts or appears on

podcasts frequently. For instance, Marc Maron has been performing standup in America since

the 1980s, and has since created a widely successful podcast, known as *WTF w/ Marc Maron*.

Likewise, Joe Rogan began hosting his podcast program, *Joe Rogan Experience*, around 2010;

he started his career as a standup comedian in the 1990s. Furthermore, Chris D'Elia, who began

standup around 2005, now hosts a podcast titled *Congratulations with Chris D'Elia*.[4] On top of

their widespread podcast success, the three American comedians listed above are typically seen

today, across America, performing standup at stadiums and arenas.

Standup comedians represent a special type of celebrity in that they become famous and

loved for their performative discourse. The popular transition of standup comedians to

podcasting shows that audiences desire the standup comedian's voice whether performing on

stage or otherwise. Indeed, standup comedians are still public figure/celebrities when they are

off-stage, and we know that celebrities and public figures' behaviors and opinions are consumed,

sought after, and held accountable (Brown, 2015; Symons, 2017). With this evolving

understanding of celebrity and celebrity discourse as influential, it would make sense that, today,

we see journalists, scholars, activists and other citizens increasingly calling attention to what

they perceive as inappropriate (i.e., culturally harmful) celebrity rhetoric.

3.5.1. The Comedian Appeal

On top of the general celebrity's influence, standup comedians themselves have long

maintained scholarly and public respect for being critical social observers, or "conduits of the

sociological perspectives" (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). Scholarly respect has been maintained

since at least 1985, when Lawrence Mintz published his article, "Standup Comedy as Social and

Cultural Mediation." The American public has been aware of the standup comedian's charm as

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[4] In June 2020, five women took to Twitter to share their individual experiences with D'Elia during their teenage years. In each of their cases, they claim direct messages were exchanged in which D'Elia requested inappropriate photos or sexual meetups. D'Elia's allegations brought #MeToo and narratives of predatorial standup comedians back into Twitter's trending spotlight (*LA Times*, June 2020).

early as the 1800s, with monologists who performed solo humorous speeches during variety programs like minstrel, vaudeville, and burlesque (Mintz, 1985). The monologist, today referred to as the standup comedian, began gaining widespread popularity with performers like Jack Benny and Frank Fay, who transitioned from the vaudeville scene. It was not until acts by comedians like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce and Joan Rivers, however, that standup comedy truly began testing the boundaries of public speech (Mintz, 1985). These comedians publicly offered social views that were either fringe, taboo, frowned upon, or simply outrageous and a profitable enough size of the American public found it entertaining.

The notion that comedians are critical social observers or, unconventional social commentators (Feldman, 2007), remains apparent across many discourse mediums (standup, Mintz, 1985; late night programs, Feldman, 2007; podcasts, Meserko, 2015 and Symons, 2017). The comedian presents an inquiry in the form of humorous narrative or monologue, and it typically culminates in a perspective that can encourage the audience to negotiate or reconsider their own opinions on the relevant matter (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). For example, in my previous work on humor (Russo, 2020), I noted that in 2018, Indian standup comedian Vir Das was performing in San Francisco and asked his audience, "What is a religion?", proceeding to suggest:

> It's a really old comic book. It's a really old superhero story. Muslims, Allah is your Batman. Christians, Jesus is your Superman. Single-hero stories. But Hindus, we created the Avengers… There're too many guys. And nobody knows what the story is.

Here, Das asks a provocative question about the nature of religion, only to implode its sternness by relating scriptures and gods to comic books and superheroes. The San Francisco audience

exploded in laughter, hinting at the success of humorous and satirical methods in criticizing philosophical subject matters.

Indeed, sociologists of the 1980's began asking about the inner workings of humor's appeal, why humor was able to transcend notions of acceptable speech, why many people were quite moved by the comedic views and social criticisms offered, and most importantly, how things people laugh at inform us about our culture. Sociologist Lawrence Mintz thought of the humorous dialogue between performer and audience as a public affirmation, or examination, of shared values. He believed that group laughter can serve as group affirmation, leading to a fostered sense of community and mutual support (1985). In other words, the standup comedian phenomenon is a group strategy for plural reflexivity.

Plural reflexivity refers to a phenomenon in which groups of people attempt to portray, critique, or generally understand themselves. In the case of standup comedy, a group of people relegate an orator to the stage whose dialogue receives live, collective feedback in the form of positive or negative vocal reactions (Mintz, 1985; Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). But there are also instances in standup comedy where group affirmation and mutual understanding is not the goal for the performer or audience.

Sometimes, people who choose to listen to a standup comedian make that choice because they are taking part in the "ritual violation of taboos," in which the comedian offers "staged antagonism" (Mintz, 1985). This staged antagonism is possible, according to humor theorists, because the comedian is granted a "comedic license" from the audience (Mintz, 1985, p. 79; Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). According to these theorists, for whom I find myself in agreement with, the comedic license has historically granted the standup comedian permission to deviate from socially acceptable thoughts and behaviors (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). It has

been shown that some audience members laugh and enjoy the comedic performance because the standup comedian acts as a "negative exemplar" (Mintz, 1985, p. 74; Nabi, Moyer-Guise and Byrnes, 2007). In this case, the negative exemplar deviates from acceptable behavior, but the audience member is not necessarily in favor of the comedian's reflection. Rather, the audience member may just be laughing as a form of ridicule or pity. Again, in this case, the standup comedian is 'funny' because of absurdity and undesirable nature of their character (Nabi, Moyer-Guise & Byrnes, 2007). The audience member's laughter here, as Nabi, Moyer-Guise and Byrne (2007) note, is likely the result of cognitive incongruency or surprise. In the same audience, we may have people who are laughing out of shock or ridicule, while also having people who are laughing out of appreciation for, and affirmation of, the comedian's deviation.

Journalism scholar Lauren Feldman further explored the role of the comedian in the realm of late-night television. She examined audiences and late-night comedy discourse, such as from *The Daily Show*, and found that late-night comedy programs can act as an alternative, or at least a supplement, to traditional news. She was interested in the phenomenon surrounding a growing youth culture in which comedy news programs offered "politics, personal expression and entertainment all fused together" (Feldman, 2007, p. 408). While she was mostly focused on the journalistic differences between TV's traditional news and *The Daily Show*, I believe it is appropriate to also consider comedian-hosted podcasting as an alternative source for news, or, as a supplement for making sense of news. For Feldman, these alternatives rise within our culture because people cringe at the "illusion of objectivity" that traditional news attempts to create (2007, p. 409). Similarly, for Bloom & Bloom (1979), humorous mediated discourse can act as an attack on the status quo reality, by attending to "instances of failure in human behavior and institutions" in a comedic, or mocking, fashion (p. 33). Indeed, many public speakers use humor

during their monologue or conversation in order to ridicule a position, or to undermine the position's credibility and legitimacy (Guenther, Radojcic & Mulligan, 2015). Furthermore, the phenomenon of humor-based criticism exists in the late night TV realm, too. For example, in the June 25, 2020 episode of *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah opened his program with commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic. At one point, he states:

> Much of America has treated the coronavirus the same way we treat our bodies in the winter. We are always like, 'Yeah, I know it's not looking good right now, but, when the summer comes, I promise you everything's going to be in shape!' And then the summer came, and things were still not looking good, and people are like, 'Yeah, screw it. I'm still going to the beach.'

Humor scholars have debated the political intentions of the modern standup comedian, with some researchers noting that the comedian who attacks dominant ideology is not always doing so from a liberal or progressive standpoint. As Gillota (2015) notes, "the cultural critic/outsider approach relies on a willful turning away from or ignoring of the countless routines and performers that use humor to reinforce conservative, dominant or regressive ideology" (p. 104). This is important to note when the persuasive standup comedian takes the stage or booth, as "the majority of these individuals are white and male, and white masculinity, in a traditionally racist and patriarchal culture, often serves to rhetorically universalize a subject" (p. 107). In this sense, there should be cause for concern that the discourse of the white, male standup comedian may help in universalizing hegemonic gender relations and in universalizing #MeToo as a movement to look down upon.

In attacking perceived failures of behavior and institution, the comedian—regardless of medium—attempts to relate to or shift the audience's perception of a phenomenon. If this is not

the case, they at least attempt to get their audiences to consider a different perspective (Guenther, Radojcic & Mulligan, 2015). In this sense, the comedian is sought after for contesting conventional understandings. Humor can then be seen as an unconventional framing strategy used to diminish the claims of oppositional stances.

Tying these notions back to the celebrity and persuasion, many Americans enjoy celebrity opinions on current events. Humor and entertainment give many standup comedians celebrity status in America. As standup comedians are already appreciated for their unconventional social commentary, the rise to celebrity stardom makes their commentary sought after even more. Thus, in theory, we should expect that many Americans will enjoy celebrity standup comedians' opinions on current events. This helps explain the popularity of standup comedian-hosted podcasts, where the standup comedian is much less likely to operate from a purely comedic point of view (Meserko, 2015; Symons, 2017).

In summary, just as when standup comedians are performing on stage, or comedian hosts are performing on television, when standup comedian podcasters discuss current events, they are framing the discussion in a certain way. This is true whether in monologue or in conversation with a co-host or guest on their program. In other words, they are presenting information about the current event in a way that primes the audience to also think about the event within that frame. This is often not intentional, rather, it's an unavoidable element of human communication. However, regardless of intent, framing may have lasting effects on audiences (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). Therefore, communication scholars should continue looking at the framing used in standup comedian podcast discourse.

3.5.2. Podcasting as Cultural Discourse

On top of contextualizing the celebrity standup comedian podcaster in today's culture, it seems necessary to further contextualize the podcast medium within popular culture, as well. Indeed, podcast listenership in America has continued to steadily rise, now at 24% of the U.S. population (68 million people) listening to a podcast at least once per week (Infinite Dial, 2020). In late 2018, Nielsen marketing research found that there were over 16 million "avid" fans of podcasts in the U.S., or, 16 million people with a podcast interest level of 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale. So, how can we understand the phenomenon of podcasting? Borrowing from Jarret (2009), this study considers podcast discourse as broadcast talk, which is a form of broadcasted conversation often heard on radio. Jarret (2009) also finds podcasts serve as a "site for the mediation of public expression and deliberation" (p. 131). In other words, podcasters deliberately use the podcast medium to broadcast their expressions and opinions to the public. Indeed, unlike traditional media personalities, we can say more certainly that most podcaster hosts, like other alternative media creators, have more control of their expressions and framing agenda than do traditional media personalities, given the alternative creator's characteristic lack of an owner to report to or hold their language accountable.

Furthermore, as conversation-discourse analyst Ian Hutchby (2003) notes, broadcast talk not only "displays a close relationship with the structures and patterns of ordinary [casual] conversation," but also, "is produced for the benefit of an overhearing audience… oriented toward the fact that it should be hearable by non-co-present persons" (p. 440). What Hutchby is suggesting here is that podcast talk achieves some of its popular success in part due to the dueling natures of both private and public talk associated with the medium. Podcast conversational discourse is ordinary (appearing as authentic or non-performative), sociable, and accessible. Hutchby (2003) further notes that podcast and broadcast talk is both "context-shaped

and context-renewing" (p. 441). In other words, podcast talk is shaped by other contexts within

the public sphere, such as historical and current events, but also, podcast talk renews such

contexts, maintaining their relevancy through broadcasted discourse. This leads discourse

analysts with the desire to investigate "the ways the participants [host or guest], in their means of

organizing their turns at talk, display for one another (and hence for the analyst too) their

understanding and sense of what is going on at any given moment" (Hutchby, 2003, p. 442).

CHAPTER 4: Methodology

In critical reviews of standup performance, it is easy to rule the performer's rhetoric as jokingly irreverent. Today, with many standup comedians increasingly setting aside more time for authenticating themselves on the podcast airwaves, the standup comedian's dialogue can no longer be thought as merely comedic. Indeed, comedian-on-comedian podcast interviews maintain millions of views and subscribers (Nielsen, 2018). Their ability to offer personal expressions and opinions, while rejecting ideas of objective news and reality, has led to die-hard followings (i.e., avid fans, fanatics) (Feldman, 2007; Nielsen, 2018). This popularity increases the necessity to analyze the rhetoric of standup comedian podcasters. Like other celebrities, they are channels of ideological influence for millions of listeners worldwide. Therefore, this study seeks to answer a variety of questions (see following section) related to how standup comedian podcasters reacted to #MeToo. By analyzing standup comedian podcaster discourse (SCP discourse), I hope to offer possible answers to these questions and allow for the consideration that standup comedians are contributing either positively or negatively to the movement, to feminist-friendly ideas of appropriate sexual behavior, and to feminist-friendly ideas of appropriate cultural reactions to inappropriate sexual behavior.

4.1. Research Questions

1. How did standup comedian podcasters frame and discuss #MeToo as a phenomenon?

2. Have they accepted #MeToo calls for action (i.e., listen, reflect, adapt) or have they challenged them (i.e., resist, backlash)?

3. How might SCP reactions be influenced or shaped by their sex/gender, celebrity, and/or standup comedian identities?

4.2. Discourse analysis: Rhetorical framing analysis

This study operates from a discourse analytical and rhetorical framing perspective. Why is discourse analysis a valuable method in the social sciences and humanities? Let's consider critical discourse moments. Critical discourse moments are critical because the moment prompts widespread social and cultural examination of meaning and values related to a phenomenon (Zelizer, 1992). If we consider sexual misconduct—and its relationship to gender and power—as a phenomenon, we can further consider the Me-Too Movement as a critical discourse moment that prompted widespread social and cultural examination of this phenomenon. This study takes from Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) to define discourse as "a cultural system of meaning that circulates among a group's members" (p. 350). As a qualitative discourse analyst, one of my jobs would then be to "delineate the possible meanings embedded in a given media text…revealing its hidden ideological content" (Hutchby, 2003, p. 439).

This study further takes from Carvalho (2008) for analytical framework guidance. Carvalho uses a form of critical discourse analysis that focuses on textual and contextual analysis. The framework, in the form of questions, helped provide a central catalog to store results from analyzing SCP discourse. For each clip or moment of discourse that this study seeks to analyze, the analytical framework begins with a layout and structure of the discourse medium (podcast)—who is talking and what form of organization is there for mediating discourse? Then, the analysis moves to the objects/themes of discourse (#MeToo, power and sexual conduct). After this, the objective would be to describe the actors of the discourse—who does the discourse mention and how are these actors represented? Actors, here, can be "both subjects—they do things—and objects—they are talked about" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 168). After the layout, object and actors are clearly detailed, it's appropriate to move into the language, grammar, and rhetoric

of the discourse. Here, the objective is to emphasize discursive strategies used to convey ideological standpoints. To make any cases for the ideological standpoints of standup comedian podcasters, the discourse analyst must understand that ideology is "embedded in the selection and representation of objects and actors, and in the language and discursive strategies employed in a text." (Carvalho, 2008, p. 171). As such, "the analyst has to learn to identify ideological standpoints from subtle mechanisms and device" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 170-71).

Linguistic and rhetorical analysis of text is typically crucial for the step of identifying discursive mechanisms and devices. An incisive thesis in discourse analysis requires paying close attention to discursive strategies, concepts, vocabulary, metaphors, and "other rhetorical figures and persuasive devices employed in the text" (van Dijk, 1988; Carvalho, 2008, p. 168; Kuypers, 2010). This study's literature review provided some examples for these discursive strategies in the Section 3.2. The linguistic analytical methods should also not be confused with analysis of pragmatics, semantics, and syntax, which are of less interest in critical discourse analysis (Carvalho, 2008). Finally, I stand firmly by the decree that discourse analysts offer a fundamental perspective to the scientific community. As Carvalho makes clear, "it is important to make ideologies manifest because they involve fundamental motivations and justifications for keeping or changing a certain status quo" (2008, p. 171). And as Storm Villadsen made clear recently at her 2018 keynote presentation on rhetoric, analysts should evaluate "reactions to social justice issues…because they are public morality in the making," circulating in a "climate increasingly characterized by partisanship and eristic."

I refer to this discourse analysis as a rhetorical framing analysis as well, in the sense that it seeks to explore the rhetorical framing strategies of the SCP discourse in order to answer its central research questions. Kuypers (2010) describes rhetorical framing analysis as contingent

upon "allow[ing] the rhetors being studied to express themselves in their own terminology and context as fully as possible" (p. 294), and further, as critical in nature. In this sense, as a framing analyst focused on rhetoric, I must give room for the standup comedian podcaster's subjective expression to be heard objectively. Then, the analysis can move to its critical nature, where criticisms are backed by existing rhetorical and social scientific theory, and the incorporation of other perspectives (Kuypers, 2010). As Kuyper further notes, "Ultimately…those operating from within this paradigm look for how news frames act to affect the political consciousness of news audiences," where the critic should be asking, "How do language choices invite us to understand an issue or event?" (2010, p. 298).

4.3. Data Selection

As previously stated, this study does not attempt to analyze all standup comedian celebrity discourse related to the #MeToo movement. Indeed, by narrowing my data collection down to podcast discourse, I may not be able to generalize my findings to an entire celebrity group's reaction to the #MeToo phenomenon. This study does maintain the intention, though, to critically highlight some of the most popular standup comedian voices with the understanding that podcasts are a rising platform for them and their audiences.

The statistics of their popularity illuminates the importance of critical review. According to Backtracks Podcast Analytics, as of May 1st, 2020, *Joe Rogan Experience* is the most popular podcast in the world. The list does not operate on total listenership history, rather, it operates on a 'top trending' algorithm. Other standup comedian-hosted podcasts on Backtracks' consistently updated Top 250 list include *Duncan Trussell Family Hour* (#35), *2 Bears 1 Cave with Tom Segura & Bert Kreischer* (#68), *Monday Morning Podcast* (Bill Burr, #102), *Your Mom's House with Christine P. and Tom Segura* (#138), *WTF with Marc Maron* (#145), *Congratulations with*

Chris D'Elia (#164), *Good For You* (Whitney Cummings, #169), *This Past Weekend w/ Theo Von* (#201), *The Church of What's Happening Now: With Joey Coco Diaz* (#207), *The All New Dennis Miller Option* (#213), and *The Dollop with Dave Anthony and Gareth Reynolds* (#247) (Backtracks Podcast Analytics, May 2020).

Overall, #MeToo discourse coming out of celebrity standup comedian-hosted podcasts seems particularly relevant. The #MeToo movement as a cultural phenomenon has notably targeted celebrities, and, in some of the highest profile cases, celebrity standup comedians. There have been several top-ticket, stadium touring standup comedians who have been "#MeToo'd," namely, Bill Cosby, Louis CK, Aziz Ansari and Chris D'Elia. Apparently, this made for a critical discourse moment within the standup comedian-hosted podcast community.

4.3.1. Database: The Joe Rogan Experience's YouTube Catalog

As mentioned, *The Joe Rogan Experience* (*JRE*), a podcast hosted by standup comedian Joe Rogan, maintains not only the status of most-listened-to standup comedian-hosted podcast, but also, in various charts at any given time, the most-listened-to podcast in general, regardless of genre. Rogan has always been ahead of the curve in the podcast industry. As early as 2003, he began livestreaming conversations between him and his standup comedian friends in the green room of various Los Angeles standup venues, especially the historic Comedy Store. By late 2009, Rogan and his producer transitioned into a makeshift home studio, with comedian Ari Shaffir as the first ever guest of the official *JRE* podcast. While Rogan has stayed committed to conversations with LA comic buddies, his podcast soon became a place for people of various professions and relations to Rogan to have long-form, open-ended discussions. By 2016, *JRE* was reaching as many as 16 million monthly downloads on its central video platform, YouTube (ONE37pm, 2019).

By late 2017, during the height of #MeToo, other SCPs were frequent guests of the *JRE*, providing viewers and researchers a large database to explore SCP takes on the movement. Therefore, this study sees analysis of *JRE* discourse as appropriate for generally understanding how SCPs have discussed #MeToo. Of the twelve other standup comedian podcasters listed in Backtracks' Top 250 Podcasts, ten of them have appeared on Joe Rogan's podcast. There are also many popular standup comedian podcasters not listed in the Top 250 chart, but that maintain loyal followings (high subscription count and video views). Some of these comedians and their programs include Jim Norton (*Jim and Sam Show)*, Norm Macdonald (*Norm Macdonald Live)*, Doug Stanhope (*The Doug Stanhope Podcast)*, Neal Brennan (*How Neal Feel)*, Joe List and Marc Normand (*Tuesdays with Stories!)*. Each of these standup comedians have also appeared on *Joe Rogan Experience*. Therefore, this method of selecting discourse solely from *JRE* should successfully highlight the loudest standup comedian podcast voices.

There is further relevance in analyzing *JRE* discourse. For instance, a survey of about 1000 podcast listeners found that *JRE* was the most listened-to podcast, that 71% of *JRE* listeners were male, and that the average age of *JRE* listeners was 24 years old (Media Monitors, 2020). Based on the popularity of *JRE* for young adult males, the podcast provides an excellent opportunity to critically examine celebrity comedian reactions. Young adult male exposure to JRE #MeToo reactions may impact not only their beliefs and attitudes regarding appropriate sexual relations, but also their own behaviors in such relations.

The rise of Rogan as an influential figure became further solidified through his latest media strategy. Starting in January 2021, *JRE* moved exclusively to Spotify, with Rogan signing a $100 million contract—the largest in podcast history. Before the transition to Spotify, Rogan released his video episodes on YouTube and audio episodes on platforms such as Apple

Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and his personal website, podcasts.joerogan.net. Episodes have since

been removed from Apple, Google, and all other platforms, but an archive remained on the

official YouTube channel, *PowerfulJRE*, until December 30, 2020. Episodes are free on Spotify,

like they have been elsewhere since he first began production in 2009. Interview segment clips

are still posted to the YouTube channel, a practice that has been in place since at least 2017. This

is presumably to advertise the full episodes and highlight the moments that Rogan's producer

(Jamie Vernon) feel are most memorable or worthwhile for audiences.

4.3.2. JRE Clip Selection Process

Because of the large catalog of JRE #MeToo clip discourse offered on YouTube, and the

lack of access to segment-clips on any other platform, this study feels the platform serves as an

appropriate medium for analysis. Full episodes, which are available on Spotify, typically range

anywhere between 1.5 and 3 hours long. Reviewing multi-hour interviews for potential moments

of discussion on #MeToo would add significant research time and limit the number of comedians

that can be feasibly reviewed. YouTube clips, then, serve as the most appropriate content for

multi-text analysis.

On top of this, when compared to Spotify, Apple, and Google, YouTube is the platform

most similar to a social network. This is important to consider, and provides a reason for fixed

attention on YouTube discourse, if we accept that social networks tend user's toward

reinforcement of media selectivity and subsequent attitude reinforcement (through algorithmic

processes such as recommendations based on subscriptions and "likes", or group processes such

as commenting, discussion, and sharing) (Feldman et al., 2014).

In regard to selecting the most appropriate *JRE* YouTube clips for analysis, I should first

note that comedian commentary on #MeToo appears to be generally popular on YouTube, and

more specifically, *JRE* is the most frequent comedian commentary platform to come up in #MeToo YouTube searches. Indeed, when a user searches "#MeToo" on YouTube[5,6,7] (with a filter for most viewed videos from top-to-bottom), twelve of the top 50 videos are of comedian commentary on the #MeToo movement. Five of those twelve are specifically of SCP commentary. Further, three of those five SCP clips are from *JRE*. The three *JRE* clips are from full-length episodes of Joe Rogan interviewing standup comedians Erik Griffin, Bill Maher (now the host of *Real Time w/ Bill Maher* on HBO, but career began in standup), and Neal Brennan (also the co-creator of *The Chappelle Show*), respectively.

The three *JRE* interview clips found in the top 50 "#MeToo" YouTube titles may offer some insight into SCP responses to #MeToo, but it still does not capture enough of the most popular SCP voices. When searching exclusively for "Joe Rogan #MeToo" or "#MeToo Joe Rogan," there is a whole new pool of selectable *JRE* clips. For purposes of social relevance, this study chooses to examine the 12 most popular (most viewed) clips. I do not limit analysis to a "Top 10" because two additional clips are added for contextual reasons: One clip adds a second female comedian perspective (Whitney Cummings; clip #4); A second clip from Neal Brennan's Dec. 14 interview is also included to ensure his fuller #MeToo perspective was given.

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[5] As of August 2nd, 2020.

[6] Results on YouTube automatically adjusted to also include titles without the hashtag, i.e., with "MeToo" rather than "#MeToo."

[7] It is important to consider algorithmic effects. When clicking on even just one YouTube video, the algorithm may take effect and drastically alter results, pushing "similar" videos to the top of the list. When searching on YouTube, I made sure to use a virtual private network (VPN) and searched without a signed-in YouTube/Google account. I also restarted my browser and connected to a different VPN before each new search. This ensured that recommendation algorithms took minimal effect.

Below is the list, ordered chronologically by clip release date to capture any evolution in thought from the host, Joe Rogan, and any reoccurring guests. The list includes discourse from Rogan and ten other popular American standup comedians.[8,9]

1. "Joe Rogan on Louis CK," featuring **Iliza Shlesinger** (~1.84 million views as of August 2020; published Nov 14, 2017).
2. "Joe Rogan on Potential #MeToo Backlash," featuring **Neal Brennan** (~1.06 million; Dec 14, 2017)
3. "Joe Rogan – Neal Brennan Gives His Take on Louis CK," featuring **Neal Brennan** (~1.04 million; Dec 14, 2017)
4. "Joe Rogan on the Aziz Ansari Story," featuring **Whitney Cummings** (~869,000; Jan 23, 2018).
5. "Joe Rogan - #MeToo Has Become a Witch Hunt," featuring **Erik Griffin** (~1.74 million; June 4, 2018).
6. "Joe Rogan – Everybody Knew About Harvey Weinstein," featuring **Joey Diaz** (~2.05 million; July 4, 2018).
7. "Joe Rogan - Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**,"** featuring **Ari Shaffir** (~1.1 million; Oct 21, 2018).
8. "Bill Burr GOES OFF on Outrage Culture," featuring **Bill Burr** (~5.86 million; Dec 20, 2018).
9. "Joe Rogan on Weak Men and Harvey Weinstein," featuring **Andrew Schultz** (~1.64 million; March 14, 2019).
10. "Joe Rogan – The Power Hot Women Have Over Ugly Men," featuring **Ron White** (~2.9 million; March 19, 2019).
11. "No, It's Not 'All Men'," featuring **Iliza Shlesinger** (~2.4 million; Dec 16, 2019).
12. "Bill Maher on Louis C.K. and the #metoo Movement," featuring **Bill Maher** (~1.3 million; Jan 17, 2020).

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[8] There are many other clips excluded from analysis that have provoking titles. For feasibility purposes and time constraints, I chose to analyze the most viewed #MeToo standup comedian commentary clips from JRE. Future research might do well to review the JRE's lesser viewed clips on #MeToo (ranging from 150k to 1.5 million views). See Appendix A for list. Analysis of these and other less popular clips may allow for contriving a more holistic understanding of Rogan's public views on #MeToo, and would widen the sample of standup comedians who have shared their #MeToo views on Rogan's podcast. I suggest maintaining the chronological order of analysis, to best explore the evolution of Rogan and his reoccurring guest's opinions.

[9] Erik Griffin, Joey Diaz and Ari Shaffir are the only three POC standup comedian perspectives that I could find from the JRE database relevant to #MeToo commentary. Whitney Cummings and Iliza Shlesinger represent the two female standup comedian perspectives. Nikki Glasser is one other female standup comedian who has discussed #MeToo on JRE. Her clip was left out of analysis due to low view count and my own time constraints.

CHAPTER 5: Results

The goal of this research was to analyze reactions to #MeToo, an ongoing discursive, cultural phenomenon. More specifically, the goal of this research was to analyze reactions to #MeToo accusations or movement discourse supporting those #MeToo accusations. At the height of the #MeToo era (October 2017 – 2019), we can safely say there was plenty of commentary and reaction in the media, and more generally, in public discourse. As a critical discourse moment, #MeToo renewed the debate of appropriate sexual conduct and appropriate handling of inappropriate sexual conduct. Sexual misconduct allegations and their handlings became an exigence that spurred reaction and dispute. Reaction, here, does not necessarily constitute a negative sentiment. This study simply uses the notion of reaction as an action that is contingent on a previous action, or in other words, a response to a stimulus.

In the instance of discourse, the speech-reaction is contingent upon the previous speech-act. That is, the person or group discursively reacting is compelled to speak because of (or, in response to) a previous person or group's speech-act. We can consider the words of sexual misconduct accusers (and their supporter's words) the original, #MeToo movement speech-acts. We can then consider commentary on these words the reaction. If we were to look at this from another angle, we might say that the original speech-act of an accuser is itself a reaction to perceiving an experience of sexual misconduct. This is true, but let's not confuse what kind of reaction this study is looking at. To reiterate, we are looking at a discursive reaction to a discursive act; a speech-reaction to a speech-act. In this sense, a reaction is not *necessarily* reactionary (in the politically or ideologically resistant sense).

Finally, this thesis hopes to examine #MeToo reactions and make sense of it, keeping in mind the question of whether or not the reactor's commentary to #MeToo should be considered a

discursive backlash or a discursive attempt to accept #MeToo's calls for action (listen, reflect,

change). When a given reactor to the #MeToo movement offers negative commentary on a

media platform (i.e., for an audience), there may be better argument for calling their commentary

a discursive backlash, or at the least, as having the potential to contribute to a backlash

(Mansbridge and Shames, 2008).

5.1. Discourse Structure and Themes

Between late 2017 and early 2020, SCPs discussed the #MeToo movement on many

occasions, with the most viewed discussions airing on *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Thematic

analysis of transcripts from the twelve most popular *JRE* #MeToo conversations reveals that the

discourse typically revolved around whether or not the #MeToo movement went 'too far', or,

whether or not reactions to a specific, high-profile #MeToo case went 'too far.' More

specifically, each clip centered on whether some sexually violent actor deserves the criminal

liability, career jeopardization, and/or social excommunication that they have received at the

behest of legal teams, employers, and/or #MeToo activists. In other words, the *JRE* discussions

tended to center around whether sexually violent actors deserve to be 'cancelled' (i.e., having

their professional careers and personal lives tarnished due to their sexual behavior). This is their

discursive holy grail when suggesting that "#MeToo has gone too far," and it appears to be their

frame of mind when confronted with new #MeToo allegations to comment on. Here, victimhood

shifts from the accuser to the accused. If the accused gets ostracized without due process, they

become the victims of #MeToo, of Cancel Culture. In doing so, popular discussion shifts from

celebrating #MeToo to condemning it as hasty and misguided. The comedians are not alone in

their belief; 51% of men and 36% of women in the U.S. believed that the movement had gone

too far (Pew Research Center, 2018). The comedians are also not alone in their confusion over

what deserved to be called sexual assault or harassment, or further, what legal or social

punishments are deserved. In another poll, 56% of Republicans and 39% of Democrats found it

difficult to know what is considered sexual assault (Ipsos, 2018).

Interpretive analysis of clip transcripts further showed three central themes, or topics, that

the SCPs discussed as a way to respond to their broader question of whether or not the

movement went too far: 1. On the accused/perpetrator (and predatorial men in general); 2. On the

accuser/victim (and the plight of women in general); and 3. On the public reactions to the

accusation/s. The three themes can be summarized as follows: 1. Discussions on the accused

explored the nature of sexual predators, men more generally, and whether or not the person

accused of predatorial sexual behavior deserves social and legal repercussion, and to what

degree; 2. Discussions on the accuser explored the motives of their accusations, the validity of

the motives and/or accusations, and the nature of women's struggle in the sexual sphere; 3.

Discussions on the public reactions to #MeToo accusations explored the nature of social justice

and activism, of the legal system, and whether or not such social and legal reactions are

appropriate relative to the accusation and/or conviction.

A rhetorical frame analysis of these three themes answers the questions of whether and

how the standup comedian podcasters aggressively resisted #MeToo calls for action. Along the

way, it explores in what ways the accused, the accuser, and the public reactions were framed,

what framing strategies were used, and how various frames compete, contradict, or complement

each other. After responding to inquiries such as these, the study can then move into critical

discussion of the relationship between SCP reactions, social identity, and social movement

backlash.[10] For example, what socio-political standpoints might their reactions reveal? In other words, how do their reactions, if at all, address power in sexual relations or a desire to maintain or reform sexual relations?

At face value—that is, based merely on the titles of each of the SCP #MeToo clips—the SCP response to #MeToo is clear: The movement went too far. Take for example, the *JRE* clip titles "#MeToo Has Become a Witch Hunt", "Joe Rogan on the Downside of #MeToo", "The Louis CK Backlash was Disingenuous", and "Joe Rogan – The Problem with Believing All Victims." If the study were to stop the analytical digging here, it might conclude that Joe Rogan thought #MeToo went too far, and that he and his SCP friends took part in a discursive resistance to the movement on his podcast. After a more rigorous thematic and framing analysis of the text transcripts, though, this study reveals a more nuanced perspective, as suggested by my detailed analysis in the next section.

5.2. Rhetorical Framing Analysis: Standup Comedian Podcaster Framing of #MeToo

As noted in Section 3.2, the central idea behind framing is about making certain thoughts, information and feelings more salient than others in news or commentary discourses on current events. It does not need to be a conscious decision for the framing to influence the listener. Regardless of intent, the ideas that are made more salient by media (for example, accused as victims of Cancel Culture) can affect public perception of what the current event or phenomenon is about. The perception can, in turn, influence people's own attitudes about the phenomenon, and perhaps, their own behaviors related to that phenomenon. This is important if we consider that most *JRE* listeners are young men in the prime of their dating lives. In the analysis below,

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[10] Before reading the remainder of this results section, please consider reviewing the simplified timeline of #MeToo moments found at the end of this paper in the appendix (Gibson et al., 2019; Nicolaou & Smith, 2019). It may help further contextualize certain details of the JRE conversations that are reviewed.

this study ties the framing strategies emphasized in the literature review to the three SCP #MeToo discourse themes in order to explain how those themes were framed. Upon completion of the analysis, a discussion will take place exploring the role of social identities and groups in SCP framing of the movement.

5.2.1. On the Accused

SCP discourse created a sense for the audience that when talking about an accused male celebrity's #MeToo case, the relationship that the accused celebrity has to the commentator matters. That is, at least for the standup comedian podcaster, the relationship between themselves and the accused seems to guide their sense-making of the case and their framing of that case for their audience. Further, the discourse constructs a frame of reality that too many men have become victims of #MeToo, undeservingly losing their careers and status. We can call this the Male Victim frame. Lastly, the discussion of accused men creates a sense that men have a natural (i.e., evolutionary) predisposition to predatorial and violent sexual behavior, which is called an external attribution frame. These attribution, or causal, frames, as noted in Section 3.2, typically are used not to justify predatorial actions but to attempt to explain their origin or causality. The discussion below further details each of the above-mentioned frames on the accused, perpetrator, and the (naturally) predatorial man.

Modesty frame: The accused (comedian or friend) as deserving of respect

Regarding the notion that the relationship between the standup comedian podcaster and the accused man guides the podcaster's commentary, the texts reveal that standup comedians need to have each other's backs (i.e., be respectful and take care of each other). This maxim especially guides the standup comedian podcaster's commentary on fellow standup comedian Louis CK's #MeToo case. As noted in the simplified #MeToo timeline (see Appendix B for a

more detailed explanation of standup comedian #MeToo allegations)[11], CK faced public backlash and career ostracism for coercing women into allowing him to masturbate in their presence. For comedian podcasters like Iliza Shlesinger, Joe Rogan, Neal Brennan and Joey Diaz, when confronted with the opportunity to ostracize CK or to provide any insightful details to the public on his life, the comedians tend to appeal to cultural mores of loyalty and reservation, as opposed to what they consider appeals to hostility and gossip.

For Rogan, specifically, who claims to not know CK well or have insights into his personal life, there is a desire to maintain a level of respect for the fellow comedian, whether that comedian is a friend or not. Shlesinger similarly proclaims that she doesn't want to spread hate towards CK out of respect, and that she doesn't "want to be part of that story just for the sake of it." Rogan agrees and takes the commitment to modesty a step further, suggesting that even if he did know CK or have insights on his life that may be worthwhile for the sake of public knowledge, he "would never throw him under the bus…that's just the way it is, there is no other way around it." He uses his close friendship with comedian Joey Diaz to exemplify this suggestion: "If Joey Diaz did something f*cked up, and people wanted me to comment—first of all, I would never say anything bad, no matter what Joey Diaz did."

Here, then, we see that one of the central frames for discussing the accused/perpetrator was that regardless of the accused's behavior, ridiculing someone publicly is morally reprehensible (Modesty frame). The SCP belief in respect and modesty became a frame of mind for them when taking in new #MeToo stories/accusations, especially if the accused was a friend or colleague. In order to convey this Modesty frame, SCPs like Rogan, Shlesinger, Brennan and Diaz used the framing strategies of comparison, exemplification and traditional appeal.

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[11] Please see Appendix B for a chronological list of #MeToo events and further details on the #MeToo allegations of standup comedians Bill Cosby, Louis CK and Aziz Ansari.

Comparison and exemplification operated together, in the sense that Rogan compared the subject story of talking about Louis CK's sexual behavior to a personal story about Joey Diaz, where the personal story served as an exemplar for how to react to the subject story (Zillmann, 1999). Rogan used the hypothetical story of not ridiculing his friend Joey Diaz if he ever committed a violent act in order to explain that he similarly will not ridicule C.K. Secondly, in ascribing that "that's just the way it is," Rogan frames his decision as based on a moral principle which he cannot break. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) note this rationale as a powerful framing strategy in which the rhetor appeals to tradition or cultural mores to persuasively explain their behavior. We can generally relate this back to the #MeToo movement to suggest that at least some of the SCPs make sense of #MeToo in terms of respect versus hostility towards the accused men.

Male Victim frame: The accused as victims of Cancel Culture

One month after Rogan's November 2017 discussion with Shlesinger, he invited on standup comedian Neal Brennan. In their conversation, Rogan makes the argument that there are both honest and dishonest women who accuse men of sexual misconduct, and that "it's devasting" when men's lives are ruined after not doing anything wrong. Here, Rogan and his comedian podcaster guests tend to highlight those cases where, to them, the man is undeserving of accusation and ostracism. Louis CK again becomes the basis for #MeToo commentary in this conversation, with CK being represented as someone who was undeserving of the public outcry and the "cancellation" from Netflix and other cultural industry platforms. Rogan and Brennan make the claim that CK was perhaps someone swept into a #MeToo "ripple effect," where because of the outrage that erupted from the extreme #MeToo cases like Harvey Weinstein's or Bill Cosby's, anything else related to sexual misconduct, whether rape, harassment or coercion, becomes fodder for public cancellation of the celebrity.

Brennan and Rogan further suggest in their December 2018 conversation that former NBC journalist Matt Lauer is another person underserving of cancellation, amidst allegations that he coerced subordinate staffers to have sex with him in his office. To both podcasters, the actions of CK and Lauer are much less severe and much less deserving of ostracism than accused men like Weinstein or Cosby, whose actions were more explicitly criminal under legal definition. Indeed, to Rogan, CK's actions were "nothing like Cosby," rather, they were just "gross," "weird," and "pathetic." Rogan even suggests that CK acknowledges his own gross behavior to such an extent that he is a "prisoner" of his past actions: "He's like, *I am a prisoner to some shit that I used to do*." Here, Rogan makes CK a victim of his own actions, suggesting that CK is hard on himself and that his reflection on his behavior is paramount to justice for the real victims. Rogan and Brennan make these claims that CK's actions haunt his memory, and that "he's not a bad person," despite repeatedly stating sentiments like, "I don't know him very well," and, "[I] don't know what really happened."

By June 2018, Rogan and his standup comedian podcaster guests began doubling down on their claims that Weinstein and Cosby's actions are the worst of the #MeToo era, and that the murkier cases like those of comedians CK and Ansari deserve much more nuanced consideration of case details before making judgement. "The most egregious case is obviously Cosby…it's horrible...that's the worst version of it," says Rogan, regarding the deplorable and overt sexual misconduct clearly seen in his case. On the other hand, Rogan also agrees with comedian guest Erik Griffin when he suggests that Ansari's case is merely "just about him not being a gentleman." Rogan similarly proclaims that, "She [the accuser] was just grossed out by it and decided to go after him." Here, he hits on the line of thought that some women are out to "take down" any men who make them feel uncomfortable. This notion will be more rigorously

explored in this study's next section, "On the accuser." For now, it is important to note that Ansari and CK are often bundled together by the *JRE* standup comedian podcaster, as representatives of those #MeToo cases where men got wrongly attacked by the public.

In Rogan's July 2018 discussion with friend and fellow standup comedian podcaster Joey Diaz, other actors and personalities, such as comedian Tom Sizemore, comedian Chris Hardwick, and radio host Garrison Keillor, are similarly represented as men who got "#MeToo'd" unfairly. Sizemore, accused of molesting an 11 year old in the early 2000s, is specifically represented by Diaz as someone whose battle with drug addiction makes him unaccountable to his past behaviors. To Diaz, Sizemore was "known as a heroin addict" in the 2000s, and as such, his behavior can be explained away as happening during a dark time in his life: "That guy has been a junkie for 2000 years…All of the sudden, girl comes up, 'yeah he molested me on a movie set when I was 11,' That's great and dandy, dog, but you can't ruin somebody's life now." It's likely Diaz isn't alone in this view. Remember, as noted in the literature review, a Pew study found that 40% of men and 20% of women believe allegations are less relevant if they are from years ago (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Ultimately, Diaz is victimizing Sizemore as underserving of public scrutiny, shifting the blame onto the true victim and representing her as irrational and vengeful (this representation of the accused will be further explored in the next section). Diaz, further, worries about getting #MeToo'd himself: "If you want to come at me for sucking my d*ck in 2002, when we were both doing blow [cocaine], go ahead!...But I want to see footage." Again, Diaz tries to argue that past actions, especially when driven by drug abuse, should not result in cancellation, especially without evidence.

In the most recent *JRE* standup comedian podcaster discussion of #MeToo (January 2020), Rogan talks with Bill Maher, standup comedian and host of HBO's political talk show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*. A large proportion of the clip focuses on the plight of CK. Regarding the idea that CK could come out in public and defend himself against "lies", Maher says that "What's unfair is that he cannot say it…If you engage and defend yourself and correct the record, then you make it worse." Rogan agrees, saying, "They'll come at you harder." Here, Maher and Rogan are presumably referring to the #MeToo activists in the media, whether social media or traditional news commentary.

In summary, then, one of the central frames for discussing the accused/perpetrator was through the lens of victimization and Cancel Culture (Male Victim frame). SCP discourse constructed a frame of reality that too many men have become victims of #MeToo, undeservingly losing their careers and status at the behest of hasty online judgement. In order to frame the accused/perpetrator in such a light, SCPs used the framing strategies of comparison and contrast, external attributions, buzzwords, and exemplification. By comparing C.K. and Ansari's cases to Weinstein and Cosby, SCPs make the behavior of CK and Ansari seem less negative and consequential, leading to a conclusion that they deserve less scrutiny and social repercussion. As a result, CK and Ansari are considered victims of #MeToo and Cancel Culture, given the heavy scrutiny and repercussions they have face.

Another central framing strategy for instilling the Male Victim frame was through external attribution strategies. External attribution strategies will be further explored in the following section, but it is notable now for assisting, or complimenting, the Male Victim Frame. For instance, Joey Diaz sees that he, Sizemore, and others in similar positions should not be persecuted for actions that took place under the influence of drugs many years ago. Instead of

personal responsibility, Diaz argues to an amiable Rogan that drug use—and the personal and social violence that can come from it—is to be blamed as an environmental factor out of one's control (White, 1990; Sun et al., 2015).

Lastly, through repeated emphasis on examples of the accused as victims of #MeToo (i.e., as getting '#MeToo'd), SCPs took part in a resistance to interpretations of #MeToo as a time for feminist hope and justice in gender relations. This resistance manifested in an exemplification effect where examples of the accused as victims of deceit became the central focus for understanding #MeToo as a phenomenon. In this sense, SCP discourse on #MeToo potentially cued audiences to similarly think of #MeToo as an overwhelmingly misguided movement motivated by vengeful or petty women. Relatedly, references to Cancel Culture arguably serve as a buzzword or ideograph for the SCP's audience (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; McGee, 1980), eliciting familiar feelings of disdain for hasty, unreasonable online activists (Lewis, 2019).

This analysis has so far discussed how the standup comedian podcasters frames themselves as respectful and unwilling to talk negatively about friends or colleagues accused of sexual misconduct. It has also discussed how the standup comedian podcaster often frames accused men as the unjust victims of #MeToo Cancel Culture. Now, the study can turn to the standup comedian podcaster's framing of the predatorial man's actions as either natural to their male condition or a product of their environment (causal frame).

Causal frame: The predator-perpetrator as naturally male and/or poorly nurtured

By December of 2017, Rogan and his guests began offering explanations for the predatorial behavior of accused men. In a sense, it soon became one of the central frames on *The Joe Rogan Experience* for SCPs talking about #MeToo. Why do sexual assaults, harassment, and

coercions take place? This is the implicit, or explicit, question of causality behind the *dominant* SCP framing of #MeToo as a phenomenon resulting from male's predatorial (natural or environmental) condition. As natural and environmental conditions are seen as external factors influencing individual behavior, reference to such conditions as an explanation for perpetuated sexual violence against women serves as an external causal attribution frame. In other instances, SCPs engaged in internal causal attribution, like when emphasizing personal agency or responsibility, but such framing happened less often.

In the earliest instance of this framing, Rogan sees that men who get perpetually rejected by women tend to generally associate women with negative feelings, and as such, those men "become more bitter" and sexually aggressive, overtime. When talking with Brennan on December 14, 2018, Rogan brings in the metaphor that "men look at women like they're trying to score on a team." Brennan responds with his own metaphor about how the relationship between men and women is like the relationship between America and Saudi Arabia: Americans get angry at Saudi Arabians because "they won't give us the f*cking oil! They don't want to give it to you. But that doesn't mean their shitty." He goes on to make the connection to women: "She probably didn't want [sex], but it makes guys—it hurts their feelings—and it makes them crazy." Rogan then responds by explaining that "it deals with these evolutionary mechanisms that are designed to make sure we bread," to which Brennan agrees. The two reasons—that males become bitter and sexually violent over time due to female rejection over the same time (environmental attribution), and that through natural evolution males have treated females as opponents or objects to conquer—together serve as external causal frames for making sense of the phenomenon of aggressive male behavior.

Similar to the notion of "conquering" women, the SCPs on Rogan's program also frame #MeToo as a problem related to male's conquest for power. Why do people like power? To the podcasters, it's natural that power-hungry people like Harvey Weinstein have existed and will continue to exist; people want power and control and the capacity to do what they please. The argument further goes that certain people, for whatever reason, feed on their power cravings: "If you like power, why do you like that power? What are you getting out of that power…? You're getting p*ssy. That's what you're getting" (Rogan). Comedian Andrew Schultz responds that, "It's not even about the p*ssy. It's about power." Therefore, according to Rogan and Schultz at least, men want to physically abuse women not because they want them sexually, but because they want to exhibit power for power's sake (power-as-capacity; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008).

Other examples of external causal attribution of predatorial behavior come from Rogan's separate conversations with comedians Brennan, Shlesinger, Cummings and Shaffir about sexual misconduct in the workplace environment. To all five of them, the present state of the work environment fails to constrain predatorial behavior. For Cummings, sexual abuses of power in the workplace won't stop or go away "until dating people you work with is illegal." Further, when Rogan says that the workplace "becomes your entire eco-system," Brennan agrees and suggests that it's one of the only places to meet people, and as such, there is bound to be sexual tension in the environment.

In a later conversation with comedian Ari Shaffir in October 2018, Rogan builds off the eco-system argument: "The real sexism, especially for women, is having to work with a bunch of people who are trying to f*ck you all time." Here, Rogan suggests a nature of barbarism in many men; they cannot turn off their sexual fervor and in turn they may revert to predatorial behavior,

especially when they originally do not get what they want. He goes on to also blame the time and space of the work environment:

> You think about how many hours are in a day. You have 24 hours, 8 of them you're sleeping. Most of your day is at work. So, your life is not with your spouse…you're interacting with [opposite sex colleagues] in a disproportionate way.

Comedian Whitney Cummings contrasts this, seeing sexual misconduct not only as the product of workplace environment or men's natural need/desire for conquest but also as the product of biological nature of male perception and emotional intelligence. Cummings, citing studies and a research documentary film project she's a part of, believes that men on average are anatomically less able than women to read emotional cues on faces:

> Men are designed to…see movement and to hunt…You're not designed to sort of read, like, *oh, is she frustrated or angry?*....A lot of guys can't understand that there's a discrepancy between *what* I'm saying and *how* I'm saying it.

Regardless of the environment of the workplace or the biology of men, the arguments fall in line with Rogan's rationale that men and women have a difficult time working together because of (biologically or culturally) evolutionary traits revolving around sex. In other words, the standup comedian podcasters normalize predatorial behavior as an effect of evolution. Or, in Ari Shaffir's words: "We're monkeys." Principally, Cummings, Rogan, Brennan and Shaffir each argue that due to a "natural" sexual tension between males and females when they are in the same space for long periods of time, the existing dominant structure of workplace environments—one in which males and females coalesce—needs to be dramatically altered if society wants to see less sexual violence in workplaces.

In the above instances, standup comedian podcasters are making ontological claims about the male sex to—as Section 3.2. anticipates—argue that sexual misconduct, while morally

deplorably, will remain unavoidable in society as part of the human condition. It is a frame that attributes the cause of sexual misconducts to external factors (i.e., natural or environmental factors outside of the male sex's control; White, 1990). Unfortunately, as Sun et al. (2015) and Weiner (2006) note, repetitive externalization of problematic male group behavior in interpersonal or public discourse can also tend towards rendering the problem of sexual misconduct perceivably unsolvable, and thus, unworthy of critical attention. On top of this, when external factors are perceived to be the greatest cause for cruelty or violence, the perceived proper punishment or repercussions for such actions tend to drop in severity. This relates to the SCP's broader question of whether or not #MeToo went too far because someone who blames sexually inappropriate behaviors on external factors may also more likely believe that punishing, or 'cancelling,' men accused of sexual misconduct is unfair.

Ultimately, while the standup comedian podcasters spend much time explaining the reason for predatorial male behavior, they acknowledge the difficulty of coming up with a solution(s). One solution, according to Rogan, is that men need to stop being "bitches." At this point, then, Rogan shifts to internal attribution. He sees rapists and impulsively violent men as "weak" and "insecure," and that the antidote to men being "bitches" is "to be a strong man." With his previous framing of the problem highlighting his ontological beliefs about the male sex's desire for sexual conquest, and with his solution highlighting his ontological beliefs about men as a gender needing to be emotionally strong and secure, there appears a contradiction in that Rogan is attributing external causes to sexual misconduct by way of naturalizing male sex's predatorial behavior, while also attributing personal causes by way of blaming the weak and insecure—but malleable—characters of predatorial men. As White (1990) notes though,

sometimes neither "internal [n]or external causes [can] be sufficient alone," rather, it's possible "they interact in the production of effect" (p. 15).

5.2.2. On the Accuser

The second theme that emerged from transcript analysis focused on the (female) accuser. In this theme, two frames emerged. In the first frame, discussion on women who accused men of sexual misconduct in the #MeToo era created a sense for the *JRE* audience that despite important victories for many women who suffered from sexual violence, too many women in the #MeToo era have been deceptive and vengeful. The SCP discourse here constructed a frame of reality that many alleged victim's deserve higher suspicion and scrutiny. We can call this the Scrutiny frame. Contrasting this critical frame though, the podcasters can also be seen framing women as undeservedly suffering from a vulnerability and plight of life owing to the predatorial behavior of men and existing hegemonic understandings of appropriate sexual conduct. We can call this the Empathy frame.

Scrutiny frame: The accusers as vengeful, deceptive, and deserving of suspicion

The first noteworthy frame of the SCP's discussion on sexual misconduct accusers, the Scrutiny frame, regards the notion that some accusers of sexual misconduct are deceptive and vengeful, and therefore, new allegations must be heavily scrutinized. Once again, SCPs are seen interpreting #MeToo through the articulation of rare examples—credible or otherwise—of female deception and vengeance. Exemplification, as previously noted, potentially creates a distorted understanding of current events for both the people sharing the examples and the people consuming them (Bigsby et al., 2019; Zillmann, 1999).

Comedian Aziz Ansari's case, as well as a number of college campus cases, became the basis for Rogan's speculation of deceptive women in gender relations (see Appendix B for more

detail on Ansari's #MeToo case). In the previous section, this study noted that comedian Erik Griffin sees Ansari's behavior as a matter of being perverted and ungentlemanly, but not deserving of scrutinization to the point of cancellation. Rogan agrees with this sentiment, but takes it further in his discussion with comedian Whitney Cummings, turning the spotlight onto his perceptions of the accuser's cruel behavior.

For instance, to Rogan, the anonymous woman who wrote the blog post detailing her experience with Ansari acted in poor judgement and tried to ruin Ansari's career simply because she had a bad, uncomfortable date with him. He describes the treatment of Ansari as cruel and synonymous to revenge porn: "You don't have to try to tank the guy's life from a bad date…It sounds like it sucked, but…this is, like, poor judgement, and cruelty!" In his conversation with Griffin, Rogan similarly states, "That girl writes that crazy f*cking story…She was just grossed out about by it and decided to go after him." Rogan then exemplifies the Ansari case for the broader #MeToo culture, suggesting that, "You're going to have a certain percentage of human beings that are deceptive," lying that they were raped in order to get money, attention, or carry out a "vendetta." This is a line of thought that Rogan has kept since at least January 2018; the idea that some women are out to take down any men who make them feel uncomfortable.

In addition to using Ansari's celebrity case as a basis for understanding the #MeToo movement more generally, Rogan introduces a number of college campus cases to the discussion, becoming another basis for his general suspicion of alleged victims. Through proliferation on *JRE*, these examples may have further resulted in an exemplification effect as *JRE* audiences attempt to make sense of #MeToo themselves. The college campus cases used are Title IX-related cases from both before and during the #MeToo era (2017-2020). These cases are used to explain how in instances of young adult sex where alcohol is involved, some accusers of

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rape lie or are persuaded by their friends to change their perceptions of reality (i.e., of what *really* happened). In this process of persuasion, Rogan sees that the female's friends pressure her into victimizing herself and coming forward with an accusation. The central case driving this viewpoint of Rogan's is the Occidental College story, a story Rogan has been reiterating on his podcast since at least May 16, 2015 (*JRE* #553), where:

> [A] boy and girl get drunk. Text each other back and forth: 'I'm coming over. Do you have condoms?' She comes over. They have sex with each other, and then her friends convince her that because she was drunk, she could not consent, and that it's rape…You remember that was a big thing for a while? That if you're drunk, you can't consent. It was, like, for a year or two, they tried to push that. Until they realized, *oh my god, that makes everyone a rapist*.

The male student in this case got expelled from Occidental's campus, sued the college, and won. According to Rogan, this pre-#MeToo case is representative of why #MeToo should expect a backlash. The Title IX program, according to Rogan's interpretation of a *Politico* article, expels or severely suspends students instantly, upon being accused of sexual misconduct by another student. Rogan highlights that the writer of the article claims a legal backlash is expected and already playing out on some college campuses.

Another proliferated example of such backlash is the Columbia University story where a female student was sexting with a male student and told him to "bring condoms" when he said he was coming over. The next morning, after a night of sex, she accused him of rape, and he was quickly expelled. Similar to the Occidental College case, the male student's family sued the school and won, putting a sour reputation on the implementation of Title IX. By spending extended time on relaying these cases though, Rogan creates a sense for the *JRE* audience that people should not "believe all women" in the #MeToo era. It further creates the sense that

#MeToo and Title IX is overwhelmingly bad for the country because it allows for women to manipulate the law in their favor, whether it be for attention or exacting revenge.

On this notion that people should not believe all women, Rogan quotes his talk-radio friend Anthony Cumia as saying, "Calling all women liars is just as crazy as saying that all women tell the truth." The line of thinking hints at a quest for scrutinization and nuanced consideration of #MeToo-era allegations—hence the Scrutiny frame label—rather than taking an extremist position of all women as honest or all women as lairs. Similarly, Comedian Neal Brennan says that, "It becomes a 'he said, she said' thing. There's no evidence that she said no. You know what I mean?"

Brennan, in contrast to other SCPs, also speaks on the possibility of the misrepresentation of cases and the missed opportunity to talk about the liberatory nature of the #MeToo movement. On talking about such cases where the accuser is lying, Brennan notes that, "The only thing that bothers me about even talking about [the college cases] is it makes the story about lying women, which is just f*cking not—they're the outliers!" Brennan, here, appears to acknowledge the exemplification effect that this study already noted throughout to be a central part of the SCP framing strategy (Bigsby et al., 2019; Zillmann, 1999). The exemplification effect of Rogan's and others' repeated stories may lead audiences to generalize the untruthfulness of the accuser in these cases to the accusers in all cases.

Empathy frame: The plight of women from hegemony (or, In defense of #MeToo)

Brennan's response above marks a crucial intervention by some of the standup comedian podcasters on *JRE* to reframe the #MeToo movement as appropriate, necessary, and overdue. Despite Rogan and some of his SCP guests' fervent attempts at framing #MeToo as a movement deserving of suspicion, as unfair, or as going 'too far,' Rogan and guests can also be seen

framing women as sincere victims deserving of empathy. In many moments of *JRE* discourse, the plight of women takes the forefront, even if momentarily. These moments, labeled as Empathy framing, typically explore how the vulnerability and plight of women is centrally due to hegemonic pressures like predatorial male behavior and oppressive views of appropriate sexual conduct, as well as public stigmatization and judgement towards victims of sexual violence.

For example, Rogan touches on why many women don't report sexual assault or harassment to the police. He notes that in some college campus assault cases, the woman ends up not pressing charges and nothing happens in the realm of law. He also discusses how "the number of rapes that get reported versus the number of rapes that don't get reported" means there are likely more rapes than we seen in state or NGO statistics. On why women don't report more often, Rogan and Brennan suggest that it's due to the social stigmatization, judgement and negative attention, as well as the psychological stress of having to center one's life around police officers, lawyers and court dates for an extended period of time after the initial report filing. Likewise, on this notion of post-assault stress, comedian Neal Brennan sees rape as "like a horrible car accident," because the victim did nothing wrong but has to deal with the repercussions for many months or years.

Rogan also shares with the *JRE* audience a conversation that he had with comedian Iliza Shlesinger regarding hegemonic male behavior. He notes that, "Men would say things to her when she first started out [in standup comedy]…and these guys were, like, established guys, and they would treat her as if *you're below me and you're always going to be below me, so I can do whatever I want. Because you're less than me."* In this sense, Rogan frames #MeToo and sexual assault as an issue of gender inequality and male urgency for maintaining power-as-capacity. On

this note, Rogan can also be heard later stating that, "Feminism in general is a direct result of a failure by men to be fair and a failure…to raise actual men who treat everybody with respect."

Further, and again on this issue of the cruel hegemony of men who seek to exert power over women, Rogan refers to Bill Cosby's rohypnol drugging behaviors when talking to SCP Ari Shaffir to iterate the difficulty that women have in social settings like bars: "You can't leave your drink alone…That's a reality for a lot of women. That's not a reality for you and me. No one's trying to rape us." Rogan, later, continues expressing concern for the vulnerability of women, stating, "I couldn't imagine being a woman working for a man who wanted to f*ck me and me getting a raise, me getting some upward movement in my career is dependent upon this person making a decision, and this person's always trying to f*ck me?"

For SCP Whitney Cummings, who appeared on *JRE* in January 2018, the #MeToo allegations against Aziz Ansari come to attention and help formulate her rationale for Empathy framing. She believes that the allegations against Ansari represents the natural difficulty of achieving #MeToo's feminist goal of reforming definitions of sexual harassment or coercion. To Cummings, it is difficult to explain the granular and the reasons for the woman's discomfort in sexual encounters like the one that the anonymous accuser had with Ansari. She says that the phenomenon surrounding #MeToo, that of renewed discussions of appropriate sexual behavior, "is so intangible and I think that's why it's hard to explain." She gives an example of the subtly of discomfort and coercion:

> It's like you hug me at the Comedy Store…and it feels different when…Joe Blow [generic male] hugs me. There's something creepy about Joe Blow, and there's something *not* creepy about you. I can't explain it. And I can't tell you why, and I sound crazy, and manic, and histrionic…I'm not saying Aziz is guilty…I don't know. But in my twenties, I felt like I had a lot of sex that I was coerced into, that was transactional sex that I didn't have to have.

Cummings, here, describes transactional sex as a negotiation where women get warned out from the man's sexual insistence and have historically been subjected to having sex for the sake of not coming off as problematic or annoying to the man. Further empathizing with Aziz's accuser and drawing on her own experience as a sexually active twenty-something, Cummings explains:

> I know that in my twenties, when men made physical advances to me, I would be giving off these nonverbal cues, and I wasn't saying no, but my body was saying no. And I'm not saying it's like a guy is supposed to be able to read my body language, but that's what was happening…I froze up because of my trauma response.

In the *JRE* discussion with comedian Erik Griffin on June 4, 2018, Griffin shares a similar perspective to Cumming's; one that reflects the granularity of sexual misconduct and the cognitive difficulty of expressing oneself when feeling uncomfortable. Griffin details a time when he felt he was himself a victim of sexual coercion. He says he was at a bar with some comedians on tour, and they were hanging with some women all night. Griffin wanted to go back to his hotel to sleep and one of the women insisted she walk him back. They get to front door of Griffin's hotel room and he says, "Well, thanks for walking me but I think you should probably—." She cuts him off, saying "no," and that she wants to give him a massage. He replies "no," but she continues persuading him. He lets her into his room. Once there, he again hesitates and says, "Maybe we shouldn't do this." According to him, the woman started to cry and claim that he thought she was hideous. At this point in the story, Griffin says to Rogan that he felt he *had* to have sex with her, "because I don't want to become a cause" of a mental health breakdown. Griffin finishes his story by noting:

> How I apply this to the Aziz [Ansari] situation is the fact that this girl [Ansari's accuser] is in a situation where she feels like, *I guess I have to do this. I may*

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not want to, but—You know? I've been in this situation where I didn't

necessarily want to do it, but I felt like the social pressure of…*I have to follow*

through with what I'm doing right now.

 Rogan, responding to Griffin's story, starts to disagree with Griffin's connection to the

Ansari case: "I don't know. I don't know. We're speculating. We're speculating." Similar to

when Rogan disagreed with comedian Neal Brennan's suggestion that we as a society shouldn't

spend so much discursive time on those few instances where women are dishonest about sexual

assault allegations, Rogan's "I don't know. We're speculating" attacks the credibility of Griffin's

claims that women are often unjustly coerced into having sex. As such, this marks another

framing instance where Rogan publicly rejects #MeToo's call for action to listen to and reflect

on the stories of victims in a way that can challenge hegemonic, black-and-white understandings

of sexual misconduct.

 In summary, on the framing of the #MeToo *accuser*, SCPs typically opted for

scrutinization and skepticism (Scrutiny frame), and provided examples that they felt support this

framing. This is in stark contrast to the dominant frame on the #MeToo *accused*, where Rogan

and others emphasized male victimization and respect for them (Male Victim frame). Ultimately,

whether or not it represents the aspects of a comedian identity keen on offering contrary

viewpoints, SCPs encouraged nuanced consideration of sexual misconduct allegations (Scrutiny

frame) and provided a variety of public examples and personal anecdotes that may have served

to exemplify #MeToo as a movement that overwhelmingly deserves suspicion rather than

celebration. While SCPs like Erik Griffin, Whitney Cummings and Neal Brennan emphasized—

through their own examples and anecdotes—the need to recenter the discussion on female

emancipation from oppressive sexual acts, many SCPs, including Griffin, Cummings and

Brennan themselves, saw #MeToo as tantamount to a hasty injustice, proliferating outlier

examples to make their case while sidelining emancipatory discussions that confront the more common phenomenon of men getting away with sexual misconduct. Ultimately, the calls of hasty injustice aren't far off from metaphorical references to a witch hunt. The phrase, used as the title "#MeToo has become a witch hunt" for the *JRE* clip featuring comedian Erik Griffin, acts as a buzzword (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996) to elicit a frame of mob rule injustice, signaling a negative portrayal of the movement that their discourse further strengthens. As referenced in the literature review, Fileborn and Phillips (2019) note the use of 'witch hunt' theory amongst many opinion leaders and journalists, which may carry the effect of shifting the discourse to focus on the 'unfair' social and career repercussions of the accused men.

5.2.3. On Public Reaction

The third and final theme that emerged from transcript analysis of *JRE* SCP #MeToo discourse was that of examining the public reaction to sexual misconduct allegations in the news. In discussing this theme, two central frames emerged. On one hand, Joe Rogan and his standup comedian guests framed the #MeToo movement as a positive, justified reaction to horrific sexual violence that takes place in a variety of professional industries. Many of the SCPs understood #MeToo as a unique, 21st century movement made possible thanks to interconnectivity and security of social media. We can call this the Digital-Critical Mass frame, wherein the use of social media for sharing traumatic personal experiences is understood as having the ability to bring people with similar experiences together. For #MeToo, the idea behind this framing is that having enough sexual misconduct victims online opening about their experiences results not only in those victims feeling less isolated, but also in raising broader public awareness (as a critical mass of victims and their supporters grabs the attention of popular news outlets). Through the

broader awareness propagated by passionate social media users, some SCPS suggest that a renewed public circulation of debate can take place regarding standards of sexual conduct.

On the other hand, Rogan and the majority of his SCP guests consistently spoke in a negative manner about public *overreaction*. In these moments, which tended to dominate clip conversations, #MeToo was framed in relation to the derogatory Cancel Culture. For nearly all of the SCPs who discussed #MeToo on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, #MeToo and its encompassing movement activism represented hastiness, mob mentality, and lack of due process and nuanced consideration of the full details of each #MeToo case. We can call this the Cancel Culture frame.

Digital-Critical Mass frame: On the digital landscape promoting critical mass organization and reflection

The first frame on public reaction, the Digital-Critical Mass frame, viewed the #MeToo movement with a greater affinity than seen elsewhere in SCP discourse. It is closely related to the Empathy frame on the accuser. SCPs in this frame blessed the power of social media to connect survivors of sexual violence who otherwise feel stigmatized or ostracized into silence. For example, right before first *JRE* YouTube clip to discuss #MeToo ends, comedian Iliza Shlesinger offers a brief theoretical underpinning for why there's so much media attention on predatorial men of power (c. November 14, 2017). Shlesinger expresses disturbance with reactionary anger towards women speaking up, concluding that women are only speaking up now, so suddenly, "because there's safety in numbers and no one would listen before." This is particularly reminiscent of the notion of critical mass theory in social movement scholarship (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Krook, 2015).

Similarly, comedian Whitney Cummings offers an explanation for the question of 'why now?' Why is there attention *now* on predatorial men, especially those in power? Cummings

suggests, "I think women are sort of, like, *I don't want to have that kind of transactional sex anymore*." She goes on to suggest that the internet, particularly social media, makes women and other victims of sexual misconduct comfortable sharing their stories. Erik Griffin, in a later clip, wishes that, "Maybe now, people will have the courage to, like, come out," because of the support of activists, and especially, other survivors. Rogan, similarly, says that previous sexual misconduct victims throughout Hollywood and the entertainment industries failed to speak out about their experience because they were "worried about getting blackballed" (i.e., banished from show-business opportunities). In this sense, Rogan is suggesting that if it weren't for the critical mass of other victims and supporters speaking up, many victims would remain silent.

Cummings also sees that it's important to continue social media and other interpersonal discussion because in order to change hegemonic standards of appropriate sexual behavior, a public circulation of debate must take place. If people feel more comfortable using social media as their discourse platform, then all power to them, both Shlesinger and Cummings suggest. As Cumming notes, "Never before have 10 women all assaulted by the same man been able to meet each other…we're [now] able to find each other online." And as Shlesinger notes, "There's safety in numbers and no one would listen before."

Cummings also suggests that circulation of high-profile sexual misconduct allegations reveals the hegemony of present standards on appropriate (or at the least, overlooked) sexual behavior. A changing or movement of standards becomes noticeable to Cummings specifically through the way culture has reacted to the high-profile allegations. She remarks, "Look, we're just going to have to start talking to each other I guess, and, like, setting expectations… I know. That sounds like a nightmare, doesn't it?". She hints at the belief that its quite uncomfortable to

have these discussions on sexual behavior, but absolutely necessary in order to solve "murky" ambiguities between appropriate and inappropriate encounters.

<u>Cancel Culture frame: On mob mentality and Cancel Culture versus due process and nuanced consideration</u>

The second, noticeably more common frame when discussing the public opinion theme, centered around connecting #MeToo to the pejorative Cancel Culture. The Cancel Culture frame appears closely related to the Scrutiny frame on the accuser and the Male Victim frame on the accused. Under the Scrutiny frame, SCPs noted that allegations should be heavily scrutinized before making judgements with social and legal repercussions. Under the Male Victim frame, if sexual misconduct allegations were not heavily scrutinized before judgement, then the accused male may be considered a victim of #MeToo and/or Cancel Culture. As previously stated, nearly all of the *JRE* SCPs described #MeToo in terms of its hastiness, its mob mentality, and its lack of due process and nuanced consideration of sexual misconduct allegations.

Such frames are potentially guided by a pre-existing anti-social justice framework common among YouTube podcasters and alternative media personalities (Lewis, 2018). It's a framework related to an anti-political correctness ideology (anti-PC) that was circulating on YouTube well before the advent of the #MeToo movement (Serano, 2019). Scholars have noted it largely as a reaction to the social justice framework brought forth by progressive activists, or as the anti-PC folks call, social justice warriors (SJWs).

Upset that there is backlash towards those who wish to critique #MeToo through a pejorative Cancel Culture lens, many of the SCPs appeal to due process and nuanced consideration as quintessential cultural mores in both our social and legal systems. The SCPs contrast this position of rationality with what they see as SJW irrationality and mob rule. For example, related to extreme black/white opinions on whether or not someone's actions are

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deserving of condemnation based on the given details of an allegation, Neal Brennan says that people are "not allowed to have a nuanced opinion anymore." Related to extremist attacks on both the accused *and* the accuser, Brennan suggests that Americans have a problem with "mob mentality," even though it is "not in the spirit of American" (i.e., justice and individualism). The comedian podcasters, especially Brennan, Rogan, Shlesinger, Griffin, Burr, Diaz and Maher, resist the "hastiness" of ruining a professional's career at the knock of a sexual misconduct accusation. They remind the audience of an American tradition of 'innocent until proven guilty.'

At one point in conversation with Rogan, Bill Maher asks, "Is everything a hanging offense?" And later, "Is everything a life sentence?" Bringing back Louis CK as a posterchild for #MeToo going 'too far,' Maher also asks:

> Louis is a horrible person forever?...I just feel bad for him….I feel like he did
> weird shit that he shouldn't have done for sure, and I think he knows that—I
> know he knows that—but what is the proper punishment…and who decides it?

Here, Maher expresses concern that a mob mentality is misguidedly ruling the future of accused men rather than a proper court of law. To construct this frame for the audience, he uses rhetorical questions that, although hyperbolic, act to elicit disdain for overreaching legal and social judgements. He explicitly refers to the need for "some sort of #MeToo court that will hand down a fair and justified [decision]." Maher half-jokingly suggests, "Maybe the proper punishment is another five years before you can have a [standup comedy] special." Rogan, showing disdain for even this, responds with, "Oh.. That's a long time."

In another *JRE* conversation, comedian Bill Burr claims that if you raise questions about the details of a sexual misconduct accusation, #MeToo supporters will overwhelmingly attack you online:

You know, when the #MeToo stuff first starting coming out…you had to tweet

the right f*cking thing...And if you said anything that's sort of, 'Oh, let's look

at the evidence," God forbid you f*cking said that. And it just became, like,

this whole— 'You're a part of the problem!...

All you're doing is you're just building up resentment and more people want to

fu*cking take you down…

I'm not saying the points that they're making don't need to be made. I'm not

saying that they're complaints are not just. It's the execution of it.

Burr's fiery sentiment relates to the title of his *JRE* clip, "Bill Burr GOES OFF on

Outrage Culture." Burr perceives an aggressive, overly moralistic online activist culture that does

more harm than good. This notion certainly relates to the ideas brough forth by Rogan in other

episodes, where he suggests that #MeToo should expect a backlash because of what he perceives

as a misguided execution of its activism. While Rogan's candor is typically more relaxed, Burr

constructs the frame of an aggressive, overly moralistic online activist culture with his own

aggressive, moralistic online activism. His swearing and exclamations (emotional/ethos appeal),

coupled with his argument that the morality of #MeToo may be there but not the execution

(logical/logos appeal), potentially elicits similar moral reaction among audiences that #MeToo,

overall, is a bad movement.

Both Rogan and Burr see that the social justice activism rampant on social media

platforms like Twitter is missing the beat. They're both confused as to why people pour so much

outrage into #MeToo Cancel Culture, when, to them, there are plenty of other global crises that

deserve more activist outrage and attention. Burr wants to know why the social media activists

who were so loud for #MeToo didn't go after the Obamas for their post-presidential money-

making schemes: "That f*cking guy [Barack Obama]. His first, like, two, you know, public

speaking engagement things were, like, with the major banks." To which Rogan responds, "And

well, not just that. How about more serious shit? Like drone strikes…More innocent civilians were killed with drone strikes during Obama's administration—."

Burr and Rogan see that other widespread social issues need the same kind of media outrage brought forth by #MeToo. They express confusion over why the #MeToo movement had gotten so popular, when, in their eyes, there are more grave social concerns. Comedian Bill Maher similarly feels that Cancel Culture should go much further than #MeToo and male predatorial behavior: "Let's also extend it to the fracking industry, and McDonald's." He feels that "there is just no [moral] consistency."

In these instances, Rogan Burr and Maher seem to equate the supporters of #MeToo with supporters of all things progressive activism. They fail to note the nuance of each activist group or the different environments that people experience which may lead them to be passionate about one particular social issue, without the necessary connection to all other forms of social justice activism. #MeToo supporters, for instance, are specifically passionate about ending gender inequality in sexual relations. Yet even within #MeToo, the reasons for support are likely not monolithic.

Rogan does later offer an explanation for what the podcasters see as poor activist execution, overreaction, and inconsistency, suggesting that #MeToo activists simply do not understand psychology and were 'triggered' by a misogynistic American president:

> So what they think is this is their time. This is their time to get back at men.
> This is their time to yell at men. To wear the Future is Feminine t-shirts. This
> is the time to take their stand…They feel like they're justified because they
> feel like with a maniac like Trump in office, they have to do what they have to
> do to change the world. But you don't change the world by yelling at people. It
> doesn't work that way.

Similarly, when talking with comedian Andrew Schultz, Rogan suggests there is a war of ideas between feminist and traditional views of sexual violence. Rogan says that, "women feel like it's—they've got momentum in this little war of ideas, with the #MeToo movement." Yet Rogan mocks the Future is Feminine agenda. According to him, people who are spearheading Future is Feminism propaganda do *not* care about inclusivity. He sees the feminist activism as bullying, and he sees the bullying as a sign that they are just after cultural power: "What drives me most crazy is this bullying...It doesn't work!" Comparably, when talking with Burr (who emphatically agrees), Rogan states, "You don't get people to change by yelling at them. It doesn't work!"

Lastly, in the Bill Burr *JRE* #MeToo discussion, both Rogan and Burr see that being a comedian is like running for office, and therefore, the comedian is knowledgeable on public opinion. Burr notes:

> We're out there campaigning for this election that never happens and you're
> going through red states and blue states. You're going through f*cking
> everything—and the general consensus of people is, like, 'dude that was
> fu*king crazy! That—that doesn't make sense.

In other words, Burr thought that the majority of Americans also thought that #MeToo activism had gone too far. It comes off as though he is pluralizing or universalizing his own complaints, trying to add validity, credibility and popular appeal to them.

The Cancel Culture frame in the above instances was largely constructed through debate on *progressive activist* psychology and morality vs *popular* psychology and morality. The discussion on progressive activist psychology and morality was meant to represent #MeToo supporters and delineate their judgement as hasty and extreme (or hostile). SCPs countered this representation of the #MeToo supporter with a representation of the popular or common

American, delineating their psychology and morality, in contrast, as fair-minded and modest (or calm). These arguments were heavily supplemented by both emotional, passionate speech (in some cases) and, especially, the use of buzzwords, or ideographs, that appealed to cultural tradition and ritual. Through positive utterances of phrases like 'American spirit,' 'due process,' and 'nuanced consideration,' and negative utterances and correlations of phrases like 'mob mentality,' 'feminism,' and 'Cancel Culture,' SCPs like Rogan, Burr, Brennan, Griffin, Maher and Schwartz argued for protecting the American legal tradition, without commenting much on the faults of that system that has helped perpetuate some of the gender injustice seen in sexual relations. The ideographs potentially served to decry #MeToo supporters and feminists more broadly; in other words, the ideographs may have served to derogate or attack outgroup members and initiatives, as noted in the literature review's discussion of ways members of a threatened group resist social change.

Outside of the comparisons and the ideological buzzwords, there were also a variety of metaphors used to better explain their meaning of Cancel Culture. Comedian Erik Griffin, while interweaving the Cancel Culture frame with both the Empathy (for women) frame and the Male Victim frame, represents how frames like Empathy or Digital-Critical Mass, while utilized, typically get relegated to the side to make room for the dominant Cancel Culture and Male Victim frames:

> It sucks that we live in a culture where some people are getting caught in the *crossfire* so we can obliterate this sort of behavior and attitude from our culture, but in the meantime, while we're going through this, there's going to be…some people that are going to get caught in the crossfire.

Note how Griffin acknowledges the need to purge the inappropriate sexual behaviors of some men, yet finds it necessary to emphasize the victimhood of some other men getting

cancelled. Similar to this metaphor of getting "caught in the crossfire," Rogan and Griffin refer to the social environment spurred on by #MeToo as a swinging "pendulum," or, a "wave of outrage" from passionate #MeToo supporters, that will lead to "collateral damage." Collateral damage here, for Rogan and Griffin, refers to those instances when "good men" lose their career and reputation amidst the swinging of the pendulum. They hope that the pendulum, i.e., the dialectic, will balance out to a place where men can "have interpersonal relationships with women at work and in a setting and make it professional."

This section has explored the framing of the public reaction theme throughout *JRE* discourse on #MeToo. In discussing this theme, two central frames emerged in discussing this theme. Positively, the standup comedian podcasters framed public #MeToo activism as a justified reaction to horrific sexual violence that takes place in a variety of professional industries. They saw that the popularity of #MeToo, and the liberation it provided for many survivors, was made possible because of the interconnectivity and security of social media and the internet (Digital-Critical Mass frame). Negatively, the standup comedian podcasters framed the public reaction as inappropriate and histrionic (Cancel Culture frame). This frame appeared to dominate the SCP conversations on *The Joe Rogan Experience*. For nearly all of the standup comedians that discussed the #MeToo movement on JRE, #MeToo and the pejorative Cancel Culture were spoken of synonymously; to the comedians, both phenomena represented hastiness, mob mentality, and lack of due process and nuanced consideration.

Lastly, as this section comes to an end, I feel inclined to review Burr's notion of the comedian as knowledgeable on public opinion. When confronted with the opportunity to explicitly contribute to a discursive backlash against #MeToo, comedian Bill Burr appeals to moderation and 'laying low' in times of chaos. But Rogan, in response, argues that it's the

comedian's job to call out hypocrisy and to be social commentators. For this reason, he does not want to stay silent when he perceives #MeToo as disastrous:

> But I think more mocking and laughing than yelling, for sure. When you see enough of those The Future is Feminine t-shirts and you see enough hypocrisy and you see enough people trying to take people out for commenting on what's sexist and racist and trying to get people fired—like, it's a time of outrage, across the board. And you have to respond, a little bit. You have to let people know, 'Hey, this is f*cking ridiculous'…There's a certain obligation, especially comedians have, as a social commentator.

5.3. The Meta-frame of Ignorance: When you know your dominant framing is questionable

Often times, when framing their understanding of #MeToo for themselves *and* their audiences, the standup comedian podcasters pre-emptively responded to criticisms by pleading ignorance. Under all themes of #MeToo discussion, the SCPs can be seen proclaiming ignorance and uncertainty, unable to make a definitive conclusion despite their intuitions. This may create a central frame of mind for the audience that the commentators do not have all the information on #MeToo or any one specific case, and as such, that their commentary should itself be taken with a certain level of suspicion.

Rogan, for example, admits that in those instances of women lying when accusing men of sexual misconduct, he doesn't know "if it's a minor [frequency] or not." Only after his scrutiny and speculation, as well as the raising of several examples, does Rogan explicitly take this stance. The stance is accompanied by another stance; the announcement that he doesn't want to be "victim shaming." Regarding the Aziz Ansari case, he notes that, "You don't know what really happened. I don't know his version. I don't know her version. I just know the third-hand [news] version." However, whether Rogan confesses uncertainty or not, the dominant sense he and other SCPs create for audiences still remains; the sense that #MeToo is a misguided

movement unless it takes scrutinization and nuanced consideration of female allegations more seriously.

As an example, regarding the SCPs typical lack of experience in office culture and their lack of knowledge on how to fix the phenomenon of sexual misconduct in office spaces, Ari Shaffir notes, "I don't know how to correct this [predatorial behavior]." This prompts Rogan to realize, "We are lucky we don't have to work with people all day…We're so removed from it…Us talking about office politics in office environments—it's f*cking ridiculous...We're fools!" This line of thinking hints at what others have noted in comedy-as-discourse studies. Whether before or after their argumentative discourse, many comedians fall back on their comedian identity to remove themselves from their words (Allen, 1991). By framing themselves as ignorant comedians whose words should be taken with a sense of skepticism, they allow for the consumption and potential influence of their content while simultaneously relieving themselves of responsibility (Gillota, 2015; Kotzen, 2016). The Ignorance frame may be summed up by Rogan's post-argument proclamation, "Don't listen to me. I'm a f*cking idiot. Why are you listening to me?" Research notes that this performance of ignorance can actually be quite persuasive, forging an intimacy between the audience and podcaster; ignorance, through its humility, may lend a persuasive affinity to the speaker's speculative reasoning (Grano, 2007).

CHAPTER 6: Discussion

6.1. #MeToo Acceptance or #MeToo Backlash?

Debating whether or not #MeToo has gone too far, or whether some sexually violent actor deserves the cultural ostracism they received, does not *necessarily* constitute a backlash to #MeToo. However, the ways in which someone answers these inquiries might make for a better indication. As noted in Chapter 2, tactics of soft repression—such as ridicule and stigmatization of #MeToo activists, justification of coercive, violent sexual behavior, and emphasis on female sexual advantages and male disadvantages—are just a few of the better indicators of a discursive backlash to the movement and its initiatives (Ferree, 2004; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Flood, 2018). On the other hand, nuanced consideration of available details regarding a particular allegation, followed by congenial debate and ending with a reasoned condemnation of the public reactions to that allegation, may represent more of a denunciation of the hastiness of the #MeToo movement rather than a micro-aggressive backlash to women seeking sexual safety.

Chapter 3 also notes that the potential for contributing to a backlash would be due to the media's persuasive framing powers, where a certain rhetorical framing of a phenomenon may lead an audience to think of (and react to) the phenomenon in a like-minded way (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Hallahan, 1999; Kuypers, 2010; Guenther et al., 2015). Further, the audience's acceptance of the media speaker's message may be partially dependent upon the audience's existing affinity for the speaker (Kuypers, 2010; Guenther et al., 2015), with the affinity itself typically based on the speaker's ability to come off as logically, ethically, and/or emotionally compelling (in the Aristotelian rhetorical sense; Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001; Kuypers, 2010).

When considering the goals of #MeToo, this study finds that the standup comedian podcasters (SCPs), although certainly not a monolith, collectively resisted #MeToo's calls for

action. While there were brief moments of the podcasters listening to survivor stories with an empathetic ear, reflecting on their existing notions of appropriate sexual conduct and appropriate reactions to inappropriate sexual misconduct, the discussion of #MeToo on the *Joe Rogan Experience* (*JRE)* was by-and-large resistant to the #MeToo movement. *JRE*'s central (i.e., most reoccurring) conclusions of #MeToo were 1) that it was a social movement that went too far, 2) that it was hasty and lacked due process, and 3) that good men lost their careers and reputation because of obnoxious social media activists. If you, as a consumer of news and commentary, relied on *JRE* for making sense of #MeToo, you might come out with the same takeaways.

A potential for backlash to the #MeToo movement is made clear in the way that the podcasters resist #MeToo's call for contributing to positive change through listening and reflection. The comedian podcasters spent most of their time playing the role of contrarian and social movement critic. In this role, they did their best to explain away predatorial male behavior as expected given natural and environmental conditions (external Causal frame), they defended friends or fellow personalities accused of inappropriate sexual behavior (Modesty frame), they challenged mainstream acceptance of the movement (Scrutiny Frame, Male Victim Frame) and they declared that social media activism is rampant with a mob mentality and a culture of excommunication rather than redemption (Cancel Culture frame).

Major strategies to discuss and frame #MeToo in this light were the use of comparison and contrast, buzzwords and ideographs, metaphors, external attributions, exemplification of story or anecdote, and references to tradition and ritual surrounding legal and social reaction. Most comparison revolved around reciting stories of dishonest women accusing men of some form of sexual misconduct, and then comparing them with the main case being discussed. Stories of men as victims of dishonest women or hasty activism, such as the cases of comedian Aziz

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Ansari, comedian Tom Sizemore and radio personality Garrison Keillor, received greater attention than condemnation of male behavior. This potentially results in an exemplification effect for audiences, where the examples offered serve to reframe the central takeaways of #MeToo as a movement that was unjust (towards men) rather than just (towards women).

Allegations of sexual misconduct were typically highlighted to discredit feminist condemnation of predatorial men. As Chapter 3 notes, an overwhelming discursive emphasis on the less common instances of woman lying about sexual misconduct can become an exemplar, or standard, for making sense of new allegations. It potentially centers the discussion on making probabilistic judgements about the motivations and credibility of the accuser, rather than centering the discussion on appropriate sexual behavior.

Other comparisons were made between two celebrity allegations to show that one male celebrity deserves condemnation, while the other male not as much. Typically, it was Harvey Weinstein's sexual behavior versus another man's sexual behavior (for instance, Louis CK's or Aziz Ansari's) to show that the other man's sexual behavior does not deserve condemnation. Under this line of argumentation, CK and Ansari do not deserve public ostracism or career repercussions simply because of the SCP judgement that their sexual actions were not akin to Weinstein's.

To add persuasive appeal to their contrarian, resistant discourse, the comedian podcaster drew on existing anti-social justice rhetoric (Lewis, 2019), using derogatory buzzwords and slogans, like 'witch hunt,' 'Cancel Culture,' and 'feminist frenzy,' to help the audience make sense of #MeToo-related events in pre-existing, familiar terms. Rhetorical critic Michael Calvin McGee refers to these buzzwords as ideographs, "a link between rhetoric and ideology" (1980, p. 1). Jasinski and Robertson, likewise, define ideographs as "encapsulate[ing] ideology in political

discourse" (2001, p. 308). In using ideographs, the podcasters associated new phenomena with old ones, constructing and reinforcing the ideological frame in a sort of schematic resistance to feminist social movements. Much like as discussed in this study's literature review on media, stereotypes and framing (Chapter 3), ideographs appeal to a group's existing frame of mind; a way for social group's to efficiently make sense of events and phenomena in a recognizable and standardized fashion. Through repeated interactions with ideographs and other slogan-like generalizations, SCP discourse attempted to consensualize views between the podcasters themselves and between the podcasters and their audience (Koudenburg et al., 2019).

This study finds that most aspects of *JRE* #MeToo discourse fall in line with Mansbridge and Shames' (2008) backlash framework, while other aspects show more of an acceptance to the movement. In support of the notion that *JRE* discourse represented #MeToo backlash, my analysis found that the SCPs showed a desire to take a critical stance against #MeToo when negative norms or characteristics of powerful men in familiar industries became salient (Koudenburg et al., 2019). The SCPs took part in the external attribution of male predatorial behavior, suggesting either unfixable or environmental factors lay the blame for male's sexual aggression (such as "natural" male tendencies toward conquest, inappropriate co-ed workplaces, or consistent rejection from females). External attribution may not result in acceptance of such behavior, but its orientation leaves little room for discussing potential, positive ways to change them. It also minimizes the desire for serious repercussions since external attribution delimits personal responsibility for one's heinous actions.

The SCPs further acknowledged Cosby and Weinstein as black sheep that in no way represent acceptable group behavior (Branscombe, 1998). Yet, at the same time, the podcasters also justified controversial behavior (Branscombe, 1998) merely because it did not match up to

Weinstein's or Cosby's. Instead of condemning or fruitfully debating those "gray area" encounters that can leave some women feeling harassed or assaulted, the SCPs largely attempted to defend fellow comedians accused of misconduct, such as Aziz Ansari and Tom Sizemore, who the SCPs believed faced more social and career backlash than they deserved.

Lastly, SCPs identified and took advantages of weaknesses in #MeToo narratives, highlighting the dishonesty or deception of women in some sexual misconduct allegations as a means to discredit the movement or feminist activism more generally (Pfau et al., 2005; Goss and Heaney, 2010). For example, the anonymous accuser of Aziz Ansari's, whose case became one of the highest profile "gray area" encounters throughout #MeToo, was consistently mentioned so as to add validity to the notion that #MeToo was misguided or went too far.

In conclusion, throughout the 12 most popular standup comedian podcaster clips from *The Joe Rogan Experience*, nuance and positive comments about gender equality are made, including disdain for aggressive/oppressive sexual conquests and pity for oppressed woman. Ultimately, though, the dominant aspect of their discourse framed #MeToo as a misguided movement that went too far. When the SCP discourse overwhelmingly focuses on #MeToo in terms of unruly Cancel Culture and lack of judicial justice for men in existing positions of power, the central takeaway on #MeToo becomes a call for due process for the accused and skepticism towards the accuser, in direct opposition to #MeToo's ultimate goal of calls for listening to women and changing relations, whether culturally or forensically, regarding how society handles sexual misconduct.

6.2. The Role of Social Identity in Social Movement Reaction

Resistance to social movements like #MeToo manifests in one central way: through discursive debate, criticism and/or attack. When the resistance seems to come from a particular

population or social identity group, we may call that group resistance (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). We can also expect that group resistance is most likely to come from those identity groups who feel threatened by the negative attention on behaviors from those within their group (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). In the above analysis, this study came to the conclusion that standup comedian podcasters did indeed take part in a discursive backlash, building off of each other's rhetoric in a way that consensualized and solidified group resistance to contemporary feminism and social justice activism. The rest of this discussion section seeks to further explore the role of social identity in the standup comedian podcaster's reaction to #MeToo. What do their reactions say about their celebrity, their comedian, their gender, and/or their political identities?

Rhetorical framing analysis suggests that the celebrity-comedian identity played a significant role in reacting to news surrounding the #MeToo Movement. The only two female SCPs reviewed in this study took on many of the same frames as the eight male comedian SCPs. It is possible that the two SCP women (Cummings and Shlesinger) have a more heteronormative masculine-leaning gender identity—one that might gravitate them closer to the sense-making of heteronormative men—but it seems unbeneficial to delve into the complex debate on the ontologies, differences and fluidity of masculinity and femininity.

The comedian identity of SCPs was most notable through their contrarian nature of discourse. Standup comics build their reputations in part on contrarianism or the highlighting of socio-psychological contradictions (i.e., the comedian as social observer and critic; Bingham and Hernandez, 2009; Guenther et al., 2015; Mintz, 1985). Indeed, SCPs in #MeToo discourse consistently explored the popular social movement through a critical, anti-conformist, and provocative lens (Bingham and Hernandez, 2009; Feldman, 2007; Guenther et al., 2015; Mintz, 1985; Symons, 2017). This was especially apparent in Rogan's insistence that comedians have

an "obligation" to "call out" hypocrisy when they see it, much like Bingham and Hernandez (2009) note in their list of nine sociological perspectives of the standup comedian. I'm not sure if Rogan has since made the connection to the double standard; calling someone or something out is eerily adjacent to the impetus behind Cancel Culture, which is why people also designate it as 'Callout Culture' (Finley and Johnson, 2019).

Further, the manifestation of the comedian's contrarian tendencies can be seen in the Scrutiny frame on the accuser, Male Victim frame on the accused, and Cancel Culture frame on the public reaction. In the Scrutiny frame, SCPs criticized accusers for lacking credibility or wanting attention, money, or revenge. In the Male Victim frame, SCPs claimed the accused as victims of the accuser's revenge or misguidedness, or as victims of a legal or social course that did not include due process or nuanced consideration. In the Cancel Culture frame, SCPS argued that the public reaction, particularly online, went too far by calling for cancellation of careers rather than reprimand and redemption. Each of these frames expose a comedian identity that perhaps served as a precedent for viewing popular opinion as akin to herd mentality, and thus, as necessary to criticize. For example, if, as Fileborn and Phillips (2018) note, "the mainstream, public debate dedicated toward the Ansari case represents a moment in which dominant understandings of sexual violence were contested, the boundaries of inclusion shifting, perhaps ever so slightly" (p. 105), then the SCP response was mostly *against the grain*, resistant to the demand for change. When going against the grain becomes a fixed frame of mind, such as it may be for comedians, then it makes sense that one would jump at the opportunity to criticize popular social movements. As Symons (2017) notes, comedians often like to label themselves as free-thinking, 'authentic outsiders.'

Further, the comedian identity is apparent in the SCPs' removal of themselves from accountability of their rhetoric through pleading ignorance and uncertainty *after* critical utterances (Ignorance frame). Grano (2007), Nabi et al. (2007), and Symons (2017) each note this as a common technique among comedians for evading criticisms. Lewis (2019) also notes this as a common technique among alternative influencers, generally. The Ignorance frame is particularly noticeable in conversations between Rogan and Shlesinger ("I don't know CK"), Rogan and Brennan ("Just so you know. We're talking in theory, about misogyny. These are not views that either of us hold"), and Rogan and Shaffir ("We're so removed from it…we're fools!").

On top of the above claims suggesting that the comedian identity played an important role in the SCPs meaning-making process for #MeToo, a word should also be said regarding the particular group of comedians that Rogan and many of his SCP guests represent, that is, comedians coming out of The Comedy Store (a historic Los Angeles standup venue). Of the 12 comedians reviewed in this discourse analysis, Rogan, Burr, Brennan, Cummings, Griffin, Shlesinger, and Shaffir (as well as Louis CK) have had residencies or frequent spots at the Comedy Store. That's not to say Comedy Store comedians represent a hive mind, but its worth noting that many of the SCPs on JRE have come up together. Future research might do well to compare Comedy Store (LA) comedian #MeToo reactions with Comedy Cellar (NY) comedian #MeToo reactions, with the understanding that there is occasional overlap in comedians who frequent both coasts of American comedy. Such research could help distinguish whether or not, and to what extent, different ideologies circulate among different comedian networks.

Fileborn and Phillips also note that, "Debate around #MeToo having gone 'too far' can be understood as a site of power struggle and contestation" (2018, p. 106). As such, there is also

the strong possibility that the celebrity identity, or the celebrity position of power, played a critical role in *JRE* standup comedian podcaster reaction. This was most apparent in those instances where the podcasters expressed fear over #MeToo "ruining" someone's career and public image. They shared stories, disapprovingly, of celebrities like CK and Sizemore (comedians), and Keillor (radio personality), who faced backlash and career jeopardization for "old" actions (10+ years old). They also grieved over stories of celebrities, like Matt Damon (actor) and David Pakman (YouTube personality), who faced a public backlash and career jeopardization for speaking out against #MeToo ("You saw what happened to Matt Damon, right?...They attacked him and tried to get him pulled off that movie!").

Further, Comedian Bill Burr explicitly stated he does not want to speak out against #MeToo for fear of something like a #MeToo frenzy coming after him. The comedians, in general, were threatened by activism and public backlash, perhaps because they feared losing their own positions of power to speak provocatively without consequence (Koudenburg et al., 2019). This freedom of speech is certainly essential to their comedian and podcaster profession, the professions which made them celebrities in the first place (Mintz, 1985; Guenther et al., 2015).

Bingham and Hernandez (2009) also argue that standup comedians seek to "deconstruct, unmask and debunk status quo social expectations, organizations, rules, and people" (2009, p. 336-7). In SCP #MeToo discourse, though, the SCPs were not necessarily deconstructing, unmasking and debunking the *status quo.* More so, they sought to deconstruct, unmask and debunk rising progressive thought that seeks to become the new status quo through activism like the #MeToo movement. In this sense, it is possible that they were reactionary in the politically resistant sense. As noted in Chapter 1, political partisanship was a large indicator in 2018

#MeToo public opinion polling. For instance, 75% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents thought the movement went too far, compared to only 21% of Democrats (Ipsos, 2018). Further, while 60% of Democrats and Dem-leaning independents felt that women's claims not being believed is a major problem, only 28% of Republicans felt the same (Pew Research Center, 2018). This study does not attempt to label any SCP as either Democrat or Republican (or liberal or conservative), but the relationship between Republicans' and Rep-leaning independents' higher likelihood of #MeToo suspicion and the SCPs' tendency towards similar discursive standpoints (Cancel Culture frame and Scrutiny frame) is worth consideration.

Lastly, the comedian podcasters may have also been threatened by activism and public backlash because of a fear of losing their positions of power in heteronormative gender-sex relations. In other words, gender identity and existing gender-sex privileges seemingly influence the SCP's discourse, at least for the male SCPs (although both female SCPs were empathetic to the Male Victim and Cancel Culture frame). This would likely be the most relevant identity, after all, in a social movement targeting the sexual hegemony of men. For example, thoughts of manhood and maleness influenced SCP discourse in those instances of essentializing the male and female dichotomy (external Causal frame). For example, Rogan saying, "It [the phenomenon of sexual misconduct] deals with these evolutionary mechanisms that are designed to make sure we bread," and Shaffir saying, "We're monkeys." There was also the emphasis of ingroup privileges and advantages in that dichotomy (Branscombe, 1998). For example, Rogan saying, "You can't leave your drink alone…That's a reality for a lot of women. That's not a reality for you and me." Here, the male SCPs can be seen operating in the Empathy frame, aware and remorseful of their privilege.

Yet, crucially, SCPs often failed to empathize with female discomfort in 'gray area' sexual encounters (Fileborn & Phillips, 2019). As the literature review notes, people tend to make external attributions of negative behavior for in-group members (natural or environmental causes), while making internal attributions for out-group members (free will and personal responsibility). For example, Rogan saying, "She was just grossed out about by it and decided to go after him," and "You don't have to try to tank the guy's life from a bad date…It sounds like it sucked, but…this is, like, poor judgement, and cruelty!" Lastly, as noted in this study's literature review, attached individuals will often desire to take a stance in the debate amidst social controversy surrounding a dominant group (Branscombe, 1998; Koudenburg, 2019). This generally helps explain the influx of male commentary on the #MeToo movement. Those males with a platform, such as SCPs, found themselves using discursive strategies to justify or condone behavior, so as to support or separate themselves from controversial group behavior.

In short, the dynamic combination of male, standup comedian, celebrity, and potentially, political identities within the individual SCP resulted in a dynamic reaction to #MeToo, consisting of *some* acceptance and *much* resistance to the movement, and potentially contributing to the audience's own acceptance and resistance. The podcaster, because of their multiple social identities, perceived many threats from the #MeToo movement. Each social group's (males, comedians, celebrities) power-as-capacity appeared at stake. The male's capacity was threatened by potential changes to sexual and gender relation norms, the comedian's capacity was threatened by potential changes to speech norms, and the celebrity's capacity was threatened by potential changes to their accountability and the role of public opinion in dictating their career success. Importantly, attachment to one's relevant social identities likely mediates one's reaction (Branscombe, 1998; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008). That is to say, the podcaster who's least

attached to their male, comedian, celebrity and political identity likely had the weakest path of resistance to #MeToo. Notable examples include Cummings and Shlesinger, the two SCP women who did not nominally face attachment to a male identity and often empathized with both the accusers and the broader social movement. They did, however, both express concern over changes to speech norms in politically correct environments. Brennan and Griffin also appeared less attached to their male identity. They seemed to be the two SCP males least threatened by #MeToo and more often empathized with female accusers of harassment and gray-area encounters. Burr, Maher, and Rogan, meanwhile, appeared the most attached to their comedian, celebrity and political identities, often using discourse to stave off threats to changes in existing norms of (free) speech and social/legal judgement.

6.3. Conclusion

After the completion of a rhetorical frame analysis, this study comes to three conclusions. 1) Standup comedian podcasters discussed the #MeToo Movement in terms of their opinions on the accuser-victim-woman, on the accused-perpetrator-man, and on the public and/or legal reactions to sexual misconduct accusations. 2) Standup comedian podcasters showed instances of both acceptance and resistance to #MeToo's three calls for action (listen, reflect, change), but mostly, instances of resistance.[12] Thus, they took part in a discursive backlash against #MeToo,

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[12] Additional remarks on Michael Flood's (2019) three #MeToo calls for action (listen, reflect, contribute to change): A specific example of contributing to widespread change, which Flood (2019) posits as a central call to action for men confronted with the #MeToo movement, might include the deliberate reforming of common sense conceptions of sexual assault or rape that, at present, typically require a situation akin to "the stranger in the alleyway" conception (Earp, 2016, p. 10). This conception reigns despite having the public knowledge for decades that the overwhelming majority of rapes have been carried out by either partners or acquaintances (Rathus, Nevid, and Fichner-Rathus, 1997). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) happens to define rape as "the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (2014). As Earp (2016) notes, the United Nations and World Health Organization have their own definitions, as well. Coordination of definitions among influential agencies might increase agreement among the public, too. Further, and especially concerning given the ambiguity, are the blurred boundaries of both consent and violation at the level of non-penetrating encounters and general sexual harm. Deliberate public discourse on an institutional scale might do well to clear at least some "gray area" encounters,

and in part because of the *Joe Rogan Experience*'s existing influence, they potentially contributed to the audience's own acceptance or resistance. 3) The most relevant social identities for the comedian reacting to #MeToo was their male identity, their comedian identity, their celebrity identity, and/or their political identity, with the first three seeming to face clear identity threat, perhaps guiding their discursive reaction.

The implications for this research are three-fold. First, social movements have more than one theme or issue. Issue-relevant social identities may be guiding the discourse surrounding the sense-making of social movements. The issue-relevant social identity can dictate which issues are most worthy of discussion and how those issues should be framed. Second, reaction to social movement is dynamic. The same person can accept some aspects of a social movement while resisting others. People have multiple social identities, which may lead to cognitive dissonance, and ultimately, multiple perspectives or judgements of a social phenomenon. For example, comedian Neal Brennan appeared to switch between an Empathy frame on the accuser ("The only thing that bothers me about even talking about [the college cases] is it makes the story about lying women, which is just f*cking not—they're the outliers!") and a Cancel Culture frame on the public opinion ("You're not allowed to have a nuanced opinion anymore"). This may represent a lower attachment to a (hegemonic) male identity, empathizing more with the

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because, as Earp says, portrayal of sexual harm as "something that [must be physically] 'heinous' in all its manifestations…actually obscures the more complex range of harms that can occur in the messy real world of sexual interaction" (2016, p. 14). Put more directly, in the critical-rhetorical vein of Fileborn and Phillips (2018, p. 111), #MeToo has hopefully "demonstrated that public discourse is currently in the nascent stages" of a broader process that positions #MeToo not as going too far, but rather, as not going far enough. What may continue to be the greatest hurdle is reactionary wings of online and offline discourse, like the standup comedian podcasters on The Joe Rogan Experience, that struggle to break away from dualistic conceptions of sexual violence and that continue to bolster defensive groupthink in the face of broader gender politics movements. Future research should consider experimental, ethnographic and/or content-analytical methods to determine what forms of rhetoric and conversation can create the positive affect of persuading men (especially in positions of privilege) on the specific and complex issue of appropriate sexual behavior, and on the appropriate social and legal reactions to inappropriate sexual behavior.

common plight of women, but a high attachment to the comedian identity, criticizing the popular

opinion of online #MeToo support and activism. Third, attachment to one's issue-relevant

identities and existing way of life may guide how strongly a person feels threatened or welcomed

by social movement and change. If someone perceives a threat to their existing way of life, they

often feel more inclined to participate in the debate (Hogg and Reid, 2006), likely as an attempt

for self-preservation. So, in the above example on Brennan's potentially lower attachment to

male identity and higher attachment to comedian identity, Brennan appears more inclined to

participate in debates on free speech but less inclined to argue or forefront the idea that too many

female accusers are liars.

Each of these implications confirm existing research on social movement and backlash

and their relation to social identity. For instance, Branscombe (1998), Ferree (2004), and

Mansbridge and Shames (2008) have all expected that resistance would include discursive

attacks and tactics of soft repression, like the use of buzzwords, external attributions, and

negligent exemplifications. Also, Koudenburg et al. (2019) expected that when negative norms

or characters of a social group become salient, there is a stronger desire to take a stance in

debate. Koudenburg (2019) further notes that repeated like-minded reactions may validate and

reinforce their positions.

On top of that, reinforced positions often reinforce media selectivity (Feldman et al.,

2014). Reinforced media selectivity may, in return, further reinforce those positions, thus

resulting in a reinforcement spiral of both media selectivity and belief that is harder and harder to

remove oneself from in the age of algorithmic recommendations and niche, associative online

networks (Lewis, 2019). Iyenga and Hahn also found that many partisan individuals attribute

bias to mainstream media, choosing to gravitate towards "alternative sources perceived as more

congenial to their preferences" (2009, p. 22). Thus, the reinforcing spirals framework might have an even stronger effect on consumer's who use alternative, more often algorithmic, media platforms—such as YouTube, podcasting, and Twitter—to consume their news. This reminds us of the need for further examination of non-traditional and alternative news discourse. New media information sources, such as podcasting, continue contributing to the media and attitude reinforcement spirals that polarize American society today.

If members of a social group are typically consuming media discourse that reinforces their existing understandings of culture and thought (Feldman et al., 2014), then there may be opposition to outgroup influences attempting to challenge such understandings (Imai et al., 2016). The combination of media exposure, culture and thought within one's social group can often be expected to result in resistance to outgroup influences and could potentially shape behavioral patterns so that they are in accordance with group norms and expectations (Imai et al., 2016).

In the spirit of Feldman et al.'s 2014 work on polarization related to climate change policy, this study sees that consensus on appropriate sexual conduct and appropriate reactions to inappropriate sexual misconduct will remain difficult to achieve because our information environments are increasingly polarizing.[13] Given that this study finds SCPs largely reinforcing existing hegemonic attitudes related to appropriate sexual conduct, it's possible that SCPs played a role in both their own group reinforcement as well as a broader reinforcement of social division surrounding #MeToo (for their audiences and any transitively effected individuals). Social

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[13] A consensus on language used to discuss sexual behavior might do well, too. As Fileborn and Phillips note, "How we understand or make sense of these experiences, and whether we recognize and label [one's] experiences as counting as sexual violence, is deeply implicated in the language available to us…The language that has traditionally been available to us in articulating sexual violence has tended to exclude or minimize all but the most unambiguous, 'serious' experiences" (2018, p. 105-6).

fragmentation and polarizing attitudes will continue to gradually increase unless there are shifts

in public communications policy that adjust for reinforcement spiral effects (Feldman et al.,

2014).

      In conclusion, critical discourse moments like those surrounding #MeToo tend to provide

an example "of the process through which our language and understandings of sexual violence

expand and evolve…[but] also illustrates the ways in which this process is resisted and

contested—our ways of understanding sexual violence simultaneously expanding and

contracting" (Fileborn and Phillips, 2018, p. 106). Throughout this thesis, I hope I revealed to the

reader that standup comedian podcaster reactions to #MeToo generally represent the dynamic

ways in which social movements are accepted and mostly rejected. More specifically, SCP

reactions to #MeToo represent dynamic ways in which changes to understandings of appropriate

sexual behavior and appropriate reactions to inappropriate sexual behavior are accepted and

mostly rejected.

6.4. Limitations

      #MeToo is a movement that is part of a broader trend of social media-fueled feminist and

social justice activism. Although its peak may be over (October 2017-October 2018), the hashtag

often returns alongside renewed spotlights of high-profile sexual misconduct allegations, like

standup comedian Chris D'Elia's 2020 allegations of coercing and breeding teenage women, as

well as recently-inaugurated President Joe Biden's allegations from Tara Reade that surfaced

during his 2020 run for presidency. As such, this study should not be interpreted as a definitive

understanding of reactions to the movement, standup comedian podcaster reactions or otherwise.

Indeed, because of the movement's recency, I suggest referring to other #MeToo scholarship as

it comes in. Particularly, it may be wise to cross-examine #MeToo literature to explore the ways in which we, as scholars, understand and frame the movement and its significance.

Further, this study does have its methodological shortcomings. For instance, feasibility required constraining the analysis solely to standup comedian podcaster reactions, despite the importance of also looking at standup comedians outside of the podcast industry, such as Dave Chappelle, Jerry Seinfeld and Sarah Silverman (they continue to hold popular appeal and, thus, potential influence on social reality sense-making). Also, the case study method is not fully representative of standup comedian reaction to #Metoo or even standup comedian podcaster reactions, especially given the nature of the sample used in this study. Due to time constrains, I chose to explore only the most popular clips from the most popular podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*. However, there are a number of other standup comedian-hosted podcasts worth examining, including Bill Burr's *Monday Morning Podcast*, Whitney Cumming's *Good for You*, Marc Maron's *WTF,* Chris D'Elia's *Congratulations,* and Christina Pazsitzky and Tom Segura's *Your Mom's House.* Each of these dedicated time to discuss #MeToo and likely offered both like-minded and unique perspectives. Additionally, the interpretive nature of qualitative, rhetorical studies leads to constraints on the power of my claims. To increase validity and breadth of representation of multiple standup comedian perspectives, future research in this area might prefer a coalition-style of operation between scholars, building off of each other's observations. Further, quantitative methods might want to be considered. For example, a quantitative content analysis could more empirically describe the frequency of ideographs, lending a persuasive hand to this study's argument that existing slogans and buzzwords play a crucial role in framing new social movement.

Lastly, it is difficult to claim that *JRE* contributed to a backlash *outside* of their platform, given the lack of audience analysis and a feasible way to correlate the audience's consumption with the audience's relevant social behaviors. That said, it is clear that Rogan's podcast offered its audience a resistant sense-making of the #MeToo movement. In this sense, the podcasters' negative framing of #MeToo may have elicited the audience to take part in a discursive backlash themselves. This would be an important question to research for those interested in this topic. An audience analysis of YouTube comments and other *JRE* fan forums would do well to spot popular backlash. Whether or not standup comedian podcasters persuaded laypeople to take part in discursive backlash, the potential is there because of their own backlash (i.e., resistant stance and negative framing of #MeToo) and because of the popularity of Rogan's audience. As a reminder, *The Joe Rogan Experience* receives more daily views (~3.5 million) than any primetime cable news personality, most notably Fox's Sean Hannity (~3.12 million) and MSNBC's Rachel Maddow (~3.06 million) (Variety, 2019; Social Blade, 2020).

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Appendix A

#MeToo *JRE* SCP YouTube Clips Under One Million Views

Below is a list of less popular *JRE* SCP clips this study has chosen to leave out of analysis. Their titles and featured standup comedians may excite the reader to conduct further research.

1. "Joe Rogan Reacts to #MeToo, Latest Harvey Weinstein News," featuring **Greg Fitzsimmons** (~466,000 views, Oct 18, 2017)

2. "Joe Rogan talks to Doug Stanhope About Louis CK," featuring **Doug Stanhope** (~205,000 view, Dec 5, 2017)

3. "Joe Rogan on the Downside of #MeToo," featuring **Jimmy Dore** (~186,000 views, Feb 13, 2018)

4. "Joe Rogan - I'd Have Louis CK on the Podcast," featuring **Dom Irrera** (~293,000 views, Feb 22, 2018)

5. "Joe Rogan | The Louis CK Backlash Was Disingenuous w/Tim Dillon", featuring **Tim Dillon** (~314,000 views, Feb 21, 2019)

6. "Joe Rogan | Louis CK is NOT Like Bill Cosby," featuring **Joe List** (~747,000 views, May 15, 2019).

7. "What Joe Rogan Hopes Happens Because of the #MeToo Movement," featuring **Joe List** (~167,000 views, May 15, 2019).

8. "Nikki Glaser I Can Empathize with Louis CK's Situation," featuring **Nikki Glaser** (~790,000 views, Oct 4, 2019).

9. "Joey Diaz 'We've All MeToo'd Somebody' | Joe Rogan," featuring **Joey Diaz** (~500,000 views, Jan 13, 2020).

Appendix B

Simplified timeline of #MeToo events (from October 2017 – April 2020):

October 5, 2017: "Along with other actresses and former Weinstein Company employees, Ashley Judd accuses Weinstein of sexual harassment — this time, on the record — in Jodi Kantor and Meghan Twohey's incriminating New York Times story. In the aftermath, Weinstein publishes a public apology, the first of many public apologies the year would hold. The first sentence of Weinstein's statement attributed his behavior to growing up in "the '60s and '70s, when all the rules about workplace and behavior were different," and insisted the encounters were consensual. In the ensuing days, over 100 women would come forward with allegations against Weinstein." (Nicolaou and Smith, 2019).

October 16, 2017: Actress Alyssa Milano starts the #MeToo hashtag. It's to be utilized for anyone who has experienced sexual violence.

October 29, 2017: Acclaimed actor Kevin Spacey faces allegations of sexually assaulting underaged men on set.

November 9, 2017: Standup comedian Louis CK is accused by five women of sexual misconduct. Specifically, he was accused of coercively masturbating in front of, or over the phone to, female comics and/or writers. C.K. released an official statement shortly after, saying, "the power I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly." On this same day, Alabama Republican candidate for Senate Roy Moore is accused by nine women of sexual misconduct while they were teenagers.

November 17, 2017: Democrat Senator and former comedian Al Franken accused of inappropriate groping or gesturing by multiple women. Franken resigns on December 7th.

November 29, 2017: Journalist Matt Lauer is fired by NBC after being accused of sexual misconduct. Lauer denies allegations.

December 6, 2017: *Time Magazine* gives "Person of the Year" recognition to the victims of sexual misconduct willing to share their experiences despite personal consequences of speaking out.

January 11, 2018: In an *LA Times* article, comedian and actor-artist James Franco is accused by at least five women of inappropriate sexual behavior. He appears on Stephen Colbert's *Late Show*, saying, "I don't want to shut them down in any way. I think it's a good thing and I support it."

January 13, 2018: An anonymous woman shares an article on Babe.net explaining an uncomfortable sexual experience she had with standup comedian Aziz Ansari

after their date. The anonymous woman never says she was physically forced to do anything against her own will, but she notes that she raised concerns to Ansari and felt coerced into certain sexual acts because of existing gender-power dynamics and Ansari's position of influence. *Refinery29*, a global media outlet focused on the experiences of young women, the anonymous piece spurs "a conversation about the role of consent in typical, quotidian sexual encounters." See full Babe.net piece in references.

September 25, 2018: 83-year-old Comedian Bill Cosby is the first celebrity in the #MeToo era to be convicted of sexual assault, sentenced to 3-10 years imprisonment. He was convicted for drugging multiple women over the span of his career and then having sex with their unconscious or half-conscious bodies, a phenomenon known as date raping.

October 6, 2018: Brett Kavanaugh is sworn into the United States Supreme Court. Over 20 million people watched the congressional hearings the prior week, in which Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford testified that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in high school. Two other women, Deborah Ramirez and Julie Swetnick, also come forward with sexual misconduct allegations against Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh is sworn in on a narrow vote along party lines.

July 9, 2019: Aziz Ansari returns with his first Netflix special since being pushed out of the entertainment spotlight and into the #MeToo spotlight amidst allegations against his sexually coercive behavior (from January 2018). In the special, he mentions that he is hopefully a better person after reflecting on his sexual behavior and treatment towards women.

April 4, 2020: Louis CK returns with a self-produced and self-released special. It is his first published material since November 2017, when he faced #MeToo backlash for his sexually coercive and harassing behavior towards female comedians and actresses on and off set in the 2000s.

January 20, 2021: former Vice President Joe Biden is sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. Throughout his campaign for the presidency, he faced #MeToo criticism backed by Tara Reade's sexual assault allegation against him. The media (sources including NPR, PBS, *Vox*, *Politico*, *The Washing Post*, and *The Nation*) made dismissive claims such as: "Some details of Reade's account have been inconsistent, and her story has changed over time" (NPR, April 2020), despite the breaking reporter of the story, Katie Halper of *Current Affairs*, noting that "Reade provided more details over time, something that is common among survivors of sexual assault" (April 2020). Other reporters, such as Amanda Marcotte of *Salon*, note that "The story of Reade's allegations against Biden shows what can happen when the rigorous standards espoused by mainstream publications are sidestepped for a more credulous politicized approach" (March 2020).