Not Just a Joke:
Rape Culture in Internet Memes About #MeToo

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Declaration of Authenticity and Author's Rights

This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a critical account of the discursive construction of sexual violence in humorous Internet memes about #MeToo. Applying an interdisciplinary lens, the thesis combines feminist scholarship on discourse, affect, humour, rape culture and online misogyny in order to provide a contribution to the field of feminist digital media studies.

I employ a case study approach to my data set of 866 Internet memes collected from three social media platforms, 9gag, Reddit and Imgur, between October and December 2017 using the four search terms: #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Louis C.K.

Applying discourse analysis to Internet memes generated by these specific search terms enables me to investigate how sexual violence is portrayed in different ways depending on who the perpetrators and the victims are. The three social media platforms have been chosen as they encourage users to upload humorous content enabling me to investigate how humorous content constructs sexual violence in specific ways. The thesis demonstrates how certain notions about gender and sexuality are discursively reproduced in online spaces that privilege heterosexual men and exclude women and homosexual men.

The thesis aims to contribute to existing research in feminist media studies by investigating the backlash against #MeToo on specifically humorous discursive spaces thus gaining insight into how sexual violence is discursively constructed in spaces that otherwise might often be overlooked and disregarded as meaningless and harmless. By taking humour seriously the thesis contends this “just-a-joke” discourse.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research origins

On the 15th of October 2017 I logged onto Twitter and saw the first #MeToo posts. I saw people retweeting Alyssa Milano's tweet encouraging women who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault to write "Me Too" on their timeline in order to "give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (@Alyssa_Milano, 2017). I saw people retweeting and "liking" other people's posts. Some simply posted "#MeToo". Others shared personal stories of abuse experienced throughout their lives. This was women of all ages, of different backgrounds, from different industries and from different parts of the world. Though #MeToo was initiated by an actress in Hollywood, it soon turned to a worldwide phenomenon pointing to – as Milano suggested – the magnitude and variety of women's experiences of sexual violence. Within the first 48 hours, the hashtag was shared nearly a million times on Twitter and within the first 24 hours the hashtag appeared in 12 million posts on Facebook (Lawton, 2017). Scrolling through the tweets was a powerful and moving experience. It felt like a significant moment in time. It felt like more than just another hashtag. It felt like it was not going to go away. And it felt like things were going to change. Furthermore, it seemed like victim/survivors were being listened to and that public opinion had been swayed in favour of believing them rather than their abusers.

#MeToo was a popular feminist media moment. By popular I refer to Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) notion that feminism has become popular. This predates October 2017 and refers to how feminism (which can include many different forms of *feminisms*) manifests in discourses and practices that circulate on digital and broadcast media and which has gained popularity – i.e. is liked and admired by like-minded people (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 1). #MeToo occurred at a moment when feminism was already popular and added to the visibility and spread of a specific type of popular and digital feminism.

Inspired by Karen Boyle (2019a) I refer to #MeToo as a moment for two reasons. First, I want to distinguish it from the Me Too movement founded by Tarana Burke in 2006. Burke uses the phrase "me too" as a statement of solidarity to women and girls of colour who have experienced sexual abuse. She uses the statement as an effort to create support and focus on the intersectional aspect of sexual abuse (Burke,

n.d.). While Milano did not initially accredit her #MeToo tweet to Burke, after black feminists online had pointed to her work, Milano subsequently acknowledged Burke's work. Burke has now become a prominent voice in media debates about #MeToo (Boyle, 2019a, p. 5). In this thesis I refer to #MeToo as the feminist moment initiated by Milano's tweet and Me Too as the movement founded by Tarana Burke. This distinction acknowledges how the expression "me too" as used by Burke and feminist support workers before her, is part of the history of feminist activism against men's violence against women (Boyle, 2019a, p. 5). As such, #MeToo is a moment within a larger feminist movement of creating awareness of men's violence against women.[1] Furthermore, the distinction emphasises how #MeToo is a discourse while Me Too is activism (Ibid.). My thesis focuses on the #MeToo hashtag and the stories and media coverage with which it is now associated.

#MeToo arose from and spread through digital social media platforms which enabled the message to reach a global audience instantly. Women shared experiences of sexual harassment and assault – experiences that traditionally have been associated with the private sphere, with shame and silence, and as experiences which belong with the victims rather than the perpetrators. Women speaking up about abuse, reclaiming their stories of abuse, refusing to keep quiet and returning the shame and blame to the perpetrators is feminist practice. Sharing experiences and finding support within a network of women is feminist practice. None of this was new, but the magnitude of shared experiences and the attention to the hashtag was new. The attention was exceptional.

#MeToo had become a popular feminist moment. And like most popular feminist moments (Banet-Weiser, 2018), #MeToo was met with a backlash. In mainstream media #MeToo was criticised for having gone too far – for being a witch hunt against all men and for comparing "harmless" workplace flirtation with rape (Fallon, 2017b; Tolentino, 2018). On the less mainstream versions of social media, more extreme examples of this backlash emerged. At this point I was going through a large variety of social media platforms as part of my PhD research. The posts on many of these platforms started commenting on #MeToo in far from supportive ways. Rather I saw a tendency to blame women for the abuse they experienced and especially a hesitance to believe the famous Hollywood actresses. As more celebrities were accused of a variety of abuse, the posts became increasingly

[1] Scholars researching sexual violence have documented how using the expression "me too" was common within support systems in the UK prior to #MeToo (Royal, 2019).

defensive of the alleged perpetrators. This discourse echoed what feminist scholarship on rape culture (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of this concept) has argued for years (Estrich, 1987; Gavey, 2019): a tendency to normalise sexual abuse, to blame the victims and to excuse the perpetrators. This thesis is thus concerned with how sexual violence is discursively constructed on social media. I refer to sexual violence throughout this thesis as existing on a continuum (L. Kelly, 1988) which includes a variety of experience expanding from rape and incest to unwanted sexual advances and sexual harassment (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on the language use around sexual violence and for a thorough discussion on Kelly's notion of the continuum of sexual violence).

Prior to #MeToo, two events shaped my interest in rape culture and the way it is reproduced in online discourses. Both cases emerge from a US context but have spread across the Atlantic due to social media. While my thesis does not have a specific US focus, I deal with English-language media production which discursively is situated within an Anglo-American context (see the below section on Scope and Chapter 3 for a thorough discussion of my methodological considerations).

The first event was the Steubenville rape case from 2012. A 16-year-old girl was raped by a 16 and 17-year-old boy while a group of boys witnessed and filmed the assault. A digital trail, recorded and published by a freelance journalist in the immediate aftermath of the assault, reveals how the boys celebrated the assault, shared images of the naked girl and made dehumanising and victim-blaming jokes about her. Many similar assaults have occurred since then, but this was one of the first to receive massive media attention. What I really noticed, was the occurrence of victim-blaming discourses, alongside those focussing on the potential impact on and damage to the promising football careers of the perpetrators. Feminist voices of criticism characterised these discourses as evidence of a rape culture (Marcotte, 2013; Peterson, 2013; Valenti & Friedman, 2013). What I found particularly interesting was the ways in which the group of boys made jokes about the victim and as such created a humorous discourse about the rape.

The second event was Gamergate in 2014, which was the first event of organised misogynist attacks against women that gained mainstream media attention. Organising themselves through forums on Reddit and 4chan a large group mobilised to attack a number of female gamers who had spoken up about sexism in the online gaming industry. The punishment for doing so was a flood of rape and death threats,

including having personal details published online, resulting in some of the targets having to leave their homes out of fear for their lives (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Stuart, 2014). Since then there have been numerous similar examples of women being the target of organised and extreme misogyny for being outspoken and often for criticising areas that have traditionally been considered male domains. What I found particularly interesting was the fact that this abuse was so focused on sexual violence. As researchers have pointed out before me (Jane, 2017a; Lumsden & Morgan, 2017), the rape threat is the lingua franca – the go-to threat to silence women, keep them in a state of fear and exclude them from public spaces. Furthermore, I was struck by how the people participating in these attacks seemed to address these as a bit of fun – similar to practical jokes.

Steubenville and Gamergate alerted me to how sexual violence is still a "conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15 emphasis in original). The two cases pointed to how women are still blamed for sexual violence and perpetrators of said abuse are excused and reframed as victims. They alerted me to the notion of rape culture within which a particular type of discourse is dismissed: that of humour.

The main justification for my thesis is that discourse matters. The language we use and the way we use it help us make sense of the world and the people around us. Language is powerful. It reproduces notions or hierarchies and power structures which position people as subjects and objects. Language is never harmless. Hate speech, threats and hateful and hurtful language use is a violent act. Not a substitute for violence, but its own form of violence (Butler, 1997). Discourses of systemic hatred such as misogyny, racism and homophobia do not just exist as harmless words – they enact real injury and harm. The scholarship on online misogyny has repeatedly pointed to the multitude of negative consequences for its victims, including personal, political, professional and psychological consequences (Jane, 2014b, 2017a, 2018a; Penny, 2013).

Despite this, much online discourse – especially humorous discourse – is dismissed as harmless fun. When produced within a setting where humour is expected and encouraged – a humorous discursive space – misogynist discourse tends to be excused and dismissed because the assumption is that it was *intended* as a joke. This is what I refer to as the "just-a-joke" discourse. While scholars have used the expression "just a joke" before me (Aliefendioglu & Arslan, 2011; Bemiller &

Schneider, 2010; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008), to the best of my knowledge, I am the first to use the term just-a-joke discourse to address and highlight the way in which humour tends to be dismissed as something we should not take seriously. Online discourse, in particular, is often excused as somehow not *real*, as existing separate to the *real world*. When written from an often-anonymous account, the utterer of misogyny is often given the benefit of the doubt. This false dichotomy between the online and offline world (Ging, 2017) thus excuses misogyny and also distracts from the actual words uttered. Finally, the just-a-joke discourse delegitimises the person experiencing harm and ignores and erases the potential for harm altogether.

Sometimes discourses of extreme misogyny on the so-called manosphere – a fragmented network of Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) online antagonising women – spills into real life-threatening and life-destroying events. One example is the 2014 Isla Vista, California shootings in which a 22-year-old man killed six people and injured 14 before taking his own life. Prior to the attack he had posted a "manifesto" video to YouTube explaining how loneliness and rejection from women led to him specifically targeting and killing women (Cockerill, 2019; Ging, 2017; Manne, 2018a). In 2015, in Oregon, a student killed nine people at his community college before killing himself. Investigation into his online presence pointed to an admiration for the Isla Vista killer (Chemaly, 2015).

The 2018 Toronto Attack drew mainstream media attention to the term Incel (Involuntary Celibate) (Ging, 2017).[2] Here a man drove a van through a pedestrian area killing 10 people. Prior to the attack, in a post on his Facebook profile, the killer stated that the "Incel Rebellion has already begun" and referred to the Isla Vista killer (Beauchamp, 2018, 2019; Taub, 2018). The connection between the manosphere and the misogynist mass shootings has been demonstrated by scholars (Ging, 2017) and journalists (Beauchamp, 2019; Chemaly, 2015; Dewey, 2014; Garkey, 2014; M. E. Williams, 2015) alike, who evidence that some users of Incel fora celebrate the Isla Vista killer and share ideas for how to harm women. This could thus suggest that some of these killers were radicalised on MRA forums.

Misogynist hate speech online tends to coincide with racist hate speech which similarly has been a factor in a number of mass killings. Examples include the 2019

[2] Some media attention had been given to the Incel community the previous year when Reddit banned the subreddit r/Incels where users condoned or advocated rape because it was in conflict with the policy to post content that "encourages, glorifies, incites or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or group of people." (Solon, 2017).

Christchurch mosque shootings where two men killed 51 people in two mosques during Friday Prayer. One of the perpetrators posted a manifesto to the online forum 8chan prior to the attack using alt-right, white supremacist, and neo-Nazi discourse, quoting the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik as an inspiration (Kingsley, 2019). Breivik killed a total of 77 people, primarily teenagers, in 2011 and had also released a manifesto prior to the killings. In both cases, the perpetrators cite alt-right influences and produce discourses of extreme islamophobia and xenophobia while Breivik also advocates restoring patriarchy as a way of saving European culture. Both instances point to radicalisation on alt-right online spaces where users share extreme racist and misogynist views as well as conspiracy theories and fantasies about how to take back what they consider rightfully theirs.

The above-mentioned examples point to an increasing tendency where mass killings are linked to misogyny, racism and the alt-right (Arango, 2019; Svokos, 2019). This suggests that this type of violence is systemic rather than occurring as isolated events. Though mass shootings are extreme examples of misogyny, the extreme and mundane are two sides of the same coin when emerging from misogynist discourses on the manosphere. Misogynist and racist revenge-motivated mass killings are symptomatic of MRA and alt-right rhetoric and examples of why it is crucial to take online content – which is often trivialised as ironic, humorous and non-sensical – extremely seriously. The myth of the harmless Internet troll as a pitiful loner living in his mum's basement is no longer valid when the consequences of online misogyny threatens, alters and ends people's lives.

I argue that it is essential to take humorous discourse seriously as it reflects and reproduces normative notions of gender and sexuality within rape discourses. The term "rape discourse" is used throughout this thesis to refer to the way in which sexual violence is discussed and portrayed in language use (the notion of discourse is further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3). The first step to dismantling the normalisation of sexual violence that #MeToo points to, is to identify the rape culture reproduced in language use that is often trivialised, excused and ignored: that of irony, joking and humour production. The most subtle forms of maintaining social norms and hierarchies are also the most powerful ones as they often go unnoticed.

Scope and aims

The overall aim of this thesis is to challenge the just-a-joke discourse by investigating how humorous discourses portray sexual violence in certain ways. By

focusing specifically on the discursive production rather than investigating who the creators of the memes are and why they produce this content, I am able to explore how certain notions about sexual violence are produced and reproduced. The specific aims of the thesis can be summarised as follows:

- To investigate how sexual violence is discursively constructed in humorous Internet memes about #MeToo.
- To identify the way victims and perpetrators are portrayed within this discourse.
- To explore how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur and how this relates to sexual violence.
- To facilitate a dialogue between studies of humour, affect, rape culture and online misogyny utilising #MeToo as a case study.

In order to do this, I engage with the literature from a feminist theoretical perspective. The research project sits within the field of feminist media studies, drawing primarily on feminist theory on sexual violence (Gavey, 2019; L. Kelly, 1988) and the scholarship on online misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Jane, 2017a; Manne, 2018a). Methodologically, I have collected a data set of 866 Internet memes (consisting of image, text and moving image) from the three meme-sharing social media platforms 9gag, Reddit and Imgur, using the four search terms #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and Louis C.K. collected between the 5th October and 31st December 2017. Using thematic analysis, I have coded each meme before applying discourse analysis. Chapter 2 reviews the literature while Chapter 3 discusses the methodology.

To date, there has not been sufficient research into the function of humour in Internet memes about sexual violence. While the feminist scholarship on online discourses has focused on online misogyny and rape culture to some degree, little attention has been given to Internet memes specifically and especially the specific discourse produced by humorous memes. #MeToo has awoken a particular interest in the feminist scholarship on feminist digital activism, but little attention has been given to the specific backlash against #MeToo.

The scholarship on feminist media studies has developed steadily since the early 2010s. While being a recent field of inquiry it has gained significant scholarly attention and continues to inquire about the gendered aspects of online media

production and meaning making. This thesis contributes to this field but aims to expand on the field in a number of ways that have been overlooked and under-researched:

- Firstly, combining the discursive constructions of sexual violence with humorous discourse contributes to the knowledge within both feminist theory on sexual violence and feminist media theory about online humour. My notion of the "just-a-joke" discourse is a unique contribution to this.
- Secondly, Internet memes are under-researched within the feminist scholarship, which tends to focus mainly on Twitter and hashtags. Inquiries have mainly been made into the activist or feminist counter-cultural potential of memes or into the misogynist, racist and homophobic discourse produced in the memes. My research into humour in intersection with rape discourse thus provides unique insight into meme-production.
- Thirdly, employing #MeToo as a case study allows for research into a very recent feminist digital activist moment and my research provides unique insight into the backlash against #MeToo, which has been under-researched so far.

Chapter outline

Chapter 2 facilitates a dialogue between six areas of research: discourse, affect, humour, rape culture, online misogyny and the manosphere. The chapter is divided into six sections reviewing the literature of each area of scholarship as it relates to my own research focus.

The first part of the chapter discusses the feminist scholarship on the discursive construction of subjects and others, drawing primarily on the work of Judith Butler (1997). Contending the notion that language use is harmless, the section discusses Butler's work on violent language use. Drawing primarily on Sarah Ahmed (2004), the second part of the chapter investigates what affects *do* rather than what they *are*. Sara Ahmed examines how subjects become recognisable in relation to others within a circulation of affects. Discussions of specific affects, such as shame and disgust, are included to set up the future analysis of the portrayal of victims and perpetrators.

In the third part of the Chapter, I contend the notion that humour, like language, is harmless – what I refer to as the just-a-joke discourse. The section

discusses humour as a gendered practice of inclusion and exclusion. Discussing the three concepts harmlessness, intentionality and irony further explores how the just-a-joke discourse marginalises voices of disruption. Those voices are often deemed humourless, which leads me to a discussion of Sara Ahmed's concept of the "feminist killjoy" (2010a, 2010c).

The fourth section turns to the scholarship on rape culture and rape jokes. Highlighting Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence (1988) as a framework for how to analyse the multiplicity of experiences of sexual violence, I discuss the scholarship and definitions of rape culture (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Drawing primarily on the scholarship of Nicola Gavey, the section explores the notion of victim blaming. I also include a discussion within the feminist scholarship of whether to categorise sexual violence as power, sex, or violence. Finally, this section turns to a discussion of the scholarship on rape jokes.

The fifth and sixth section of the chapter turns to the scholarship on online misogyny and the manosphere. Drawing primarily on Emma Jane (2017a), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) and Debbie Ging (2017, 2019), the section discusses how the scholarship has characterised and documented the variety and consequences of online misogyny. It traces the ways in which this has been framed as harmless fun committed by "trolls" and pranksters and discusses the limited scholarship on #MeToo. Then I turn to scholarly inquiries into the manosphere, before ending with a discussion on the scholarship of Internet memes and how humour plays into content production on the manosphere. The chapter concludes that my thesis fills a gap in the research.

Chapter 3 draws on the theoretical framework set up in Chapter 2 by discussing the methodological framework for my thesis. This chapter outlines the epistemological considerations as well as discussing the scope of my case study and the make-up of my data set. In the first part of the chapter I situate myself as a researcher before discussing my approaches to discourse analysis.

I then turn to the scope of my research by defining social media platforms and discussing my methods for selecting the three social media platforms, before providing a detailed description and overview of the three platforms. Evaluating my digital literacy on the platforms, I also discuss digital literacy as a social practice relying on inclusion and exclusion. This leads to an examination of the social media platforms as male discursive spaces, in that the discourse produced privileges a male centrality. I briefly evaluate my ethical considerations for collecting data online,

before discussing how I created my data set. Finally, I turn to a definition of Internet memes according to Shifman (2013b) and outline the way in which I have coded the memes.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of my data set. First, I discuss similarities and differences between the four data sets generated by the different search terms. The three perpetrators are portrayed in significantly different ways, which generate themes that might be more or less specific to the individual perpetrator. Second, I address the overall representation of gender, sexuality and race across the four data sets. The chapter finishes with a short discussion of some general tendencies in the representation of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. The purpose of this chapter is to present the data set and give a sense of the overarching themes emerging from this.

Chapter 5 discusses how victims of sexual violence are discursively constructed in my data set. The chapter outlines how some people are considered legitimate victims, while others are deemed non-legitimate based on age, gender and sexual attractiveness. Though child victims are represented in a large portion of memes, the chapter focuses mostly on adult female victims as the representation of them is significantly more complex. After discussing how victims are dehumanised through comparisons with animals, puppets, and inanimate objects, the chapter explores discourses of victim blaming, which is expressed in more or less subtle ways. A reoccurring notion is the idea that it should be women's responsibility to avoid sexual violence – by avoiding predatory men and situations that might place them at risk. The chapter then provides evidence as to how victim-blaming discourses in turn exonerate the perpetrators and reconceptualise sexual violence as sex.

Chapter 6 traces the ways in which the three perpetrators are portrayed throughout my data set. The chapter builds on scholarly work on affective constructions of disgust, discursive constructions of sexuality and gender, and male sexual entitlement on the manosphere. The three perpetrators are portrayed in significantly different ways and the chapter is dedicated to discussing the three perpetrators separately.

Through a discourse of disgust, Harvey Weinstein is portrayed as the monstrous other. The memes about Kevin Spacey draw connections between his homosexuality and his sexual assault of teenagers, pointing to a suggested correlation between homosexuality and child sexual abuse. Louis C.K. is portrayed as an anti-

hero who the users of the platforms can identify with through homosocial male acts such as masturbation. The chapter evidences how memes frame the responsibility as lying with the victims and often reconceptualises the abuse as sex.

While Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the way the victims and perpetrators are portrayed in the Internet memes, **Chapter 7** focuses on the way in which the memes avoid the subject of sexual violence through distraction and backlash. The purpose of the chapter is to critically discuss how the memes make the victims and the abuse invisible.

The chapter is divided into three subsections. The first section focuses on how some memes politicise #MeToo by targeting, primarily, US Democrats and especially Hillary Clinton. The second section explores the way in which #MeToo is constructed as a Hollywood-specific problem, thus making sexual violence an exceptional issue. The third section analyses the backlash against #MeToo, which in the memes is constructed as a witch hunt against all men – thus positioning men as the real victims of #MeToo.

Finally, **Chapter 8** concludes by discussing the ways in which I have met my research aims and objectives. I summarise my findings and evaluate how my theoretical and methodological approaches helped reach my research objectives. I discuss how my research provides a unique contribution to knowledge within the field of feminist media studies. Finally, the chapter provides ideas for further research.

Overall, then, this thesis provides an account of the way in which sexual violence is discursively constructed in specific humorous discursive spaces online. It begins to shed light on the intersection between humour and portrayals of sexual violence in the online specific medium of the meme, which also provides insights into how victims and perpetrators are discursively constructed in theses spaces.

Chapter 2:
Establishing a conceptual framework for analysing rape discourse on social media

Introduction

Central to my research is the notion that language is not neutral and that a joke is never just a joke. The words we choose and the way we use them are informed by our historical, social and cultural circumstances. Consequently, a critical approach to rape discourse can point to normative notions about sexual violence as well as gender and sexuality. In this chapter I facilitate a dialogue between five areas of scholarly research. The first two parts of the chapter discuss the feminist scholarship of violent language and the feminist scholarship of affect in the discursive construction of subjects and others. The third part turns to the feminist scholarship of humorous language, introducing the just-a-joke discourse while investigating humour as a practice of inclusion and exclusion. In order to situate my research within the scholarship on sexual violence, I turn to a discussion of feminist research on rape culture and rape jokes. Finally, I include feminist research on online misogyny and the manosphere, which allows me to situate the specific androcentric, "himpathetic" and homosocial space from which the Internet memes in this thesis emerge. The aim of this chapter is to review the literature on which I will draw throughout the analysis, and also to identify the gap in the current scholarship and how my thesis will contribute to filling this gap.

Violent language and the discursive construction of subjects

The main focus of my thesis is the discursive construction of sexual violence and of the victims and perpetrators of said violence. The main theoretical approach to this is Judith Butler's (1997) notion that we are linguistic beings who are constituted in language. As such, language is crucial for our recognisability as subjects and for our social existence (Butler, 1997). The words we use and the way we use them both create and reflect the world we live in. This understanding of language use and discourse is the foundation for my analysis as well as my approach to the scholarship on language, affect, violence and sexual violence. As the feminist scholarship on

language and discourse argues, language use is gendered. Gender is socially constructed within language (Butler, 1997; C. West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 1997) and is often androcentric, meaning that it represents or names the world from a male point of view (Cameron, 1990).

My definition of discourse relies on Michel Foucault's work on power, knowledge and truth and I define discourse as language structures which are informed by our historical, social and cultural context and which simultaneously reflects and creates the reality of which we speak (Mills, 1997) (for further exploration of this, see Chapter 3). Language, then, is the instrument with which discourses are produced and reproduced. This thesis is concerned with discourse and extends beyond language (memes often consist of images as well as text). However, some of the literature discussed in the following focuses on language and language use. I include this literature as the points can be applied to analyses of discourse as well. Chapter 3 will pick up on the discussion of discourse in more depth as I situate discourse analysis as the methodological framework for my analysis.

The feminist scholarship on language and discourse is vast and varied, including linguistic approaches (Cameron, 1990, 1992; Holoshitz & Cameron, 2014) and discourse analysis (Mills, 1997). Furthermore, feminist research into media reporting on sexual violence finds that mainstream media generally reproduce victim blaming rhetoric (where victims are blamed for the abuse), represent perpetrators as monstrous others or loving partners and fathers, and often write the victims out of the narrative (Cameron, 1990; Clark, 1992). It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with this literature in detail. Instead I focus on violent language use and the construction of subjects within this.

Language as violence

As Judith Butler (1997) points out, subjects come into linguistic existence – meaning that they are recognisable as subjects in relation to other subjects – once they have been called a name. Sometimes name-calling, however, is hurtful and hateful, what she refers to as injurious language. The link between subject constitution and injurious name-calling is, however, a paradox: injurious name-calling fixates, paralyzes, derogates and demeans the subject but it also gives the subject a possibility for social existence (Butler, 1997, p. 2). In order to fully grasp the various

elements of violent language, I turn to a brief exploration of the concepts of interpellation and speech acts.

Butler's theory of injurious language is explained through a combination of Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation and J. L. Austin's speech act theory. In Butler's understanding of Althusser's concept, interpellation is the act of calling someone a name, which then brings that person into being as a recognisable subject. In order for that to make sense we must imagine an impossible situation where a body has not yet been given social definition, or in other words, is not yet accessible or recognisable to us (Butler, 1997, p. 5). Once addressed, or in Althusser's terms interpellated, the person becomes recognisable to us as a subject – and, as Butler would argue, a gendered subject – for example the exclamation when a child is born: "It's a girl". The "recognisability" of a given person is thus crucial to how they come into discursive existence as subjects. A person who does not have an immediately and easily identifiable gender in the meeting with other subjects is less easy to recognise as a gendered subject. The interpellation becomes less decisive and the subject is more likely to be interpellated in a hurtful or harmful way.

Performative speech, or speech acts, are utterances that perform an action (Austin, 1962; MacKinnon, 1993). Austin distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Illocutionary speech acts do what they say in the moment of their utterance, for example "I promise", "I dare you", "I sentence you", "I apologize" (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997, Chapter Introduction). Perlocutionary speech acts produce an effect as a consequence of their utterance, a consequence which follows the utterance, for example, a threat that implies that something will happen after the threat has been uttered (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997, Chapter Introduction). As such "Austinian performativity is about how language constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it." (Sedgwick, 2003: 5). This notion is important for understanding the significance of rape discourse: it does more than just describe the reality of sexual violence: it reproduces and affects our understanding of sexual violence.

Butler argues that language itself is a violent act. This is inspired by Toni Morrison who states that: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence." (Morrison, 1993: 6). Referring Morrison's notion of oppressive language to her own term, violent language, Butler explains that violent language is thus not just a representation of violence or a substitute for the experience of violence: "It enacts its own kind of violence." (Butler, 1997: 9). When language

becomes hurtful or harmful, this type of language functions the same way as an illocutionary speech act: language does not just stand in for the violent act, rather language itself *is* that violent act. A threat, for example, always carries the implicit possibility that it will be carried out – manifesting a hierarchical power difference between the speaker and receiver of a threat. Furthermore, since speaking is itself a bodily act, a threat emphasises the possibility of violence by the body who utters the threat. A threat is then more than just a linguistic and hypothetical act. An interpellation using a hurtful word to bring the subject into existence, has the ability to harm the subject because it invokes a certain historicity connected to the name. This historicity is never explicitly uttered but "has become internal to the name" and gives the name its force through repetition (Butler 1997 p. 36). When traumatic experiences are connected to the historicity of hurtful language, such as experiences of sexual violence, the trauma is not just remembered, it is relived (Ibid.). This is what Butler refers to as "injurious language" as it causes injury to the subject in question.

William C. Gay makes a similar point in claiming that violent language, which he refers to as linguistic violence, historically has occurred alongside physical violence. Violent and sexist language often precedes, rationalises and facilitates physical violence and this is why, he argues, research which focuses on sexist and violent language has the potential to reveal deeper cultural violence as sexist language is a symptom of this violence (Gay, 2007). Catharine MacKinnon similarly argues that violent language acts are not "only words". Rather, she argues, focusing on sexual harassment and sexual violence: "Unwelcome sex talk is an unwelcome sex act" (MacKinnon, 1993: 46). Speaking specifically of threats, she argues that recipients of threats of sexual violence will feel not just terrified of the potentiality of an assault but will feel violated by the threat itself. Researching hate speech, Mari Matsuda (1993) claims that hate speech functions as a vehicle to reinstall social structural domination. Focusing on racist hate speech specifically, she claims that racist speech effectively perpetuates racism (Matsuda, 1993). I argue similarly, that sexist language perpetuates sexism and that humorous rape discourses which excuse perpetrators and blame victims, perpetuate sexual violence.

Butler problematizes two popular views on hate speech and injurious language: that the effect of injurious words is always context-dependent and that some utterances are always offensive regardless of context (Butler, 1997, p. 13). As she points out, none of these statements give an account of the power at work or

explain how the context of the words is invoked. This thesis argues in a similar way for a thorough investigation of the discursive construction of sexual violence, rather than a focus on whether or not the memes might be offensive and what the intention of the poster of said meme might be. The notion of intent will be taken into further scrutiny in the section on humour below. From having established how subjects are discursively constructed within language, I now turn towards the way in which affects work to construct the boundaries between subjects and objects.

The circulation and stickiness of affects

This section outlines my main theoretical influences within feminist theories of affect, mainly drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed. As such, I am interested in feminist readings of affect and will not engage with other readings or the field more broadly. A selection of feminist approaches to affect thus functions as an analytical tool in this thesis rather than a distinct contribution to the scholarship of affect. Ahmed's 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is part of the feminist *turn* to affect which began in the late 1990s. Feminist affect scholars share a common wish to break down the Cartesian mind-body duality that traditionally associates anything relating to the body, including emotions, the irrational, the physical, the natural and the private as female traits while the opposite of this is anything relating to the mind and the rational as male traits (Jaggar, 1992; Jaggar & Bordo, 1989; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012; Probyn, 2005). Feminist scholars have investigated the cultural, social and political effects of a number of different affects such as trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003), pain, loss, and melancholia (W. Brown, 1999; Butler, 2004; Eng & Kazanijan, 2003), and especially shame (Ahmed, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Munt, 2008; Probyn, 2005). Before turning to the key concepts of Ahmed's work, I will add a brief discussion on the terminology of affects and emotions.

A common understanding of the distinction is that "emotion refers to cultural and social expression, whereas affects are of biological and physiological nature" (Probyn, 2005: 11). These distinctions are, however, much debated (Koivunen, 2010). Some feminist scholars are particularly interested in affect, following Probyn's distinction, in order to pursue the bodily potential of a pre-discursive reality (Hemmings, 2005). Ahmed (2004, Chapter Introduction), on the other hand, suggests removing any clear difference in meaning between the two words and makes a theoretical point out of using them interchangeably. She suggests a shift in theoretical approach from defining what emotions *are* to investigating what emotions

do. Consequently, I use affect as a term which includes both the bodily and social aspect of how emotions work in an effort to counter the mind/body dichotomy.

Similar to Judith Butler's notion of the constitution of subjects, Sara Ahmed points to how bodies become recognisable as subjects through the circulation of affects. She describes affects as relational: they circulate between bodies, sticking to some bodies while sliding over others. The stickiness of emotions means that some affects tend to stick more to some bodies than others. Affective signs, such as words or objects, will similarly tend to stick to some bodies more than others (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 89–92). Drawing on Marxist theory, Ahmed points to how affects accumulate over time, creating a sort of "affective value" through the circulation of affects between different bodies (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 44–49). Suggesting that affects are neither inside the subject or something learned from the outside world, Ahmed points out that affects "are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects." (Ahmed, 2004, p. 10). In other words, subjects and objects come into recognisable existence through the circulation of affects.

Teresa Brennan (2004) has a similar understanding of this circulation of affects, what she refers to as the 'transmission of affect'. She describes how affects emerge either from within a person or from without, from other people or from an atmosphere. This explanation, however, still relies on the notion that affects take residence in bodies, which Ahmed questions.

A final key concept of Ahmed's is the slide of metonymy (Ahmed, 2004). Just like some affects stick to some bodies, so do certain words stick together and create associations between both bodies and words. Through histories of naming, some words might slide into other words, making links and sticking words together even when it seems that arguments are made to separate the words. Using discursive racism as an example, Ahmed points to how repeatedly grouping words such as Arab and Muslim together with words such as fundamentalism or terrorist in accounts of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, make the words stick together and "constitute their coincidence as more than just temporal" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 76). In other words, the slide of metonymy sticks the words terrorist and Islam together as an "implicit argument about the causal relations between the two" (Ibid.).

Ahmed argues that affects matter in a similar way as Butler's notion that language matters. Butler points out that the "boundary, fixity and surface" of subjects, as well as the world around subjects, is produced through the repetition of

norms (Butler, 1993, p. xviii). Significantly, these norms appear only through the concealment of this repetition: language and affect work in subtle ways. As per discourse and language use, affects are performative and generate meaning, not only by naming that which already exists, but by bringing into discursive existence that which it names. A poststructuralist, feminist approach to language and affects, thus, has the potential to not only point to these norms but to outline the structures that keep them in place. As I show in this thesis, affective language works to "objectify" certain bodies through the use of gendered, sexualised and shaming language. Having discussed Ahmed's key terms in her conceptualisation of affects, I turn to a discussion of two specific affects: shame and disgust as these are key to parts of my analysis in later chapters.

The discursive construction of shame and disgust

Shame has been of particular interest to feminist and queer scholars focusing on the shame/pride dichotomy, often inspired by LGBTQ activism, which historically has worked towards removing any notion of shameful stigma connected to non-heterosexual sexualities. My interest in shame lies in the intersection between shame, sexuality and gender, as well as how it sticks to different bodies in different ways.

Referencing psychologist Silvan Tomkins' classification of different types of affects (Tomkins, 1995), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick carries out a poststructuralist analysis of shame in which she argues that shame is always interlinked with interest (Sedgwick, 2003). Building on this argument, Elspeth Probyn explains that we must be interested in someone or something in order to feel shame when that interest is disconnected (Probyn, 2005). Shame is thus an embodied affect where blushing reveals our interest. Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 104) offers a similar reading of the connection between shame and interest which she defines as a double play of concealment and exposure. When we fail to live up to social norms and we are witnessed by an *other* in that failure, we experience shame. This can be an imagined other: the mere thought of an *other* witnessing us intensifies the experience of shame. But in order for that affect to be recognised as shame, we must be invested in that other: the other's view must matter to us. In this sense, the other equals an ideal: "In shame, I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other" (Ahmed, 2004: 106). Subjects are thus constituted through expressions of shame which simultaneously reveals how shame sticks to different bodies in different ways.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that shame could be positive and productive. She considers shame to be a transformative force central to performativity, which can engender queer agency (Sedgwick, 2003). This is the foundation for Sally Munt's work (2008) which points out how shame can have a positive political potential when otherwise stigmatized bodies come together in communities of shame. An example of this is LGBTQ activists who celebrate pride as an antidote to shame and Black Pride movements who celebrate black culture and embrace their African heritage. These horizontal communities can form collective desires to claim new forms of legitimate identities and lead to political rights and protection. Douglas Crimp is also inspired by Sedgwick's theorization of shame as a positive and productive force, which in his words can have the capacity to articulate "collectivities of the shamed" (Crimp, 2002: 66). Judith/Jack Halberstam (2005), however, problematises Sedgwick and Crimp's positive spin on shame in pointing out how gay shame too often becomes universalised as a white, male shame. Halberstam points out how gay shame for women and people of colour creates very different types of abjection and how it simultaneously leads to very different types of political strategies. Furthermore, Halberstam questions the notion that shame has a transformative force which can and must lead to pride in stating that women and people of colour might not have access to pride in the same way as white gay men do (Halberstam, 2005).

Halberstam's critique is part of a general discussion about what to do with shame. This discussion is centred around the shame/pride dichotomy and is instigated by Sedgwick's notion that we should stay with the shame as it has political, queer and anti-normative potential. Probyn agrees with this notion, arguing that we should embrace the way that shame enables us to reflect on who we are individually and in relation to each other (Probyn, 2005: 8). Berlant, however, questions what she refers to as an "orientation towards interiority" in queer studies, asking why "the project of queerness [must] start inside of the subject and spread out from there?" (Berlant, 2002: 74). Halberstam echoes Berlant in problematizing the notion that change must come through an adjustment of the self, rather than paying critical attention to social, political and economic influences (Halberstam, 2005: 224).

Ahmed positions herself outside of this debate. She disagrees with the notion that embracing shame means positioning oneself as non-normative. This, she claims, is problematic as it means taking pride in being non-normative as a queer subject.

Rather she suggests investigating how one is affected by relations to and differences from the normative, as this could open up "different possibilities for living" (Ahmed, 2004: 107, note 5).

The feminist scholarship of shame has strong queer theoretical roots which both encourages and problematizes an exploration of the transformative and positive power of shame. Most significant to my own interest in rape discourse is Ahmed's and Munt's focus on how subjects are constructed through expressions of shame and how certain subjects are stigmatised on basis of their gender and their sexuality. As will become apparent during my analysis of Internet memes, shame works very differently for male and female sexuality, especially when it intersects with representations of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. While claiming a position of shamelessness might be accessible to some bodies, others will tend to be sticky with shame with no possibility of ridding themselves of that shame. The possibility of ridding oneself of shame, of turning shame into pride and being shameless is thus more readily available for subjects in positions of privilege (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018).

Disgust works in similar ways to shame, in that it only comes into existence in the meeting with an *other*. Disgust does not reside in a certain body – no body is inherently disgusting. Some bodies, however, are more easily felt as being disgusting – as being objects of disgust. Ahmed argues that the feeling of disgust emerges when a body or object comes too close (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 85–89). Significantly, like with shame, disgust sticks more to some bodies than others, creating a feeling that those bodies are disgusting as if the presence of those bodies is what makes us feel unwell. Referring to Butler's (1993) notion of performativity and speech acts (as discussed above), Ahmed argues that naming something as disgusting positions that body as an other – as an object of disgust.

Crucially, affects not only create bodies as affective others. They also create subjects who stick together through a shared affective relation to others. Through expressions of disgust, for example, a distinction is created between a disgusting "them" which in turn constructs an "us" (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). Affective engagement on social media platforms is explored by feminist scholarship on digital media. Some scholars explore specific affects such as anger (Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019) and shame (Stenberg, 2018). Some of the research investigates how feminist platforms and hashtag campaigns can work as 'intimate publics' (Berlant, 2011) where women share experiences of sexual violence in a *consciousness environment*

of affect and empathy (C. Harrington, 2018; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Mendes, Keller & Ringrose (2018) consider the *affective intensities* of discourses of sexual violence within networked communities of disclosure. Massanari (2019) investigates how feminists speak back against male centrality and misogyny online, while Allan (2016) explores the ways in which Men's Rights Activists online deploy affects in discourses of self-victimisation.

Fear and shame work in distinctive ways within online communication. Fear works to restrict some bodies in public spaces and is thus an efficient silencing strategy online (Jane, 2017a). Narratives of feminine vulnerability thus position public spaces as potentially dangerous while private spaces in turn are constructed as safe. "*Fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others.*" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 69). Fear is thus tied to notions of space and mobility, which is experienced differently by different bodies. Fear as a result of the use of hateful and threatening language directed at women online is often met with advice for how women can stay safe online (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017a). Exonerating the perpetrators of the hateful and harmful rhetoric and ignoring the way that online life is now indistinguishable from offline life (especially for people whose jobs are dependent on an online presence), women are told not to engage with abusers and leave the spaces that make them feel unsafe. Women's safety work is their own responsibility and the fear installed in them through misogynist discourse and outright threats to their lives and existence restricts their access to public spaces online and offline.

Banet-Weiser (2018) makes similar points about shame in that it works to make women invisible. Shaming, she argues, "is a mechanism of power designated to humiliate" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 70). Shaming, however, works differently for men and women, both in terms of quantity and content. When a woman experiences public shaming through ridicule and sexualisation of her body through online harassment, sharing of intimate photos or rape threats; shaming functions as a policing of the female body. Victim blaming discourses about how to dress, behave, and not to take nude photos, thus limits the freedom of expression for women in the public sphere and ultimately works to silence and make women invisible in online spaces.

Ahmed's research on affects investigates how affects circulate, stick and slide between bodies, objects and words, thus creating subjects as recognisable within an economy of affects. Butler's and Ahmed's scholarship on language and affect,

respectively, points to how naming brings subjects into existence while simultaneously positioning certain bodies as objects – as others. Their research allows for an identification of the discursive norm and the discursive other. This notion is explored throughout this thesis, as I trace how Internet memes discursively other victims as well as perpetrators of violence. In the following section I discuss how the scholarship on humour can function as a conceptual framework for understanding how the Internet memes support a gendered "us" vs. "them" discourse. This section builds upon the notion that language both reflects and creates the reality it describes, which means that language use, even when constructed within a humorous discursive space, is never harmless.

Feminist scholarship on humour: the construction of the just-a-joke discourse

Humour tends to be defined as a quality that a person can *have* and having a 'sense of humour' is considered important for successful human interaction. If someone is considered to lack a sense of humour, they are deemed lacking a vital human quality (Wickberg, 1998). Rather than focus on scholarship which aims to define humour, the following discussion focuses on the scholarship which applies a critical approach to this social aspect of humour.

Following Butler's and Ahmed's notions of how language and affect reflect social norms and construct subjects in relation to each other, I discuss the ways in which the humour scholarship allows for an analysis of normative constructions of gender and sexuality within online humorous spaces. In the next chapter I discuss at length how the three platforms, 9gag, Imgur and Reddit function as humorous discursive spaces, as users are encouraged to upload humorous content. For now, I turn to the humour scholarship in order to highlight the ways in which claims of intent can be mobilised to provide an alibi against harm and offence. This, I refer to as the just-a-joke discourse: the notion that "anything goes" as long as the speaker can credibly claim that the statement was *meant* as a joke. This approach not only justifies harmful language use but also delegitimises any position of offence from such humorous language use.

The humour scholarship in this section extends to disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, communication studies, linguistics, anthropology and media studies. What the scholars have in common, however, is a critical approach to

humour as a social act. The first part of this section explores the scholarship which discusses humour as a practice of inclusion and exclusion. The second part includes scholarship on humour as a gendered practice, including discussions of three key concepts: harmlessness, intentionality and irony. Finally, the third part of the section explores the scholarship on humourless feminists and feminist killjoys.

Humour and ridicule as practices of inclusion and exclusion

Humour works as a way to simultaneously include and exclude certain people. Humour scholars point to how humour functions as a social act which creates and upholds social boundaries and maintains the social norm (Billig, 2005; Kuipers, 2009). Through the possibility of ridicule, humour then maintains the social order, as the mere possibility that one might be ridiculed ensures that the members of a given society will comply with the customs and habits of said society (Billig, 2005, Chapter 9). Humour thus works as an indicator of compliance and as a means of social control.

Laughter is the primary indicator of the success of a given humorous interaction, but it also signals belonging and defines outsiderness: joining the laughter means inclusion in a certain group, while the absence of laughter signals difference and distance and results in exclusion. The absence of laughter is, however, often read as a failure to "get the joke" rather than a protest against a potentially offensive and harmful joke. Laughter then functions as an affective bodily signifier which either supports the shared happiness of a group or excludes outsiders. When anticipated laughter fails to occur, it functions as a powerful rhetorical tool to signal disapproval, what Michael Billig (2005, Chapter 8) refers to as "unlaughter". As I explore further in the section on feminist killjoys below, the person who does not join in expressions of happiness, such as laughter, is considered to sabotage the shared moment of fun and happiness of the rest of the group (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010c). Elise Kramer builds on Billig's notion of unlaughter by claiming that in order for us to find a joke funny we must at the same time imagine someone somewhere who would not find it funny (Kramer, 2011). She thus suggests that our amusement depends on an imagined hypothetical other's lack of amusement. Unlaughter can in this way both function as a tool of disruption and protest as well as a useful concept for understanding how humour affectively unites and divides. Billig refers to this as the paradoxical quality of humour: it is simultaneously social and anti-social (Billig, 2005, p. 176). Most significantly, humour can unite and divide simultaneously when

one group laughs at another group – such as a stand-up comedian inviting the audience to laugh at marginalised people, as will be discussed in the following section. Sara Ahmed's notion of stickiness can work to understand this mechanism: laughter sticks certain bodies together. Subjects become recognisable through laughter, which signals belonging and "likeness", or through unlaughter, which is read as a lack of humour, a disruption of happiness and a position of difference. Humour thus draws up the social norms and designates subject positions as either insiders or outsiders.

An important part of how humour maintains the social norm is through ridicule. Michael Billig (2005, pp. 202–211) points to two different types of humour which can be seen as forms of ridicule: disciplinary humour, which mocks those who break the social rules and norms – thus maintaining social norms – and rebellious humour, which mocks the social rules and thus might be seen as challenging those rules. It should be noted, however, that this distinction can be contentious, in that one person might consider a joke to be mocking the norms, while someone else might perceive it as upholding those norms. This will tend to be dependent on privilege and reflective of whether the joke punches up or down. Furthermore, while a joke might appear to mock those in power – thus appear to be rebellious – it might simultaneously discipline marginalised people. Rebellious humour might then in fact have a disciplinary function (Billig, 2005, pp. 211–214). An example of this is memes that ridicule Weinstein's appearance, while simultaneously blaming his victims for not considering this a warning sign. Chapter 6 examines this point.

Gender and humour

Humour is a mechanism for challenging as well as upholding gender stereotypes. It is also an instrument for delineating difference, for declaring allegiance and alignment and, as such, a practice of inclusion and exclusion. The scholarship points to how this practice is gendered (Crawford, 2003) which is what I will discuss in the following.

There are two tendencies within the research on humour as inclusionary and exclusionary: research that points out how gender is constructed as a binary opposition which results in "gender wars" and research which shows how humour often constructs white, heterosexual men as the norm and excludes women, non-heterosexual people and people of colour.

The first strand of humour research investigates humorous discourse which supports gender essentialist and gender binary discourses of "natural" gender differences (Shifman & Lemish, 2010). This type of humour includes feminist and postfeminist ridicule of men and Men's Rights Activists (Shifman & Lemish, 2010) and men's ridicule of women and feminism.[3] Within an online context, a small amount of research is emerging on feminist voices using humour to speak back against misogynist discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019; Rentschler, 2014; Sills et al., 2016).

The second strand of humour research points out how humour – especially sexist humour – tends to create an "us versus them" duality, inscribed in a patriarchal power hierarchy designed to oppress and subordinate certain groups of people (usually non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male individuals) (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). Building on notions of performativity (Butler, 1990) and "doing gender" (C. West & Zimmerman, 1987), Bemiller and Schneider (2010) discuss the gendered language which sexist jokes reproduce and with which they contribute to a patriarchal ideology in which men and women are inherently different with women always assigned a submissive position to men.

In order to discuss the gendered aspect of inclusion and exclusion within humour, I find it useful to draw out three key concepts: harmlessness, intentionality and irony.

Harmlessness refers to how jokes and humorous language are often framed as innocent and harmless – what I refer to as the just-a-joke discourse. As Kramer (2011, p. 146) points out, jokes are commonly framed as pragmatic acts which are empty from denotation. The speaker of the joke might add that "it was only a joke". This is what Salvatore Attardo calls the "decommitment" function of humour, meaning that a person separates themselves from any serious or literal meaning of what they just said by claiming that it was meant as a joke (Attardo, 1993, p. 554). As long as the audience of the joke believes that the speaker means no ill-intent, the joke will be perceived as harmless (Kramer, 2011).

Bemiller and Schneider refer to sexist jokes as a "particularly dangerous" form of gendered language because jokes are told under the guise of humour, which implies that they are not to be taken seriously (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). They point out that the reality produced by sexist jokes is that of a patriarchal system with

[3] See the final section of this chapter for a discussion on Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and the research on this phenomenon.

real experiences of subjugation for women. The consequence of sexist jokes is thus a naturalisation and justification of gendered violence. What is important to note in connection with the just-a-joke discourse is that we can never assume that a specific joke will not induce harm in the same way we can never assume that a certain joke will *always* induce harm. This echoes Butler's (1997) contention that injurious language is always context dependent and that some language is always offensive regardless of context (see discussion on this in the first section of this chapter, pp. 25-27). As she points out, none of these stances account for the power at work and the historicity invoked when injurious words are repeated. Similarly, I will argue that rather than discussing which jokes might or might not induce harm and who should and should not tell certain jokes, we should direct the discussion towards how language and humour construct and repeat certain ideas about gender and violence and their affective grounding and implications. Significantly, the notion that humour is harmless privileges certain normative ideas about who is entitled to feel harm and delegitimises often marginalised positions of offence. The just-a-joke discourse is, however, vigorously defended – especially in online spaces as I will discuss towards the end of this chapter – positioning sexist and racist jokes as rebelling against "political correctness" (Billig, 2005, pp. 241–242).

The second concept is intentionality, which is conceptually tied to the notion of harmlessness: humour is constructed as harmless as long as the speaker[4] can credibly claim that they *intend* to be funny and mean no harm. Consequently, within the intentionality discourse, ill-intent is denied and no audience can legitimately claim to have been harmed (Pérez & Greene, 2016, p. 269). Intentionality is thus a rhetorical tool in which harmful and hurtful jokes are legitimised based on the assumption that the "sensible" audience will assume no ill-intent from the speaker. Elise Kramer's (2011) research on jokes as communicative acts shows how Western societies put emphasis on the intent of the speaker. Thus there is less emphasis on the semantic or referential content of the joke, implying that the actual words uttered are less important than what the speaker intended to convey. In other words, the discourse of intentionality distracts from a critical approach to the content of the utterance and legitimises violent and misogynist language use. This issue is complicated further in cases where the intentionality cannot be easily determined –

[4] I use speaker to cover both written and spoken language. Though my research focuses on written language, the scholarship I include here includes both spoken and written language. Furthermore, throughout the thesis I include notions of hate speech and free speech when addressing both written and spoken language.

such as on social media where the speaker might be a stranger or anonymous. Furthermore, in online contexts, it cannot be denied that harm might be intended. As the scholarship on trolling suggests (which is further explored towards the end of this chapter), the purpose of online interaction might very well be to provoke and harm the person or people addressed in a given interaction (Phillips, 2012, 2015b). I highlight intentionality here as this thesis aims to go beyond the intention of the meme producers by focusing on the discourse produced by the memes.

The third concept, irony, has close ties to both intentionality and harmlessness. It must be noted that irony is just one aspect of humour and that jokes can be non-ironic the same way that irony can be non-humorous. This, however, only adds to the complexity of ironic jokes. As Imelda Whelehan (2000, p. 67) points out, irony provides such linguistic ambiguity that it is possible to state a certain point of view and at the same time claim complete distance from it or even opposition to it. Whelehan argues though, that even if sexist ironic jokes might seem like isolated incidences, they should be considered part of women's everyday experience of sexism and discrimination (Whelehan, 2000, p. 69). Literary studies scholar Lara Cox discusses irony in rape jokes performed by comedians. She points out how irony is dependent on "discursive communities" (Cox, 2015, p. 967). These discursive communities are made up of the specific comedian's fan base, the ones who know whether to take the comedian's words literally or not. This then simultaneously excludes the group of people unfamiliar with the comedian's type of humour and assumed ironic intention. What makes this phenomenon problematic, is the fact that those who are excluded from understanding the irony are the targets of the joke, the ones who in comedy terms are known as "the butt of the joke" (Cox, 2015, p. 967). The success of an ironic joke thus depends on the existence of someone who will not "get" the ironic nature of the joke, similar to Elise Kramer's reading of Michael Billig's notion of unlaughter (Billig, 2005; Kramer, 2011). The use of irony in online spaces reframes misogynist discourse as harmless fun.

These three concepts, intentionality, harmlessness and irony, are significant factors in constructing the just-a-joke discourse. This then creates no room or legitimacy for any harmed, offended or traumatised party. The speaker of the joke on the other hand speaks from a safe subject position with the support of anyone who has the 'right' sense of humour. However, the notion that humour is harmless and that free speech should never be limited, results in a reproduction of gendered social norms where the butt of the joke tends to be those bodies that deviate from the white,

heterosexual, male norm. While humour has the ability to unite and speak truth to power, it simultaneously functions to other and exclude marginalised groups.

The construction of the humourless feminist and the feminist killjoy

Feminist research on sexist humour shows us how the just-a-joke discourse constructs any criticism as irrelevant, oversensitive and illegitimate. So, where does that leave subjects who do feel harmed by a joke or who do not find the joke funny? In the following I explore the notion of the humourless feminist.

Pérez and Greene (2016) point out how feminism is ridiculed within a patriarchal culture where feminists are labelled as humourless. Humour thus works hand in hand with anti-feminist discourse to discipline otherwise critical voices and to reinforce the comic-feminist binary (Pérez & Greene, 2016). Bemiller and Schneider (2010) use Marilyn Frye's (1983) notion of the double bind to explain the consequence for women of sexist jokes. Within a patriarchal system, women find themselves in situations where their choices are limited and where any choice will leave them exposed to penalty, censure or deprivation. When told a sexist joke, women are left with a problematic choice between two options which will both be wrong: either laugh at the joke and be complicit in their own humiliation, as well as condone patriarchy, or express dismay and point out the sexism of the joke, which will lead to exclusion from a given group (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010, p. 462). The consequence of the latter decision is to be ostracized from the group and to be labelled as a humourless feminist. The most important point here is the fact that sexist jokes create a difficult social and affective environment for women, but at the same time are constructed as harmless fun. Kramer (2011) echoes this point in stating that women and especially feminists are described as inherently incapable of appreciating jokes.

The consequence for women protesting sexist and misogynist humour might be accusations of ruining the fun for the rest of the group – along the lines of Sara Ahmed's figure, the Feminist Killjoy (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). This figure is a much used way for scholars of sexist humour to describe how people that are not amused are often portrayed (Cox, 2015; Niccolini, 2016). The feminist killjoy springs out of Ahmed's research on happiness (Ahmed, 2010c), about who has access to happiness and about how we express happiness. Whilst I do not want to equate happiness with laughter or humour, Ahmed's arguments resonate with my research to the extent that they also point to inclusion and exclusion, unity and

division through bodily and affective expression – similar to the notions of laughter and unlaughter. Happiness, Ahmed argues, functions as a way for people to be together, to be placed within happiness together, and happiness thus becomes a way of justifying social norms and a way of grouping people together (Ahmed, 2010c).

A comparison can be made to Laurent Berlant's work on optimism as an instrument of power and privilege. In her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), she argues that the notion of the good life and the promise that it is available to everyone can be seen as a marker of privilege. Optimism is cruel when it keeps us all oriented towards a certain notion of the good life, which is only good for some and might be damaging to others. Berlant thus draws attention to how affective relationships organise subjects, power and privilege in a similar way to Ahmed's work on happiness.

When someone does not experience happiness from the same things as the rest of the group, that person becomes alienated. And that is the case of the feminist killjoy. The feminist killjoy is the person who protests, who speaks up against sexism. The protest is read as an unhappy topic and the killjoy is seen as bringing the rest of the group down. The feminist killjoy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others. Ahmed's point is, however, that the feminist killjoy points to the bad feelings that already exist but are hidden away, displaced and negated by the general feeling of joy and happiness expressed by the group (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010c). Significantly, when feminists protest sexism and misogyny, the discussion becomes about the feminists being unhappy, rather than what the feminists are unhappy about (Cox, 2015, pp. 967–968). I would argue, that the feminists are perceived as unhappy namely because they are considered humourless and, if only they had a sense of humour and could accept a joke for just being a joke, they would be able to join the happiness along with everyone else. The consequence of this is the fact that the construction of the humourless feminist and the feminist killjoy distract from discussions of systemic sexism and misogyny within humorous language use.

Throughout this section I have argued how humour – like language – is not harmless. It reproduces and upholds certain social norms and works as a practice of inclusion and exclusion. The humour scholarship points out this practice in terms of laughter as an affective signal of insiderness and outsiderness. Considering the notions of unlaughter and ridicule, I have discussed the ways in which humour sticks certain people together while simultaneously excluding others. When humour intersects with gender, particularly in sexist jokes, the research points to how this

discourse tends to reproduce gender stereotypes in which women are subordinate to men. Considering the concepts of harmlessness, intentionality and irony allows for an understanding of the subtleties of humour which often ignores and excuses misogyny and harmful language use. The just-a-joke discourse delegitimises any position of harm and protest. Feminist voices of protest are stigmatised as humourless and as killjoys which in turn identifies a normative "good sense of humour" as inherently male-centred. When humour is constructed as harmless, it means that voices of protest are silenced and othered and feminist voices of protest are constructed as humourless and therefore illegitimate. The consequence of the just-a-joke discourse and the othering of feminist voices of protest is a distraction from systemic misogyny and sexism.

The following section turns to humorous language about rape. Here the just-a-joke discourse serves to legitimate and trivialise sexual violence. Throughout the next section, I highlight research on debates about rape jokes which shows how the just-a-joke discourse often divides the debaters in two opposing and gendered groups: the male comedians and the humourless feminists. Before going into this, the section starts with a conceptual discussion of rape culture which I define and situate within feminist theory historically and conceptually. This overview is to function as a theoretical and conceptual frame for my analysis of rape discourse in Internet memes throughout my thesis.

Rape culture and rape jokes

From research on humorous language in the above section, I turn to jokes about sexual violence and, more specifically, rape jokes. The just-a-joke discourse discussed in the above section is prevalent in this discussion of rape jokes as well. The intent of the speaker, and the construction of humour as harmless thus also factor into the research on rape jokes.

My aim is to situate the scholarship on rape jokes within the wider feminist scholarship on sexual violence and rape culture, so first I turn to a discussion of this. The section is constructed around Nicola Gavey's (2019) work on the cultural construction of rape as her work is contemporary and her methodological approach is similar to my own in aiming to describe power structures and dismantling social norms about gender, sexuality and sexual violence. The first part of this section thus defines sexual violence and rape culture. Then I turn to a scholarly debate on how to

conceptualise sexual violence within language and the discursive construction of perpetrators and victims. Finally, I review the literature on rape jokes. The purpose of this section of the chapter is to situate my research within a conceptual framework of sexual violence and rape culture and to identify a link with the humour research on rape jokes.

The continuum of sexual violence

Before turning to the scholarship on rape culture, I will define sexual violence through the lens of Liz Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence. Based on interviews with women about their experiences, she develops a continuum which covers everything from sexual harassment, flashing, obscene phone calls and threats of violence to coercive sex, pressure to have sex, sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape and incest. Significantly, these experiences are related, occur throughout a lifetime and cannot readily be distinguished (Kelly, 1988). Kelly argues that the continuum both allows us to talk about all kinds of sexual violence and point to common traits and consequences of these experiences. Furthermore, it can lead to discussions of experiences of sexual violence which are often characterised as harmless (such as street harassment), by comparing the reactions of these women to those who have experienced more commonly acknowledged incidences of sexual violence (such as rape). The continuum puts the experience of women at the centre, taking their experiences seriously rather than focusing on the perpetrators.

Karen Boyle (2019c) builds on this notion and encourages "continuum thinking" within research on sexual violence. She suggests thinking about continuums in the plural, expanding on the multiplicity of sexual violence in terms of how it is experienced in different ways by victims/survivors, as well as how men's violence is portrayed and normalised across notions of hegemonic masculinity. Significantly, continuum thinking means pointing to connections rather than equivalences (Boyle, 2019c), which in a sense is what Alyssa Milano's #MeToo tweet aimed to do by getting a sense of the "magnitude" of women's experiences with sexual violence and harassment (@Alyssa_Milano, 2017; Boyle, 2019a, Chapter 3). Throughout my thesis I use the term sexual violence to describe the variety of experiences of abuse in order to include the actions of Weinstein, Spacey, C.K. and others without equating the actions or the abuse. Similarly, when I use the term rape culture in the following, and include research on rape specifically, this is in

order to incorporate research which conceptually can be applied to research on sexual violence more broadly.

Defining rape culture

My definition of rape culture relies on Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth's *Transforming a Rape Culture* from 1993, in which rape culture is defined as "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" (Buchwald et al., 1993, p. vii). They point out that within a rape culture, sexuality is constructed as violent and violence is encouraged in portrayals of sexual acts. Rape is described as existing within a continuum of violence (L. Kelly, 1988) and physical and emotional violence against women is considered the norm which thus condones rape (Buchwald et al., 1993).

Rape culture as a term was coined by radical second wave feminists in the 1970s (Field, 2004; Gavey, 2019). The New York Radical Feminists first wrote about the term in their 1974 book *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* where they call for a "revolutionary transformation of our society" in order to eliminate rape (New York Radical Feminists, 1974, p. 250). Following this was the controversial 1975 film *Rape Culture* by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich, which discusses the cultural normalisation of rape (Rentschler, 2014). The same year saw the publication of Susan Brownmiller's influential book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* in which she refers to rape as a "process of intimidation" where "*all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear."(Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15). In other words, rape exists in a culture which facilitates its existence.

Heterosexual sex has historically been portrayed by the male aggressor and dominator versus the female passive and submissive party in need of courtship and sexual encouragement. Romance has in literature, films and popular culture been portrayed in terms of a man pursuing a woman until her resistance melts away and she gives in to what will then automatically become sexual pleasure (Gavey, 2019). Dianne Herman (1984) adds that rape culture encourages rape by teaching people that it is natural and normal that sexual encounters involve aggressive behaviour by men. This is what Nicola Gavey refers to as the "male sexual drive discourse" (a term which she credits to Wendy Hollway (1989)). Gavey argues that there is a cultural taken-for-granted notion about a man's sexuality as being uncontrollable. Within this heteronormative discourse, men are the subjects of the male sexual drive and women are the objects. Consequently, "men are always-already ready for sex,

and it is women (or women's bodies, or pictures of women's bodies!) who activate this interest" (Gavey, 2019, p. 99). The discourse portrays heterosexual sex as something that men do to women, in turn resulting in sexual assault being a naturalised and legitimate by-product of natural heterosexual male desire. Rape culture simultaneously "provides a normative pattern for (hetero)sex that makes a man's rape of a woman possible, and at the same time plausibly deniable (it was "just sex" not "rape")." (Gavey, 2019, p. 228).

In close relation to the male sexual drive discourse, Gavey suggests applying Debra Bergoffen's (2014) concept of the myth of masculinity to analyses of gender and sexual violence. Discussing male rape, Bergoffen notes how "patriarchal gender codes identify masculinity with invulnerability and translate this abstract concept into the seemingly benign power to protect and the abusive criminal power to rape"(Bergoffen, 2014:174). Within a hierarchy of gender, the myth frames men as inherently dominant, superior and entitled, justifying a dominance over women and others. Instances of misogyny and homophobia are thus reframed as normal and some kinds of sexual violence are recast as "just sex". Significantly, the myth of masculinity functions as a burden on men which can explain the harm men suffer from sexual violence as well as the violence that some men perpetuate. The myth of masculinity is inherently fragile and under threat which means that any defence against "real or perceived" threats to their masculinity within the heteronormative gendered order is justified (Gavey, 2019: 250).

The consequence of the male sexual drive discourse is victim blaming and rape myths. Victim blaming refers to the tendency of blaming or somehow holding the victim responsible for being raped. This adheres to the notion that 'good girls don't get raped', that the rape victim must somehow have encouraged the perpetrator, acted irresponsibly (drinking alcohol and flirting), or having previously been engaged in sexual relations with the perpetrator. Legislation and courtroom discourses maintain the notion of victim blaming (Gavey, 2019; Maybrey, 2004). Rape myths are often instrumental to instances of victim blaming, as they lay the groundwork for inaccurate but widely held and widely circulated beliefs about rape. Rape myths include the idea that the perpetrator is always a stranger and that it is impossible for a woman to be raped by her partner (Estrich, 1987). Popular culture, media representations and legal structures reinforce and repeat these rape myths (Gavey, 2019). A much-used rape myth is that of rape fantasies. This suggests that rape fantasies are common parts of women's sexual desires and that all women

secretly want to be raped. This construction of female sexuality leads to discrediting of victims' experiences of sexual assault in cultural and media representations as well as within the justice system (Gavey, 2019). Victim blaming and rape myths support the construction of sexual violence as a woman's problem and not a systemic societal issue. Discourses of victim blaming and rape myths – which will be exemplified in my analysis of Internet memes – not only minimise sexual violence but also excuse and justify it (Gavey, 2019).

Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence and Karen Boyle's concept of continuum thinking informs my approach to sexual violence throughout this thesis. The feminist research on rape culture points to the gendered nature of sexual violence and the systemic gender hierarchies in place which enables the abuse to take place. Nicola Gavey's notion of the male sexual drive discourse and the myth of masculinity enables an understanding of male sexuality as inherently dominant and aggressive, naturalising men's sexual violence against women and reconceptualising much of this violence as "just sex". I the following section I turn to a discussion within the feminist scholarship on how to define sexual violence.

The discursive construction of sexual violence and victims

Within the feminist research, a debate exists on how to characterise sexual violence. This debate has been centred around whether to define sexual violence as violence, as power or as sex (Boyle, 2019b; Gavey, 2019). Positioning sexual violence as violence emerged from feminist activism in the 1970s as a reaction to how sexual violence was positioned as sex. According to feminist activists, this characterisation was based on men's experiences and it ignored the experiences of the women they assaulted (Boyle, 2019b).

Conceptualising sexual violence as power allows for a consideration of structural violence and oppression within gendered power relations of the patriarchy. This feminist conceptualisation of sexual violence as power is often attributed to Susan Brownmiller's definition of rape culture as "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15, emphasis in original). As Boyle (2019a, Chapter 3) notes, the reading of sexual violence as violence-not-sex or power-not-sex in relation to the allegations against Weinstein has been a useful way for feminists to respond to his explanation that he "came of age" in a different time when sexual morals and interaction with co-workers were different than they are today. His "apology"

focuses on how the sexual morals and culture has changed and thus distracts from his assaults and his abuse of power.

The feminist push to read sexual violence as violence or power has, since the 1980s, been complicated by feminist scholars who insist that sexual violence is also about sex. As discussed above, Nicola Gavey's (2019) concept of the male sexual drive discourse and Liz Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence allows for a conceptualisation of the violence of heterosexual sex. Understanding sexual violence as both sex and violence (experienced in different ways by different people in different situations) thus acknowledges both the many different experiences women have of men's violence and harassment and it allows us to understand this as a structural problem within normative heterosexual sex.

Based on legal discourse and the judicial distinction between different types of sexual assault, Susan Estrich (1987) introduces the notion of 'real rape'. This she defines as the cases of rape where the victim is most likely to be believed and where the case is most likely to be prosecuted. These types of rape are more likely to be committed by strangers and to take place outdoors. The perpetrator will probably use violence and the assault will cause visible injury (Estrich, 1987). The opposite cases, which Estrich refers to as 'simple rape', occur when the victim knows the perpetrator and when no force has been used, leaving no visible injury on the victim. The perpetrators are less likely to be sentenced or even prosecuted in those cases which in turn renders the assault invisible (Estrich, 1987).

This distinction, which is reinforced by cultural representations of rape (Gavey, 2019), has consequences for positions of victimhood. What constitutes a 'legitimate' or believable victim (Ehrlich, 2001) depends on the circumstances of the sexual assault and whether the perpetrator is considered a legitimate perpetrator. Thus, 'legitimate' perpetrators are unknown to their victims and commit sexual assault using force and causing injury. 'Legitimate' victims are those who have been sexually assaulted by those perpetrators and the construction of the legitimate victim and the legitimate perpetrator are thus interdependent. The concepts of a 'legitimate' victim and 'real' rape render the majority of sexual assaults invisible.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of victimhood depends on the reactions of the victims of sexual violence. As Gavey and Schmidt (2011) suggest, a "Trauma of rape" discourse, which constructs rape as always traumatic for victim/survivors, might not always be helpful. While the recognition of the psychological harm of rape is important and resonates with some victim/survivors, the notion that rape always

has a crippling effect leading to trauma makes other experiences invisible.[5] The "trauma of rape" discourse then becomes the universalising polar opposite to a discourse which minimizes rape and as such it might function to other and stigmatise victim/survivors as always traumatised by this unique experience. The consequence of the "trauma of rape" discourse might thus be a delegitimization of victim positions for those bodies that do not seem to "do" victim in a recognisable way. This is particularly evident for the Hollywood actresses discussing their experiences of sexual violence during #MeToo, as will be developed further in Chapter 5.

The notion of the legitimate victim is complicated further when considering how women are overwhelmingly the victims of sexual violence and men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the representation of female victims is often distinguished based on their perceived level of sexual attractiveness as well as how they position themselves as sexual and sexualised subjects. For the purpose of this aspect, I find it useful to introduce Helen Benedict's notion of the virgin/vamp dichotomy (Benedict, 1992). Her research shows how media discourses categorise female victims in one of these two opposing categories. The virgin is sexually chaste and is attacked by a perpetrator who tends to be characterised as a monster – a sexual deviant. The vamp, on the other hand, is portrayed as sexually promiscuous and is blamed for putting herself in a situation where she tempted a man, who is unable to control his natural sexual desire. The blame for the sexual violence is thus entirely removed from the male perpetrator and put on the female victim.

The feminist research on sexual violence points to how it exists within a continuum of experiences and how it exists within a rape culture that encourages male sexual aggression and normalises sexual violence as "just sex". In the following section I turn to how this spills into humour about sexual violence.

Rape jokes

The early 2010s saw an increased popular interest and much debate about the phenomenon of rape jokes. Much of this coincided with an increased interest in the concept of rape culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gavey, 2019). As discussed in Chapter

[5] Research suggests, that while some women experience serious psychological consequences of rape, this is not the case for all women. Furthermore, many of the women who do suffer psychological damages report a decrease in the distress over time (Frazier, 2003; Koss & Figueredo, 2004). As such, the experiences of victim/survivors is varied and there is no one universal experience of or response to rape (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011).

1, the Steubenville rape case, where a 16-year-old girl was raped by her high school peers and photos of the assault were circulated on social media (Dodge, 2015), sparked a great deal of media attention. The case was characterised as an example of rape culture by feminist voices of criticism (Marcotte, 2013; Peterson, 2013; Valenti & Friedman, 2013) and included detailed accounts of how the perpetrators and their friends made rape jokes about the victim. Increased attention to campus rape across the United States, with feminist bloggers and journalists referring to rape culture in college fraternities and college sports teams, further increased attention to rape culture (see for example Jezebel.com, feministing.com as well as Kirby Dick's 2015 film *The Hunting Ground*). An example of the popular interest in rape jokes is Patricia Lockwood's poem "Rape Joke", which went viral in 2013 and which confronts the rape joke from the perspective of the victim/survivor (Lockwood, 2013). The scholarly attention to rape jokes arose from these various cases and especially from popular media debates about rape jokes (Valenti, 2013) – for example the Daniel Tosh controversy which I discuss below. This culminated in a special issue on rape jokes in the journal *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* in 2017. The following is a discussion of the scholarship emerging from humour and feminist research originating from the increased focus on rape jokes.

Much of the research focuses on media debates about rape jokes – especially within stand-up comedy (Kramer, 2011; Lockyer & Savigny, 2019). The debates mainly evolve around issues of whether or not rape jokes can be funny, what constitutes a funny rape joke, and who should and should not tell a rape joke. These debates take place both online and offline and relate to jokes articulated in both online and offline contexts. The opposing sides tend to be divided by gender, with the male comedian defending the right to make fun of everything under the right to freedom of speech and the female (often feminist) critic raising concerns about the seriousness of rape and the experiences of rape victims. The implications of the humour research in the previous section is evident in these media debates as two opposing sides are drawn up: people are either for or against rape jokes. This gendered aspect seems to reproduce the trope that women are not funny thus positioning men as the de-facto comedians. The anti-rape-joke debaters accuse their opponents of having the wrong kind of humour, while the pro-rape-joke commenters accuse their opponents of having no sense of humour. This is how the construction of the humourless feminist and the feminist killjoy takes place. Discourses of intent, irony and the harmlessness of humour tend to dominate the debates, echoing the just-

a-joke discourse discussed previously. Free speech often surfaces as an argumentative tool amongst pro-rape-joke debaters (Jane, 2014b; Niccolini, 2016; T. Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, & Miltner, 2015) who in turn accuse anti-rape-joke debaters and feminists of wishing to censor male comedians. The free speech argument flows through much of the discourse around online misogyny as well – especially amongst men's rights activists on the so-called manosphere as will be discussed in depth in the final section of this chapter.

2012 was branded "the year of the rape joke" in the English language comedy industry (T. Romano, 2012) following the controversy around the comedian Daniel Tosh. He infamously directed a rape joke at a female member of the audience during his 2012 stand-up show in Los Angeles which led to criticism from feminist bloggers and columnists, as well as response from fellow comedians defending Tosh's right to joke about rape (Holpuch, 2012; K. McGlynn, 2012). In a TV debate comedian Jim Norton and feminist blogger Lindy West discuss Tosh's controversial rape joke (L. West, 2016). Pérez & Green (2016) analyse the debate and argue how Norton and West represent two ideological frames when responding to controversial sexist humour: the dominant patriarchal frame and the oppositional feminist frame. The authors conclude that the dominant interpretations of rape jokes reinforce patriarchal ideologies and deny the real and affective experiences of misogynistic humour. Consequently, humour controversies simultaneously reveal and obscure power relations as well as the political nature of jokes. Lindy West experienced a significant amount of online abuse as a consequence of her criticism of Tosh – in particular rape threats and rape jokes (L. West, 2013, 2016) – which has been the focus of some scholarly attention (Jane, 2014a; Manne, 2018a; Mantilla, 2013)

Lara Cox (2015) also discusses the debates following the Daniel Tosh controversy. Her research, however, compares rape jokes performed by male and female comedians. She is interested in the potential for ironic rape jokes to disrupt the gender stereotypes founded within rape culture. Based on this, she poses the question: "Can a rape joke ever work subversively?" (Cox, 2015). Discussing various examples of rape jokes performed by comedians, she suggests that rape culture will either be affirmed or assailed dependent on who tells the joke and where the irony is targeted. Similar to my own research focus, Cox outlines how gender and sexuality is structured within the discourse of selected rape jokes and points to how normative categories of men and women are reproduced. Gayle Salamon's (2017) short essay makes a similar investigation of the difference between jokes about rape

and jokes about rape culture, noting how the difference lies in whether the victim or perpetrator is exposed and whether part of that exposure extends to the conditions that normalise rape. Virginia Goldner (2017) similarly explores comedians who make subversive rape jokes that either make the rapists the punch line or tell their own stories of sexual assault.

Lockyer & Savigny (2019) point to the link between rape jokes and rape culture in the UK newspaper coverage of rape jokes. They find that the representation of rape jokes focuses mainly on male speakers of jokes which repeat patriarchal structures of gender inequality and normalise men's sexual violence against women as a subject of humour (Lockyer & Savigny, 2019). The notion that rape jokes function as injurious speech (Butler, 1997) is noted by Katie Gentile, who characterise rape jokes as "a description of an assault in the past, used to create a sense of fear in women in the present by conjuring up risk in the future" (Gentile, 2017: 288). For the women in question, this results in their lives being constrained and limited by risk management behaviours – which has also been described at length by Fiona Vera-Gray (2016) as the safety work women do to protect themselves from *men's intrusions*.

Existing research on rape jokes tends to approach the issue from a psychological perspective, often discussing rape humour and rape proclivity, and investigating whether there is a correlation between finding rape jokes funny and committing sexual assault (Romero-Sanchez, Carretero-Dios, Megias, Moya, & Ford, 2016; Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998; Thomae, 2015). Other research investigates the role of social media for bystander intervention against sexual assault (Armstrong & Mahone, 2017). Most feminist research focuses on the representation of rape jokes in media and media debates about rape jokes (Kramer, 2011; Lockyer & Savigny, 2019), rather than on the content of the jokes. Lara Cox' research and Gale Salmon's essay do analyse the content of the jokes and how they reproduce rape culture, but this research is extremely limited at the time of writing. My research thus builds upon existing research into rape jokes but my focus on humorous discourse about sexual violence provides a unique contribution to the field. The research on online misogyny and rape culture is, however, a substantial and continually growing field of investigation for feminist scholars. A thorough discussion of this field will be developed in the following section which extends from online misogyny and online rape discourse to research on the manosphere, Internet memes and #MeToo.

Online misogyny

Emma A. Jane states that "Misogyny, in short, has gone viral" (Jane, 2017a, p. 3). Misogyny has always existed but its shape and spread has changed significantly with the emergence of web 2.0 – often defined by a shift to an online participatory culture and user-generated content (Jane, 2017a). In this section of the chapter, I explore the ways in which misogyny is expressed online and the networks in place which allow for the misogyny to flourish. Numerous studies show that women are disproportionately targeted by gendered online abuse (Amnesty International, 2018; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; Gardiner, 2018; Gardiner et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2017) and here I explore what online misogyny looks like and how women are affected by it. I include the scholarship which investigates the ways in which women and feminists have responded to online misogyny through various forms of activism, including #MeToo.

Misogyny is traditionally defined as a hatred of women (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2). Feminist scholars, however, complicate this notion by extending the definition to mean a systemic dehumanisation and objectification of women (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Misogyny upholds and enforces patriarchal norms and practices of misogyny are often justified as a consequence of this. Kate Manne describes how the logic of misogyny

> functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on. (Manne, 2018a, p. 19).

Furthermore, misogyny is "expressed as an invisible norm" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2) which in turn delegitimises much criticism of the lived experiences of misogyny. Manne argues in favour of an intersectional (K. Crenshaw, 1991) approach to misogyny. This is, on one hand, because misogyny affects different groups of women in different ways. On the other hand, because it is important to understand misogyny as one strand among many others within a patriarchal system of domination. Other strands include racism, xenophobia, classicism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia et cetera. (Manne, 2018a, p. 13). Online misogyny is thus often compounded with other forms of hate such as racism, homophobia and ableism (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Shaw, 2014).

Returning to Jane's (2017a) notion that misogyny has gone viral, it is important to note that misogyny did not emerge with the Internet. As numerous scholars have documented, misogyny has always existed in various forms and through various outlets (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2019; Jane, 2017a). The Internet, however, provides new avenues for this abuse to take place (Mendes et al., 2019). It has amplified the abuse and the multiplicity of ways in which women experience it (Jane, 2017a). Tracing nearly two decades of abuse experienced by herself and other women online, Jane investigates this "new form of old misogyny" (Jane, 2017a, p. 4). She provides a useful characterisation of how instigators of online misogyny work:

> they target a woman who is, for one reason or another, visible in the public sphere; their authors are anonymous or otherwise difficult to identify; their sexually explicit rhetoric includes homophobic and misogynist epithets; they prescribe coerced sex acts as all-purpose correctives; they pass scathing, appearance-related judgments and they rely on *ad hominem* invective. (Jane, 2014a, p. 560).

An example of this was the infamous case of Gamergate, as discussed in Chapter 1, which gained much popular, media as well as scholarly attention (Braithwaite, 2016; Chess & Shaw, 2015; T. Shepherd et al., 2015). Gamergate was characterised by a new type of anonymous coordinated attacks against individual women, signified by extreme misogyny (often consisting of rape and death threats) on a large variety of channels (Jane, 2017a; Mantilla, 2013).

I use online misogyny as an umbrella term for all types of online abuse directed at women as it emphasises the gendered aspect and includes a great variety of abuse (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Jane, 2017a). Scholars have described the phenomenon as 'e-bile' (Jane, 2014b), 'technology-facilitated sexual violence' (Henry & Powell, 2015), 'gendertrolling' (Mantilla, 2015), 'gendered cyberhate' (Jane, 2017a), and 'cyber VAWG' (Violence Against Women and Girls) (Jane, 2017a). Similarly to Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence, online misogyny also exists within a continuum and this is crucial to understanding how none of these experiences exist in a vacuum. Applying Boyle's (2019c) notion of the plurality of 'continuum thinking' to online misogyny means understanding the variety of experiences across an online/offline continuum as well as across time.

Kate Manne points out that "Misogyny *is* [...] what misogyny *does*" (Manne, 2018a, p. 20). An investigation of the variety of experiences of misogyny is essential

to understanding how misogyny works and what the consequences are. Furthermore, "[m]isogyny should be understood from the perspective of its potential targets and victims – girls and women" (Ibid.). Online misogyny can thus extend to (though it is not limited to) the following experiences: hate speech, online sexual harassment (Keller et al., 2016; Megarry, 2014), rape threats (Jane, 2014b, 2014a, 2017a; Megarry, 2014), cyberbullying (Dodge, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013), hate speech (Megarry, 2014), trolling (Braithwaite, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Mantilla, 2013; Phillips, 2015b), doxxing (Jane, 2017a; A. Massanari, 2015; Mcglynn & Rackley, 2017), hacking (Moloney & Love, 2018), sextortion (Wittes, Poplin, Jurecic, & Spera, 2016), creepshots (Thompson & Wood, 2018), and image-based sexual abuse (C. McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017). The work done by these scholars has been essential to documenting the scope and magnitude (and sometimes, the existence) of online misogyny. It is crucial to analyse the phenomenon in its entirety in order to address the systemic problem of online misogyny and make the shift from individual cases and personal responsibility to government, legal and corporate responsibility. As Jane (2017) documents, the tendency in general is for women to be blamed and held responsible for the abuse they experience and for men's abuse to be excused and trivialised. This echoes the feminist analysis of rape culture (as discussed in the previous section) in which female victims are blamed for men's sexual violence. The just-a-joke discourse is thus prevalent in online misogyny in which male abusers are characterised as "pranksters" and "trolls" and their victims in turn are characterised as humourless killjoys unable to appreciate harmless fun.

Research has documented the many ways online misogyny effects women directly including psychological (anxiety, fear of violation (Jane, 2014b; Penny, 2013), professional, social, political, physical and economical harm (Jane, 2017a, 2018a) as well as indirect harm in terms of exclusion, silencing and the way in which online misogyny makes the Internet less equal (Ging & Siapera, 2018). The harm experienced by victims of online misogyny spills into the offline world, breaking through the online/offline divide and much abuse exists both offline and online (sextortion, doxxing and image-based sexual abuse are some of the obvious examples). Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, the misogyny which might have grown out of online spaces, such as MRA forums, can spill into the offline world in very real ways such as the Isla Vista killings in 2014 (Manne, 2018a) as discussed in the previous chapter. The ways in which online misogyny is

trivialised and normalised by referring to it as harmless fun and "just words" is documented and contested by numerous scholars (Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Jane, 2017a; Manne, 2018a). As such the trivialisation of online misogyny is part of the just-a-joke discourse.

While any woman can be the target of online misogyny, it works in different ways for different women. The consequences for different groups of women for stepping outside of the social norms in turn reveals what those social norms are, how they differ based on class, race, sexuality, ability et cetera, and how those norms are based in traditional patriarchal notions of gender difference and gender stereotypes. At the same time, though, research reveals that certain figures are key targets for online misogyny: the feminist, the Social Justice Warrior (SJW), the "slut", women in gaming and tech and women who visibly and noticeably speak up against gendered power relations (Ging & Siapera, 2018). As such online misogyny works to silence women and limit their voice in the public sphere (Megarry, 2014).

The overlap between online misogyny and anti-feminism has been the subject for some scholars (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging & Siapera, 2019) in part due to a blurring of the boundary between women and feminists within new anti-feminist discourses on the manosphere (Ging & Siapera, 2019). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) points to the intertwined relationship between what she refers to as popular feminism and popular misogyny. Popular feminism means a trendy and visible movement, relying in part on neoliberal and individualist discourses of empowerment and confidence – similar to what many scholars have defined as postfeminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). Popular misogyny is similarly a networked movement on any variety of media as well as everyday practices. Popular misogyny can both be visible and almost invisible (as expressed through for example social norms). Popular misogyny as such, Banet-Weiser argues, is a reaction to popular misogyny. Furthermore,

> contemporary expressions of popular misogyny are seen *not* as structural but as the anomalous expressions of individuals responding to feminism. If misogyny were acknowledged as a social, political, economic, and cultural structure, then it could be subjected to criticism and challenged in a way that individual expressions, often dismissed as anomalous and insignificant, cannot be." (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 36)

The representation of feminists and masculinity within the logic of misogyny will be further developed in the below section on the manosphere.

Rape discourse is central to the practice of online misogyny. As Jane (2017a, p. 3) points out, rape threats have become the lingua franca for men who disagree with what women say online . Such threats, however, often take the shape of more or less obviously veiled threats, including comments that are shaped as humorous. Jane refers to this tendency as 'rapeglish' which points to the normalisation of rape discourse online. Research on rape culture online scrutinises this tendency and reveals how discourses of victim blaming are reproduced in the comments section to online news articles about sexual assault (Zaleski, Gundersen, Baes, Estupinian, & Vergara, 2016). Alexa Dodge (2015) points to how rape culture and rape myths are reproduced in comments about teenage girls whose pictures were taken during their sexual assaults and who were called sluts and similar while their perpetrators were excused and sometimes celebrated. Other scholars document the ways in which digital feminist activists speak back against rape culture (Keller et al., 2016; Mendes et al., 2019; Rentschler, 2014; Sills et al., 2016).

The feminist scholarship has been particularly interested in the ways in which feminist activists speak back against online misogyny. Through campaigns such as Hollaback and The Everyday Sexism Project, feminists have brought attention to the continuum of sexual violence both on- and offline. Hashtag activism spread on Twitter and other social media platforms mobilises women and feminists to both speak back against online misogyny, such as #mencallmethings from 2011 (Megarry, 2014), but also works as a way for women to share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment, for example under the hashtags #YesAllWomen from 2014 (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Thrift, 2014), and #MeToo from 2017 (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Individualist responses to online abuse, referred to as 'digilante' responses (a portmanteau of 'digital' and 'vigilante') (Jane, 2016b), have been problematised in the feminist scholarship. These DIY strategies (Jane, 2016b) shift the burden of responsibility to the individual rather than the social media platforms and the legislators (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Furthermore, it echoes victim blaming discourses in which women are held responsible for men's abuse.

The scholarship on online misogyny has given very limited attention to Internet memes. The existing scholarship will be discussed in the following section on the manosphere, as the meme culture often emerges from this type of Internet culture. Some scholarship does however investigate the ways in which feminist activists speak back against misogyny (A. L. Massanari & Chess, 2018; Milner, 2016; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), which will be discussed in the following section.

Broadly, the scholarship is limited when it comes to the investigation of misogyny in Internet memes and the reproduction of gender and sexuality. The research into how misogyny is constructed online and how platforms and online-specific discourse facilitates the spread of misogyny, has thus broadly overlooked the medium of memes. No research has been made into the portrayal of #MeToo in Internet memes.

At the time of writing, new research on #MeToo is starting to emerge (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Rodino-Colocino, 2018). In 2018 Verso released their collection of new and previously published writing by scholars, as well as activists and journalists, focusing on #MeToo and histories of feminist organisation against sexual violence (Verso Report, 2018). *Feminist Media Studies* (2018) included a comments and criticism section on the media industries "post-Weinstein" in a 2018 issue. Notably none of the essays discussed how #MeToo was received online, including any backlash against #MeToo and the accusers of famous Hollywood men. This is scrutinised, though, by Boyle & Rathnayake (2019) who investigate the backlash against feminists in relation to the social media events #MeToo and #HimToo on Twitter. Boyle's book (2019a) investigates this notion further in analysing the representation of sexual violence across a multiplicity of media and social media outlets in connection with #MeToo. My thesis aims to fill the gap in the research on #MeToo by investigating a small sample of platforms which produce humorous approaches to #MeToo in the form of Internet memes. The intersection between #MeToo, humour and Internet memes is so far not investigated in the scholarship on feminist theory and digital media studies.

The Manosphere

This sixth and final section of the chapter reviews the literature on the manosphere. An exploration of the scholarship on the manosphere is important as the manosphere creates the space online which allows for misogyny to exist and to become normalised. When I mention "space" in the following and throughout the thesis, I refer mainly to how the social media platforms provide discursive, humorous and homosocial spaces. This will be discussed further in the following chapter where I consider how the format and affordances of the social media platforms allow for and encourage a specific kind of discourse.

While men's movements and men's rights movements emerging in the 1970 were often inspired by second wave feminism (Ging, 2017), the online self-declared 'Men's Rights Activists' (MRAs) employ an explicitly antifeminist agenda. The

manosphere refers to diverse groups of MRAs online who call for revenge against feminists, 'social justice warriors' (SJWs) and women in general in the name of men's liberation (Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Working as a system of shared interconnections and links (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the manosphere brings together an amorphous set of discourses and ideologies (Ging, 2017). Common for the manosphere is anonymity, affordances on social media, reliance on echo chambers and often an overlap with alt-right sympathies (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Nicholas & Agius, 2017). The main difference between previous offline mobilizations of men's rights groups and the current online manosphere is expressions of extreme misogyny and a tendency to organise personal (and often sexual) attacks against individual women (in order to scare off all women), as discussed in the previous section on online misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2019).

A neoliberal ideology directs much of the discourse on the manosphere calling for individual approaches to inequalities similar to postfeminist and popular feminist strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2019). The discourse is characterised by anti-political correctness (Ging, 2017; Jane, 2018b), which is expressed through discourses of extreme misogyny, racism and homophobia as well as "recreational nastiness/sadism" (Jane, 2018b, p. 666) in a sort of competition to see who can cause other people (predominantly women, LGBTQ people and people of colour) the most harm and suffering. The discourse thus escalates in an effort for the users to outdo each other in producing the most extreme content.

It is crucial to understand that hegemonic masculinity on the manosphere largely refers to a white and heterosexual ideal. Racism and homophobia[6] are thus intersecting with misogyny in the discourses produced on the manosphere (Ging, 2017; Phillips, 2015b) – not dissimilar to 'alt-right' ideologies. The 'alt-right' (short for 'alternative-right) is a far-right conservative movement, which opposes multiculturalism and progressive left-wing thought (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nicholas & Agius, 2017) through discourses of victimisations and grievance of white, heterosexual, Christian masculinities (Brigley Thompson, 2018). While some users on the manosphere might not identify with the alt-right, the various manosphere formations will often overlap with alt-right rhetoric, especially in

[6] Ging (2017) complicates the notion of default heterosexuality in her research on the manosphere. She finds that while using homophobic rhetoric, self-declared heterosexual "betas" will mobilize with gay men against feminism. White, middle-class men are thus mobilizing irrespective of sexual orientation to rally against political correctness and feminism which are constructed as "threats to freedom of expression and, ultimately, to their social privilege" (Ging, 2017, p. 15).

reproducing misogynist, racist and homophobic discourse. Echoing white-supremacist ideologies, anti-Semitism is central for the alt-right who frame Jewish people as a powerful force controlling the US society (A. Kelly, 2017; Koulouris, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The alt-right is the fraction of the manosphere which most visibly has orchestrated violence offline such as the 2011 Norway attacks and the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings, as discussed in Chapter 1, where both killers cite alt-right influences and discourses of extreme islamophobia and xenophobia (Kingsley, 2019).

The discourse and format on much of the manosphere is influenced by earlier practices of online trolling. Trolling arose from chat rooms and discussion boards in the 1990s, where it was defined as disruptive behaviour where trolls would post "incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board" (Phillips, 2012). The contemporary version of trolling can be defined as a game: "one only the trolls can initiate and only the trolls can win" (Phillips, 2012). Trolls are motivated by "lulz", a deviation of LOL, meaning Laugh Out Loud. Lulz can be defined as a particular kind of aggressive, unsympathetic laughter, similar to schadenfreude which comes from "eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s)" (Phillips, 2012). Two things are generally held to be strong beliefs among trolls: that nothing should be taken seriously, and that anonymity is key. This means that anyone who writes genuine political and sentimental statements and who openly admits to their offline identity (their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, political affiliations and similar) are asking to be taught a lesson and attacks on those people are considered justifiable (Phillips, 2015b). The power relation between the troll and the target is asymmetrical at its core: the troll speaks from a "safe" position of complete anonymity, exposing all the perceived weaknesses that the target has revealed about themselves. Furthermore, the target of the trolling will never know whether the abuse stated by the troll reflects the troll's genuine personal beliefs, in other words, what the intention is. This then links to the humour research as discussed previously in the chapter, challenging the notion of intent as an excuse for sexist humour. Another link to humour scholarship is the way in which trolling also creates an us vs. them, an outsider/insider divide, in which the trolls are in on the joke and the outsiders are excluded and othered. The same way as Butler (1997) argues that we become recognisable subjects through interpellation in language, Phillips explains the subject construction of trolls through the phenomenon of lulz:

"Put simply, trolls laugh themselves into existence and sustain this existence through further laughter." (Phillips, 2015: 31).

A few concepts draw together the diverse groups on the manosphere. One of these is the 'Red Pill' which refers to the main character Neo's choice in the film *The Matrix* (1999). A dilemma where taking the blue pill will result in a life of delusion and where taking the red pill will lead to enlightenment and truth. The manosphere employs the Red Pill philosophy to mean an awakening from the brainwashing of feminism. Another common denominator is the notion of free speech and antipolitical correctness (Ging, 2017; Nicholas & Agius, 2017). The manosphere celebrates the notion that "anything goes" on the Internet and that it is the last place where people are still "free" to express things that would be deemed unacceptable in public life. (Jane, 2017a).

The logic of misogyny and masculinity on the manosphere

The discourses on the manosphere rely on a sexual difference logic in which men and women are positioned as binary oppositions and eternal adversaries/enemies (Jane, 2016a; Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018). MRAs employ discourses of online misogyny which excludes women and targets feminists specifically (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2017; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Jane, 2017a; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The organised attacks against women, as discussed above, are often organised on manosphere sites and forums (Ging, 2017). Women are discursively othered and referred to through extreme misogynist name-calling, including terms such as "cumdumpsters", "feminazis", "femtards" and "cunts" (Ging, 2017).

The antagonism against women and feminists is often explained through zero-sum logic: when feminists point to inequalities and suggest changes to the status quo, this is constructed as taking away power from men. Men have been injured by feminists and are thus in the right to take back what is considered rightfully theirs (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Braithwaite, 2014; T. Shepherd et al., 2015). Feminists are thus blamed for emasculating men and are constructed as a threat to masculinity. MRAs employ a logic of injury, where men lose rights as women gain them and the mission for MRAs is to restore traditional heteronormative masculinity (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 35). Feminists become a legitimate target because they are seen as discriminating against (white) men, who in turn are constructed as the victims of feminism. Constructing feminism as misandry (hatred of men), MRAs reproduce traditional and historical reproductions of feminists as "man haters" (Marwick &

Caplan, 2018). The term, misandry, is used by MRAs to signify a type of feminism which "privileges women's rights over men's" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018, p. 553).

The discourse of aggrieved white, heterosexual masculinity produced on the manosphere relates to the 'promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010c). According to Ahmed, we are sold a promise of prosperity and contentment through maintaining specific prescriptions and proscriptions. This is what in turn results in killjoys when individuals point to inequalities in maintaining this structure. Within happiness narratives of white men, the promise of power and prosperity is felt as being denied when women and (sexual) minorities gain power. Within such a zero-sum logic, the happiness that was promised feels to have been taken away from the white man (Brigley Thompson, 2018).

This victimisation of the white man on the manosphere extends to rape culture. This is seen in misogynist backlash against #MeToo online, where the potential innocence of the accused perpetrators of sexual violence are highlighted and where sexual assault is constructed as sex. In fact, women are seen as in control of consent which in turn means that rape culture cannot logically exist (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This leads to MRA campaigns constructing rape accusations as most likely false which in turn obviates the category of rapists (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Gavey points to how the manosphere constructs sexual violence as a gender neutral problem by which men are quadruply victimised: "[t]hrough sexual violence itself, denial of the existence and suffering of male victims, denigration of all men through any message that singles out men to stop rape, and through false rape allegations." (Gavey, 2019, p. 239). Feminist efforts to highlight rape culture and efforts to dismantle the systems in place that allow sexual violence to exist at a structural level are thus met with discourses that deny the existence of a rape culture altogether.

Constructions of masculinity on the manosphere are complex and multifaceted. Debbie Ging describes them as 'hybrid masculinities', "whose self-positioning as victims of feminism and political correctness enables them to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously compounding existing hierarchies of power and inequality online" (Ging, 2017, p. 14). A subsection of the manosphere is the group of so-called Incels (involuntary celibate). Incels blame women for their own sexual inexperience and ineptitude (Ging, 2017; Tait, 2018). Sexually disenfranchised white men (Ging, 2017) employ discourses of victimhood and male sexual entitlement (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016) to justify online misogyny – which spills into the offline world as in the 2014 Isla Vista

Killings and the 2018 Toronto attack (Beauchamp, 2018, 2019), which I discussed in Chapter 1.

Male sexual entitlement is central to the Incel logic. Positioning sexual access to women as a right that all heterosexual men have, the Incels blame women for withholding this right from them. Being in power of sexual consent means taking away power from men, which in turn justifies misogynist discourse. The notion of male sexual entitlement relies on the logic of the male sexual drive discourse positioning heterosexual sex as something men "do" to women (Gavey, 2019). Within this logic, sexual violence tends to be reconceptualised as sex. When a man is entitled to sex, his actions logically have no victims. This produces notions of victim blaming when women are held responsible for tempting and igniting the uncontrollable sexual drive within a normal and healthy heterosexual man. Gotell & Dutton's (2016) research highlights how MRA discourse constructs sexual violence as gender neutral and constructs rape culture as a feminist moral panic, in which innocent men are accused of sexual assault. The hashtag #NotAllMen is an example of MRA rhetoric spilling into mainstream online discourse. The hashtag is a response to the feminist hashtag #YesAllWomen which aimed to draw attention to systemic misogyny and rape culture following the 2014 Isla Vista killings. Drawing attention away from structural rape culture and victims of sexual violence, the usage of the hashtag positioned men as victims of a feminist campaign to paint all men as rapists (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Thrift, 2014). Furthermore, some of the more extremist fractions of the Incel communities encourage and celebrate sexual assault, swapping stories and tips on how to sexually assault women (Beauchamp, 2019).

Androcentrism, himpathy and homosociality

The scholarship on the manosphere and, before that, trolling has described these spaces as androcentric, meaning spaces that favour and naturalise male-focused behaviours and attitudes (Phillips, 2015b). The subtle ways in which androcentric discourse works, both privileges male-gendered traits and delegitimises the perspectives and experiences of other genders. An androcentric discourse privileges sympathy towards men rather than women, what Kate Manne (2018a, 2018b) refers to as "himpathy": "the inappropriate and disproportionate sympathy powerful men often enjoy in cases of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, homicide and other misogynistic behavior" (Manne, 2018b). In the context of sexual violence, himpathy is directed towards the male perpetrator – especially when he is white and otherwise

privileged – which in turn means a "reluctance to believe the women who testify against these men" (Manne, 2018a, p. 197). This himpathy will result in exoneration of the (male) perpetrator, while the (female) victim is blamed for her own assault. The perpetrator is thus reconceptualised as the victim – similarly to how men are reframed as the victims of feminism on the manosphere.

Though her research focuses on online gaming, Andrea Braithwaite's description of women can be applied to the perception of women on the manosphere: "women can only be one of three things: sex objects, invisible, or the enemy" (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 5). When gaining political, social and cultural influence and accessing spaces that MRAs consider male only spaces (such as the Internet), thus moving away from the category as sex objects or invisible, women become the enemy and thus a legitimate target for organised hate campaigns.

The boundary work to exclude women from the perceived male-only space of the Internet consist of tropes such as "there are no girls on the Internet"(Milner, 2013a), "GTFO" (get the fuck out) or the original long version: "tits or gtfo" (i.e., "show us your breasts or leave" (Jane, 2017a; Phillips, 2015b)). These tropes signal exclusion and othering of women as well as signalling belonging and homosociality among users on the manosphere. Though researchers find that users believe these tropes originate in an early utopian idea that the Internet is gender-neutral – that gender should not matter when everyone is anonymous – the reason gender is not discussed is because gender is always assumed to be male (Jane, 2017a). Through a number of 'manhood acts' (Moloney & Love, 2018), such as masturbation (as will be exemplified in my analysis of memes about Louis C.K. in Chapter 6), the users on the manosphere signal belonging on a homosocial space. A homosocial space means avoiding any trait of femininity by following scripts of misogyny and homophobia. Homosociality is thus performed through acts of hegemonic masculinity. The creation of such "boys only" spaces means both keeping women and non-heterosexual men out as well as policing hegemonic masculinity (Moloney & Love, 2018; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

The homosocial and androcentric discourses are reproduced in much meme-production, as my thesis will demonstrate. The scholarship investigating misogyny in Internet memes is, however, relatively limited. The literature on Internet memes emerged from the scholarship on web 2.0 in the early 2010s – especially referring to the work of Limor Shifman and Ryan M. Milner.

I want to highlight a number of attributes and characteristics of Internet memes as defined within the scholarship. First of all, Internet memes are intertextual, referring to each other in "complex, creative, and surprising ways" (Shifman, 2013b, p. 2). Second, Internet memes are characterised by copying, imitation, and remixing – thus making them pillars of participatory digital culture (Shifman, 2013b). Memes are in a constant state of flux (Mautner, 2005; Shifman, 2014) in a hypermemetic logic (Shifman, 2013b): a meme is never one fixed thing and does not belong to any individual. However, while memes might diffuse from person to person, they "shape and reflect general social mindsets" (Shifman, 2013b, p. 4). Though memes might be perceived as light-hearted, humorous and non-serious content, taking memes seriously has the potential to reveal dominant norms. Furthermore, memes lend themselves as particularly useful for the spread of gendered and racial stereotypes. As Milner argues, they are a "fixed heuristic shortcut for assessing novel information" (Milner, 2016, p. 123). Which means that by employing simple stereotypical attributes to a meme (in his examples memes linking African Americans to monkeys, Jewish people to greed and Middle Eastern people to backward savagery), the memes communicate stereotypes that are so persistent that they are easily decodable. even for people who do not sympathise with the stereotypes. Central to Milner's (2016) work is the way in which women and people of colour are othered on online spaces.

The scholarship on the content of Internet memes – as opposed to the spread and longevity of memes has grown since the early 2010s – especially worth noting is Milner (2013a) and Miltner (2014) as well as Shifman (2013b, 2014). Turning to the feminist scholarship and research focusing specifically on the representation of gender in Internet memes draws up two threads. One part of the scholarship points to the political, activist and counter-cultural potential for the usage and spread of Internet memes (Milner, 2013c) and the feminist potential within humorous memes to speak back against sexism in an affective network of laughter (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). The other part of the scholarship investigates the misogynist, racist and homophobic discourses in some Internet memes – echoing the scholarship on the manosphere as discussed above. Memes are intertwined with issues of gender and most memes are constructed with a "white male centrality" (Milner, 2016), which produces an androcentric world view that excludes women and people of colour. Massanari & Chess (2018) investigate how memes about the figure of the Social Justice Warrior portray feminists as the monstrous feminine – as non-normative

problematic bodies – which can be reappropriated as a feminist image of power. While pointing to the androcentricity, misogyny and racism which is normalised in much memetic discourse, Milner (2016) also explores the potential for agonistic, counter-public engagement. The research of Massanari & Chess and Milner then combines the two threads of scholarship on the content of meme production.

Kanai (2016) analyses readership in relation to animated GIFs (a specific type of meme composed of moving images, often designed to loop). She investigates how the readership constructs gendered, raced, and classed forms of belonging and exclusion. By focusing on the literacy required for decoding and participating in meme cultures, Kanai describes how elements such as gender, race and class are mobilised as discrete elements (which can be visible or implied) and are used to compose the humorous punchline. The white male centrality is often made evident in meme production where the punchline reveals that women and people of colour are often excluded and othered through humorous discourse. The research closest to my theoretical and methodological approaches is that of Drakett, Ricket, Day & Milnes (2018). Analysing image macro Internet memes, they investigate the representation of gender. Focusing especially on irony and humour, they find that the discourse produced in the memes provide spaces of heteronormative hegemonic masculinity while excluding and othering women. Echoing my notion of the just-a-joke discourse they argue that the status of memes as "humorous objects works to permit or sanitise their content" (Drakett et al., 2018, p. 122). They point to how women might be visible in the memes but rarely have a voice, thus supporting the notion of memes as part of the discursive production on the manosphere. Sarah Banet-Weiser sums up the subtle yet powerful dynamics of online misogyny on the manosphere: "this network of organizations and digital spaces has, on the one hand, been normalized in contemporary culture so as to become practically imperceptible as misogyny, and, on the other, is seen as the province of a few, deranged individuals."(Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 118).

While much humour on the manosphere might seem self-deprecating – especially within Incel discourses where men joke about their inability to obtain sexual relations with women – the joke might very well be at the expense of women. As Kendall's (2002) research shows, while the joke might be intended to ridicule the male users and their nonhegemonic masculinity, the jokes are often constructed in such ways that leave women as the butt of the joke. My thesis investigates similar

humorous constructions in asking questions about the practice of inclusion and exclusion in humorous discourse.

Misogyny works in subtle and often invisible ways to uphold male dominance and power and in turn police women's expressions and visibility. Within a system of oppression and othering, discourses of misogyny, racism and homophobia are employed on the manosphere to exclude bodies other than the heterosexual, white man. Apart from the fact that online misogyny on the manosphere has real life consequences for women targeted by organised campaigns, the discourse produced in these male spaces works in much subtler ways. Discourses of androcentrism that favour the heterosexual, white man in turn excludes and others women, non-heterosexual people and people of colour. Through discourses of himpathy and victim blaming, rape culture is normalised and sexual violence is trivialised. Rhetorical devices of humour and irony work to exonerate and excuse online misogyny and ultimately paint voices of disruption as killjoys and humourless outsiders unable to take a joke. In conclusion, humorous discourse on the manosphere victimises the white, heterosexual man, blames women and feminists for men's abuse and delegitimises any criticism of online misogyny.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have facilitated a dialogue between the feminist scholarship on discourse, affect, humour, sexual violence, online misogyny and the manosphere. The discussion showed how subjects become recognisable through language and how the language we use is never neutral. Rather, language use is socially, historically and culturally founded, and sexist and misogynist language both reflects and constructs categories of gender, sexuality and shame, which reflect systemic sexism and oppression. Turning towards humorous language use then showed us how the construction of humour as harmless, what I named the just-a-joke discourse, functions to legitimate, naturalise and trivialise sexism and misogyny. The scholarship on rape culture and the continuum of sexual violence allows me to address discourses on sexual violence across a continuum of cultural practices of power rather than as a private and individual problem.

Finally, this chapter provided an outline of the feminist scholarship on online misogyny and the manosphere. Here it became clear that there is a gap in the research so far on the humorous aspect of much discourse on the manosphere. While some research investigates sexist humour online, some research investigates rape

culture on the manosphere and some research investigates humour in Internet memes, my specific focus on rape culture in Internet memes on humorous discursive spaces is non-existent in the scholarship at the time of writing. #MeToo has enjoyed some scholarly attention since 2017 and new publications are under development at the time of writing. My specific case study-based approach to investigate the way #MeToo is portrayed on three social media platforms through the medium of Internet memes is, however, unique. While building on a long tradition of feminist research, my thesis provides a unique contribution to the field of feminist media studies.

Chapter 3:
Methodological reflections and approaches to feminist research on social media

Introduction

While the previous chapter facilitated a dialogue between scholarship on discourse, affect, humour, sexual violence and online misogyny in order to establish the theoretical framework for my thesis, this chapter will discuss my methodological approaches. It unpacks definitions of and approaches to discourse analysis and humorous online spaces, while also introducing and discussing the scope of the case study: humorous memes responding to #MeToo on the three social media platforms 9gag, Reddit and Imgur.

Soon after the Weinstein story broke, various more-or-less well-received humorous responses followed, including comedian James Corden's controversial jokes at a benefit gala in Los Angeles and British MP Michael Gove's joke on BBC's Radio 4. A number of US comedians joked about Weinstein and #MeToo, including Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, Samantha Bee and John Oliver, and the late-night comedy show Saturday Night Live featured several sketches on the case. Following the reactions to these humorous responses on social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube, I discovered that they were on the one hand characterised as rape jokes and on the other hand were discussed within the framework of the just-a-joke discourse – defending comedians' right to joke about any subject they please. Since I was interested in composing a data set that provided me with humorous online reactions to #MeToo, I soon found that I would need to narrow the scope from mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter – as their content was not exclusively humorous – to platforms that encourage users to upload and share humorous responses to current events.

My research methods are primarily qualitative, but this project does employ quantitative elements. I collected my data methodically within a set time frame and have counted and presented it in tables for a clear overview (see tables 3.1 and 3.2 on page 85). Apart from this, my methods are qualitative. I have coded all memes using

thematic analysis and have then applied discourse analysis for an in-depth examination of the memes. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how I have approached my data collection and the methodological reflections along the way. First, I situate myself as a researcher within a feminist theoretical tradition. Then, I discuss feminist approaches to the concept of discourse in order to specify my approach to the discourse analysis of my data. The second part of this chapter outlines my approach to building my data set. I define what is meant by social media platforms in the context of this study. I evaluate the build and purpose of the three platforms individually and discuss how they support and encourage humorous content. The third section explores the notion of digital literacy and discusses the way in which the platforms can be characterised as male discursive spaces. This is followed by a short evaluation of my ethical considerations for conducting research online. In the fifth part of the chapter I evaluate my choice of search terms and outline the process of creating my data set. Finally, I define Internet memes, providing an overview of the different types, before discussing how I have coded them into main topics and sub-topics.

Situating myself as a researcher: feminist methods and discourse analysis

Building on the feminist contention of the notion of objective research (Barad, 1996; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Scott, 1999), I am inspired by two feminist theorists. Sandra Harding's (1991) notion of "strong objectivity" urges researchers to own their bias, and Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges" describes each researcher as situated in a specific way, allowing them only a partial perspective of their research object. My approach to analysing the Internet memes is inspired by the notion of situated knowledge. My knowledge of the three social media platforms is limited due to the fact that I am not a regular user of the platforms, and my approach to analysing the memes is based on my subjective understanding of the subcultural and popular cultural references in the memes. I expand more on this in the section on digital literacy below, where I discuss my position as an anti-fan and outside observer of the platforms.

As discussed in the previous chapter, my theoretical framework is largely influenced by feminist theory foregrounded particularly by Judith Butler's notions of

subjects as constituted in language and her concept of performativity. Inspired by this, West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest a theory of "doing gender", whereby gender is something we do rather than something we are. This describes how gender functions as a discursive and bodily construct, in which we act or perform in certain ways to be recognisable as a certain gendered subject. The notion of "doing" throughout my thesis thus extends to "doing" woman, "doing" victim and "doing" perpetrator. These all point to the performative aspect of these categories and how failures and successes to be recognised within them indicates their discursive nature and their boundaries. Inspired by this I use discourse analysis as my main method for understanding how sexual violence is constituted in language – including how victims and perpetrators of sexual violence are constructed. Sexual violence obviously exists as a real, lived and bodily experience, while it also exists as a discursive construction reproducing certain social norms about gender and sexuality. The way in which sexual violence is discursively constructed is the focus of this thesis.

Feminist reflections on discourse analysis

My approach to discourse analysis is influenced by feminist readings of the way Michel Foucault's (1972) uses the term, discourse. Rather than discussing his work in depth or claiming to employ a "Foucauldian" analysis, I will illustrate the way feminist scholars such as Sara Mills (1997) and especially Nicola Gavey (2019) employ Foucault's work to investigate the discursive constructions of gender, sexuality and sexual violence. Gavey (2019, pp. 6–7) points out how Foucault's work on discourse, power and sexuality is useful for understanding how sexuality is shaped by culture, and how norms and frameworks of meaning guide our ways of "doing" normal human beings within societies and cultures. Discourse should be understood as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). In other words, discourses do not exist independently and cannot be analysed in isolation. Rather, they exist within certain systems that are made up of ways of thinking, behaviour and social norms, which differ within different cultural contexts and in different historical moments (Gavey, 2019, p. 80). Consequently, there is no pre-discursive self that exists outside of discourse. We are always already constituted within discourse. As discussed in Chapter 2, this notion of subjects as constituted within discourse is Judith Butler's point of departure when establishing the significance of language for the social existence of subjects – what

she refers to as the recognisability of subjects. Discourse is thus intrinsically connected to our understanding of the people around us and how we understand our subjecthood in relation to theirs.

Discourse analysis works to destabilize categories such as gender and sexuality which through repetition appear natural, fixed and inevitable. The discourses which appear natural in any given time and place is what I refer to as 'dominant discourses' (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). In my Internet memes, this, for example, refers to how male, white, heterosexual identities are assumed and discursively reproduced – what I referred to earlier as androcentricity, and which I will develop further in the section on male discursive spaces later in this chapter.

Discourse analysis allows me to analyse similarities across a long line of different memes and point to how they have been produced within a certain set of power/knowledge relations (Mills, 1997). An important aspect of this is how discourse is organised around practices of exclusion (Mills, 1997). Throughout my analysis I will evidence how this discourse negotiates spaces of belonging and exclusion based on heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.

A discourse analysis informed by feminist theory is the most appropriate methodological approach to analysing my data set, as I am interested in the way gender, sexuality and sexual assault is constructed in a multimedia content-production: the Internet meme. The meaning production and reproduction is thus the centre of the analysis. By identifying the dominant discourses, I am able to identify how certain notions about gender, sexuality and sexual violence appear 'natural' and 'normal' (Gavey, 2019, p. 81). Discourse analysis is particularly useful for an analysis on social media content as it avoids the online/offline split between an objective 'real world' reality and an interpretative form of knowledge which is achieved through media (Macdonald, 2003). Applying discourse analysis to memes allows me to consider them as systems of statements within a multimedia construct, rather than focusing on text or image alone. The analysis then focuses on the specific message formulated by the meme which I decode based on my specific situation as a researcher and generating situated knowledge based on my cultural knowledge and literacy of the memes and the platforms. The intent of the meme-creator is thus less important here as my thesis makes a case for the significance of the discourse which is subtly produced under the guise of humour. Discourse analysis allows me to investigate how the memes circulate in a specific context that generate a specific type of meaning and reproduce a certain discourse.

Social media platforms, definitions and scope

My data set consists of memes collected on three social media platforms, or more specifically, meme-sharing social media platforms. In the following I define the concept of the social media platform and discuss the way I chose the three specific platforms and how I collected the memes. This includes a discussion of the individual social media platforms and how they can be characterised as humorous discursive spaces in similar and slightly different ways.

As Bruns (2015) points out, all media is social, but what distinguishes social media from traditional forms of media, such as print, radio and television, is the unique focus on connectivity and sociality. Sloan & Quan-Haase (2017) suggest that the following three criteria are a useful way to define social media platforms. The platform should:

- Support user-generated content such as images, text and video
- Have the capacity for users to connect with each other (i.e. through likes, followers and friendship)
- Provide means for members to engage with each other in the form of "collaboration, community building, participation, sharing, linking" etc. (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 5)

All three platforms that I include in my data set live up to these criteria: they encourage users to upload images, text, video and GIFs; they provide a platform for liking, upvoting/downvoting and commenting on posts; and they create a sense of community among the users who refer to themselves as "9gaggers", "Redditors" and "Imgurians". Sloan & Quan-Haase's criteria do, however, not consider the self-referential, ever-changing, and memetic nature of Internet memes which make up the means of communication on these platforms. McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase (2017) include this consideration in their definition of social media which they develop based on a review and comparison of a selection of the scholarly literature on social media:

> Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modifies [sic], share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible. (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 17).

Their emphasis on co-creation and modification reflects the content on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur as users reference and modify previous content in a constant state of flux (Mautner, 2005; Shifman, 2014). McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase provide a classification of different types of social media platforms. One of these is 'Media sharing' sites which the authors define as "Services that allow you to upload and share various media such as picture and video. Most services have additional social features such as profiles, commenting, etc." (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 18). I consider 9gag, Reddit and Imgur media sharing platforms as they provide a platform for users to share media, specifically memes. As the format on all three platforms[7] consists of a long list of memes on which users post and comment, I refine my definition of the social media platforms even further and refer to them as meme-sharing platforms. They are thus social media platforms where users mainly communicate through sharing Internet memes.

The story of my research: choosing the platforms

In order to compose a data set of humorous Internet memes, I created the following criteria for how to select the social media platforms from which to collect my data:

- The social media platforms should all comprise primarily of English language posts.
- The posts on the social media platforms should comprise of memes, in the form of text, images, GIFs or videos.
- The social media platforms should all encourage users to upload material which engages with topics in a humorous manner.

Out of the social media platforms I came across in my initial research, only three returned a substantial number of memes relevant to this project: 9gag, Reddit and Imgur. The other platforms that I investigated (using the snowball sampling technique where posts, comments and discussions on one platform lead to another[8]) include: 4chan, Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr, Pinterest, memes.com, giphy.com,

[7] Reddit works differently across the platform, which I will elaborate on below. But on the specific 'subreddit' from which I have collected memes, the format is the same as on the two other platforms.
[8] Though mostly employed in ethnographic research to build a sample of research participants, this method is also utilised by researchers conducting content and discourse analyses to generate a data set across different platforms (Braithwaite, 2016; Ging & Siapera, 2019).

memecenter.com and memebase.cheezburger.com. I was able to exclude these platforms, after careful research and scrutiny, either because the search terms hardly generated any content or because the platforms could not be clearly defined as humorous discursive spaces where humorous posts are encouraged.

When researching and familiarising myself with 9gag, Reddit and Imgur, I found that users communicated through memes and that much meaning and cultural and subcultural codes could be extracted from these memes. Many of them produced humorous discourse as well as rhetoric similar to what has been referred to as manosphere rhetoric by scholars before me (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019). Finally, the users had actively engaged with the topic of #MeToo and the allegations against famous men which meant that my search terms generated a substantial number of memes.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a platform and social network analysis of the three social media platforms[9], I do want to briefly touch upon some relevant points about how the structure and moderation on three platforms generate a specific kind of content.

Moderation is a task taken on reluctantly by many social media platforms (Gillespie, 2018). The reluctance could be explained by the widespread idea that the Internet should not be regulated – a utopian notion of the freedom of the Internet and the fantasy of the open platform (Gillespie, 2018). Moderators are usually made up of some of the most active users of the platforms and rather than police the potential offensiveness and extremity of the content of the memes, they moderate the format of the content.

Scholars have noted how policies and moderation (or lack thereof) of social media platforms form the content and the dominant discourses on these platforms (Ging & Siapera, 2019). Investigating Reddit's algorithmic policies, Massanari (2015) argues that they facilitate misogynist and anti-feminist discourse, while prioritising the experiences and interests of young, white and heterosexual men. The "upvoting" system (more on this below) influences the algorithm which means that popular material that has gained a great deal of upvotes will be highlighted and appear at the top of a given page. Studying similar mechanisms on 4chan (which does not have an upvoting system but allows users to bump a thread to keep it in

[9] Some scholars provide fascinating research into how affects shape the format and content on social media platforms. See for example Papacharissi (2015) on 'networked publics' and Hillis, Paasonen & Petit (2015) on networked affect as well as Mendes, Ringrose & Keller's (2019) analysis of the affective nature of digital feminist activism.

rotation for longer), Nagle (2015) finds that controversial threads are more likely to be kept in rotation than non-controversial ones. These accounts of online policies, combined with anonymity and lack of accountability, provide a platform for misogynist, racist and homophobic discourses to thrive (Ging & Siapera, 2019). The memes in my data set similarly seem to emerge from a culture of outdoing other users and producing the most shocking content – as highlighted by other scholars (Jane, 2018b). The following is a discussion of the format of the three platforms and how I collected my data on each platform.

Reddit

Reddit was founded in 2005 (Meese, 2014) as an open-source platform for user-generated content which encourages participatory media culture and functions as a social community platform (A. Massanari, 2015). Any user, or 'Redditor' (A. Massanari, 2015), can create their own discussion boards called 'subreddits'. Some subreddits have existed for years and they will often develop their own memes, norms and discourses (Milner, 2013a). Each subreddit is individually moderated by voluntary moderators who are other Redditors (A. Massanari, 2015) and each subreddit has its own set of rules which can be seen on the right side of the page (see image 3.2). Posts can be 'upvoted' and 'downvoted' by other users which means that the most popular posts will appear at the top of a subreddit and the top of any search results. Each post is awarded with a score based on the number of upvotes and downvotes and these are translated into so-called "karma points" for each user account. Comments to posts are subject to the same upvote/downvote system. The discussions in the comments could provide a very interesting focus for analysis but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. The focus on this research project is on the humorous posts themselves and not on responses and discussions in the comments sections.

Reddit is by far the most researched site of the three platforms in my data collection and is often discussed in the scholarship on online misogyny and the manosphere (Braithwaite, 2016; Ging, 2017; A. Massanari, 2015; Milner, 2013b, 2013a; Miltner, 2014; Phillips, 2015b). I had been familiar with the platform for years prior to this project and kept up to date with various subreddits and trends on the platform. Once the Weinstein story broke, posts about this flooded the platform, and by that time I was able to decode the cultural references and understand the memes being referenced, reused and renegotiated.

When I decided to limit my data to #MeToo, I went through a number of subreddits that I knew encouraged humorous content and used the snowball effect to explore other subreddits via the suggestions box (see image 3.1). I decided to limit my data collection to the subreddit r/Funny as it provided me with a data set for each search term (between 6 and 45 memes per search term). Furthermore, the subreddit conforms to my humour criteria as the rules section to r/Funny explicitly states that "All posts must make an attempt at humour" (see image 3.2.).

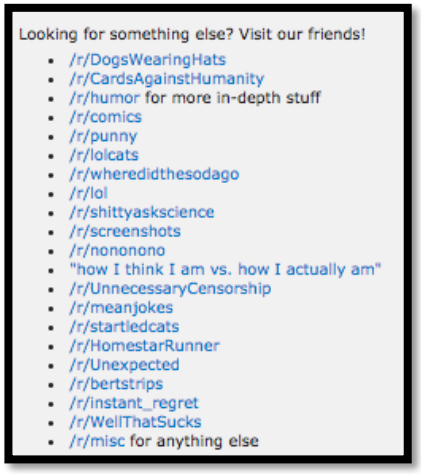

Figure 3.1: Suggestions from r/Funny. Screenshot

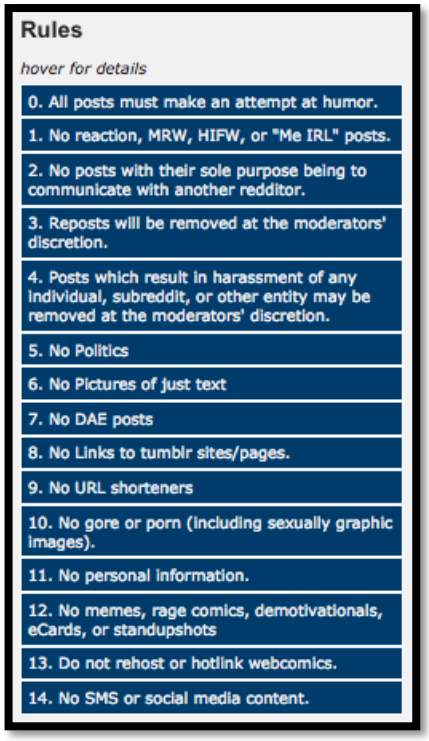

Figure 3.2: Rules from r/Funny. Screenshot

The memes on r/Funny include images, GIFs, videos and text. I collected all posts within my timeframe and excluded posts that consisted of links to other platforms, primarily to Imgur. After clicking the post (in order to see the full meme) I took screen shots of all memes as exemplified in Figure 3.3 below.

Figure 3.3: Harvey Weinstein data set from Reddit. 04-11-2017.

Each post frames the meme with some text above the meme. In the above meme, the first text in blue is what I refer to as the "title" of the meme, which is always created by the Original Poster (OP). The small URL in brackets next to the title (i.redd.it) refers to Reddit's image server which simply means that the image in question is saved on Reddit's own image server rather than on another platforms' server. This information has no relevance to my analysis and will not be taken into further consideration. Below the title of the post is the information about when the post was submitted and by whom. I have blacked out the usernames in all Reddit memes in order to secure anonymity in accordance with the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (more on this in the section on ethical considerations below). The last line of text informs me of the number of comments and allows the user to either share, save, hide or report the post.

9gag

9gag was created in 2008 and allows users to upload images, videos, GIFs and memes (Wagener, 2014). The platform has an upvoting/downvoting system very similar to Reddit. 9gag is mentioned by scholars when listing meme sharing and image sharing platforms and is often placed in the same categories as platforms such as Reddit, 4chan, YouTube and Tumblr (Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2014). 9gag,

however, has received little scholarly attention compared to those platforms. 9gag functions as a humorous discursive space and the emphasis on humour and fun is explicit throughout the platform. It is described as "your best source for fun" and "the fun part of the internet" ("9gag, About," 2018) and the Rules section describes how "9gag is all about fun. It's a place that gives people the power to make the world happier" ("9gag, Rules," 2018). As the co-founder of 9gag, Ray Chan, said in 2012: "We want to become a place where people will go whenever they want to kill some time and have a laugh … We want to make the world a happier place." (Gannes, 2012). I was an infrequent visitor to 9gag before starting my research, so I was familiar with the vernacular, culture and references. I checked the website traffic of humorous platforms on Alexa.com and when 9gag was at the top of the list (March 2018) of most visited humour platforms, I decided to include it as one of my platforms ("Alexa: 9gag.com Traffic Statistics," 2018).[10]

I filtered the posts by date (choosing the tab "new") in order to have the memes listed chronologically. This allowed me to attach an approximate date stamp for each post even though the post does not have a publication date (like the Reddit posts). As the comments below the post do have a publication date, I was able to determine an approximate date. Posts without comments were given approximate dates based on the date stamp of the previous and following posts. I discovered that a large number of posts were off limits as they were deemed "Sensitive Content". In order to access those posts, I created a user account (more on this in the section on ethics).

My data set from 9gag is by far the largest but also has the largest percentage of duplicates (32%). This might be due to the lack of moderators on 9gag as opposed to Reddit. My data from 9gag primarily consists of images with or without text and the occasional GIF and video. Irrelevant posts were excluded primarily when they had no connection to the search term. A common practice on 9gag is to add often random and irrelevant tags to a post, simply because a certain number of tags is required. Often tags are used to attract attention to a certain post, similar to how hashtags work on Twitter. This means that a number of memes in my data set have irrelevant tags referring to, for example, various presidents and singers, or people and phenomena that were popular at the time of publication.

[10] I filtered results by category, then chose the subcategory 'recreation' which allowed me to choose the subcategory 'humour'.

9gag has a different format to that of Reddit. Though 9gag has different categories – slightly similar to Reddit's subreddits but in a much smaller scale – a user can scroll through an endless stream of memes posted right after each other. It is possible to see the entire post including title and number of points without clicking the post. After clicking the post, it is possible to see all the comments as well as the tags – see Figure 3.4. The first line of text is the title of the meme and the second line of blue text are the three tags attached to each meme. Both title and tags are created by the OP. Underneath the blue text is the number of points given to the post as well as the number of comments written to the post. The final line of text is a selection of buttons. The first one – an arrow up – gives the post an upvote while the arrow down gives the post a downvote. The next two buttons allow the user to share the meme on Facebook or Pinterest while the last button (the three dots) signifies more options. The red button to the far right allows the user to jump to the next post.

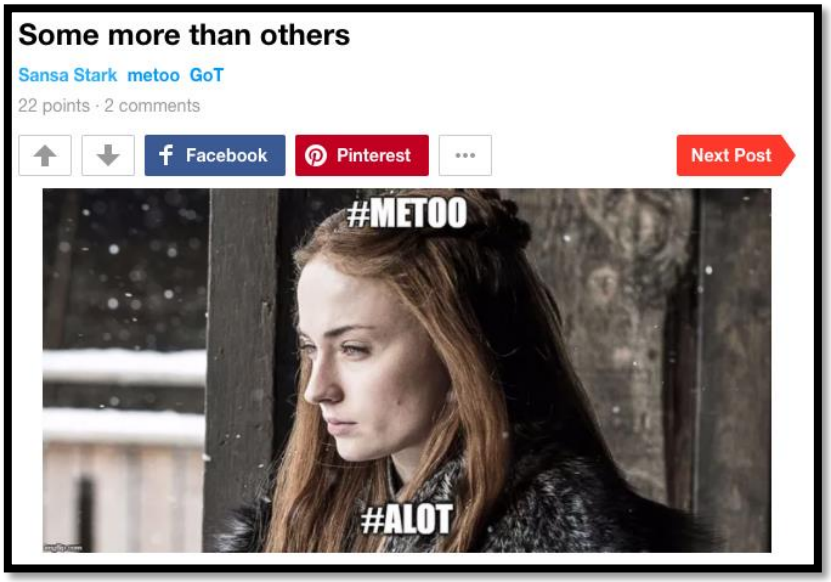

Figure 3.4: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 18-10-2017.

Imgur

Imgur (pronounced "Imager")[11] was founded in 2009 and started as a static image sharing platform but now features animated GIFs as well (Mikal, Rice, Kent, & Uchino, 2016;). Like Reddit and 9gag, it features user-generated content and allows users to up-vote and down-vote posts which feeds into a point system. Furthermore, it encourages users to engage with each other in the comments section. Users, known

11 (Mikal et al., 2016). According to the article "Pronunciation on Imgur.com", Imgur is pronounced "image-er" (im-ij-er) ("Imgur, Pronunciation," 2018).

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as “Imgurians” (Chaykowski, 2016; Milner, 2016), interact with each other and renegotiate cultural references as well as create their own references.

Going through the data set from Reddit led me to Imgur as I discovered that it is customary for Redditors to link to other platforms and the one website Redditors linked to the most was Imgur. Due to this link between the platforms I started exploring Imgur and found that the content and the platform matched my criteria. Furthermore, the posts were abundant. I was not a user of Imgur before starting my research project but as I familiarised myself with the platform, I discovered that it functions as a humorous discursive space with cultural references similar to those of Reddit and 9gag. Consequently, my literacy on Reddit and 9gag enabled me to quickly become literate on Imgur. The search function enabled me to easily find the posts that had my search terms in either title, tag, or in the meme itself. I was able to filter by date by choosing “newest first” and quickly had an overview of all posts with each search term. All posts feature a publication date, so it was easy to catalogue them. As was the case with 9gag, I excluded posts that had been tagged with the search term only to draw attention to the post without engaging with the search term or the subject sexual violence. I also excluded all “collection posts” which are collections of a number of memes that had already been posted to the platform previously.

Imgur has less emphasis on *fun* in the self-branding than 9gag, rather the emphasis is on *entertainment*. A 2017 press release describes the content as “community-powered entertainment” (https://imgurinc.com/press-discover-the-magic-of-the-internet-on-imgur). The notion that the content should be light-hearted and humorous is evident on the About page where Imgur is characterised as the platform “where you’ll find the funniest, most informative and inspiring images, memes, GIFs, and visual stories”, adding that “You’ll always find something on Imgur to make you smile and brighten your day.” (“Imgur, About,” n.d.). I would thus characterise Imgur as a humorous discursive space similar to Reddit and 9gag. All platforms reproduce the notion that the space is “just for fun” and that potentially offensive material is legitimised as users post “just for lulz”. In other words, the three platforms embody the just-a-joke discourse.

Imgur has a similar format to 9gag in that it provides a seemingly endless list of images for users to scroll through. While it is possible to see almost the entire meme as well as the title, some images are cropped so that part of the meme is missing. Once clicking the post, the entire meme becomes visible along with the

username of the OP as can be seen in Figure 3.5 below. The first line of text above the meme is what I refer to as the title, created by the OP. The next line reveals the username of the OP – which has been redacted by me – and the publication date. Finally, the blue button at the far-right corner takes the user to the next post. The bottom of the image often features a small text indicating whether the meme has been created via Imgur's meme generator or if it has been imported from another website.

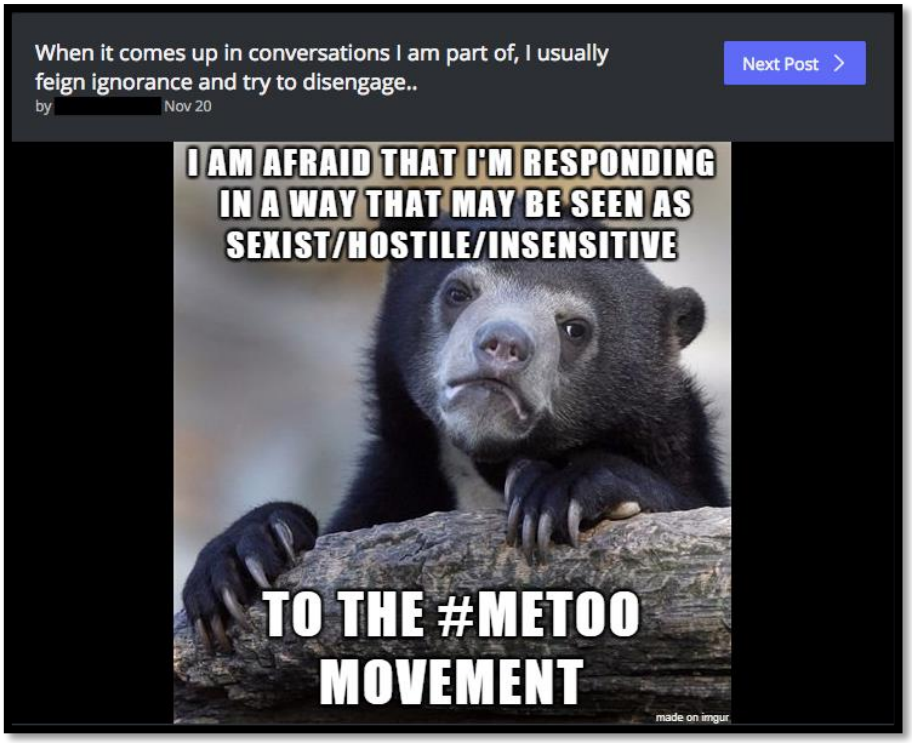


Figure 3.5: #MeToo data set from Imgur. 20-11-2017.

As Milner (2013a) argues, the logic of lulz is vital to Reddit. I would however argue that it is not limited to Reddit but in fact extends to the other two platforms in similar ways. 9gag and Imgur provide the same type of humorous discursive space where certain codes are in play and where upvotes, downvotes and comments create a similar discursive community – one where technological affordances and abilities to decode sub cultural and pop cultural codes, privileges certain people and excludes others.

Digital literacy and male discursive spaces

I understand digital literacy in two ways: first as my ability as a researcher to decode meaning from the memes and second as a digital sociality, in which subjects are included and excluded dependent on whether or not they are in on the joke. Both

aspects of literacy are relevant to my project, as my ability to navigate the content is crucial for a thorough analysis of discourse and because literacy as a politics of inclusion and exclusion is central to understanding how these online spaces are gendered.

Inspired by Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledges, I find it important to situate myself as a researcher based on my historical, cultural and bodily context. I use a great variety of social media on a daily basis and I consider myself as part of the Internet generation, as I became a frequent user in my late teens. Similar to what Phillips & Milner (2017) point out, being in my mid-thirties and having grown up in a North-western European society, my cultural experiences are informed broadly by Anglo-American Internet culture. I situate my own experiences as informed by this cultural context and consequently consider my digital and cultural literacy as sufficient to decode the cultural references of my selected social media platforms. In her work on the sociality of GIFs, Kanai (2016) argues that a reader of a GIF does not necessarily have to be familiar with the exact popular cultural context from which the GIF is derived in order to decipher the meaning. Similarly, I argue that my knowledge of Anglo-American culture, Internet culture and platform-specific sub-culture is sufficient for decoding meaning on the three social media platforms.

As mentioned, I had prior knowledge to the platforms to varying degrees. I familiarised myself with Imgur for the purpose of this research project. Reddit was on my radar for years leading up to this project as I had become aware of it as a hostile space for women and racial and sexual minorities through my reading of scholarly work as well as feminist blogs ("Feministing.com," 2018; A. Massanari, 2015; Milner, 2013a; Phillips, n.d.). I had been an infrequent user of 9gag in the past though never to the extent of creating a profile or uploading content and engaging with other users. I would thus characterise myself as an outside observer of the three platforms as I do not engage with or contribute to them. I would however argue that my literacy on each platform is sufficient for decoding the 'platform vernacular'(Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015) specific to each platform due to months and (in the case of 9gag and Reddit) years of observation.

My analysis of the memes is influenced by my specific feminist background, theoretical knowledge and theoretical approach to rape culture. Though I have been an infrequent observer of the platforms, I do not have any strong positive nor negative feelings towards the platforms in general. The specific memes in my data

set do however generate a different type of sentiment, thus leading me to characterize myself as an "anti-fan" (Gray, 2003). My analysis of my data set will thus logically differ from that of a fan of the content – the person who would feel discursively included and represented in the discourse and who would find the memes funny. Thus my interaction (Gray, 2003) with the content is influenced by my specific situation as a researcher and thus produces situated knowledge – logically resulting in subjective research production.

Kanai (2016) suggests understanding individual digital competences as situated within broader social practices of literacy. Drawing on Burgess and Green, this means that literacy should be considered as a historical and political "*system* that both enables and shapes participation" (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 72, emphasis in original). This then leads to questions of who has access to social media literacy and who is excluded from access to such platforms. When relating this to my discussion of the manosphere and androcentricity in the previous chapter, we can see how this question of access is highly gendered. As discussed in Chapter 2, this gendered distinction between the insider and outsider position is also apparent in humorous discourse where the assumed male subject and audience excludes women and make their experiences invisible. Furthermore, digital literacy can be used to draw up boundaries in which disruptive voices are constructed as unable to "get" the joke. This will be explored thoroughly in my analysis but for now it is important to note that the social literacy on these online spaces creates a gendered insider/outsider divide where, female subject positions are excluded from a community of hegemonic masculinity and male centrality.

Male discursive spaces

According to Alexa.com, the user demographics on Reddit, 9gag and Tumblr have a significant overrepresentation of men and a significant underrepresentation of women compared to the general Internet population (see Figure 3.6).[12] This data does not take into account the fact that users might falsify this information, especially on these types of platforms that encourage anonymity. This information does thus not provide an accurate account of the demographics of the users, but it does support the notion that the three social media platforms largely function as 'male discursive

[12] This data was retrieved in April 2018 and accounts for the previous 12 months and comes from voluntary demographics information submitted by the people in the Alexa global traffic panel. The panel consists of a sample of millions of Internet users that use one of many different browser extensions ("Alexa.com, About Us," 2018).

spaces'. As discussed in the previous chapter, the discourse produced on some social media platforms (primarily based on research on Reddit), privileges a white male centrality – an androcentric worldview assuming male subjecthood among users. The scholarship on memes has outlined similar gendered assumptions privileging men and excluding women through humorous discourses (Kanai, 2016; Milner, 2016). Even though 9gag, Reddit and Imgur implicitly as well as explicitly reproduce the notion that the users are de facto non-specific and anonymous, a discourse analysis of communication and the uploaded memes on the platforms does reveal a heteronormative male-oriented discourse, echoing the Internet trope "There are no girls on the Internet" (Milner, 2013a). Rather than discussing or drawing conclusions on the gender of specific users and OPs, I argue that gendered discourse in the memes construct these platforms as discursively male spaces (Boyle, 2014). The discursive construction of gender and sexuality will be unpacked further in the following chapters so for now I suggest that the platforms in my data set provide discursive humorous spaces where the content produced reveal androcentricity and white, heterosexual belonging.

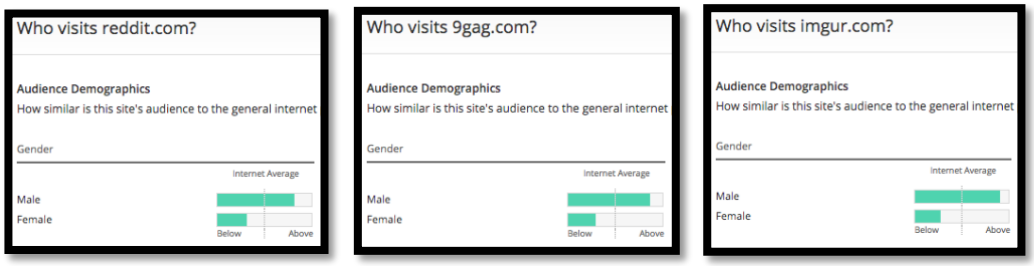


Figure 3.6: Audience demographics divided by gender on Reddit, 9gag and Imgur relative to the general Internet population. Source: https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/reddit.com, https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/9gag.com and https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/imgur.com.

Ethical considerations

As my data set consists of Internet based content, I find it necessary to reflect on my ethical considerations for composing my data set. In order to secure that I take all necessary measures into consideration, I have consulted the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). I have consulted ESRC's extensive list of research that require full ethics review and my research approaches do not fall under any of these categories (Economic and Social Research Council, 2018). Consequently, my research did not undergo ethics review. I have, however, considered three ethical considerations

which I will discuss in the following: the public/private divide, privacy/anonymity, and copyright.

The social media platforms encourage users to create user profiles in order to upload memes and engage in discussions in the comments sections. However, the users have no control over who can access the material they upload to the site or what happens to the memes once they have been uploaded. Memes are per definition non-fixed, ever-changing entities and the users have no intellectual property rights.

The second point is protection of identity and whether or not to seek consent from research objects. As my research focuses solely on the user-uploaded content of the platforms and not on the users themselves, I do not deem it necessary to seek consent from the users. I do protect the identity of the users by redacting the usernames of the OP in each meme as discussed above. This is in order to protect the personally identifiable information of the users, as well as to protect them from potential harm and vulnerability (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Consequently, it is not possible to trace the meme back to the user who uploaded it, especially considering that these memes are reposted constantly as well as being in a constant state of flux where they are altered and remixed. The memes collected from 9gag do not have a visible OP username. Furthermore, the user profiles and the interaction among users is generally anonymous – an important part of the digital construction of meme-sharing platforms (Phillips, 2015b).

My access to the content on 9gag was slightly more restricted than the other platforms. Some of the memes were deemed "sensitive content" (see Figure 3.7), which required that I created a user profile in order to access these memes. Creating a user profile meant submitting my full name, my email address and a password. Then I ticked a box stating that "I'm not a robot" (see Figure 3.8). After this I was sent an email asking me to confirm my email address. Having confirmed this, I then had access to all the content. Though password protected platforms often lead to further ethical considerations, my registration on 9gag was not approved by a gatekeeper, the registration happened instantly, and I would argue that the registration is in place as a legal measure for the platform and a way to avoid robots, rather than as a safety measure for the benefit of the users of the platform. At no point was I asked to agree to the Terms of Service, however, the Terms of Service state that I agree to the Terms of Service when "using or accessing the Services" ("9gag, Terms of Service," 2018). This is the same practice as on Reddit and Imgur ("Imgur, Terms of Service," 2018; "Reddit, User Agreement," 2018).

The AoIR recommends considering the expectations the users might have about whether the content on the platforms can be considered private or public (Ess & AoIR ethics, 2002; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Despite having to log in to 9gag in order to see the memes considered "sensitive content", this does not mean that the content was uploaded to a private rather than a public domain. The user can choose to tick "sensitive content" when adding a meme, but this does not mean that the user has any control over who accesses the content. As Townsend and Wallace (2016) point out, whether content should be considered private often depends on whether the user can reasonably expect their posts to be observed by strangers (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Based on the accessibility of the content deemed sensitive, I would argue that the user cannot reasonably expect the uploaded content to be private and based on 9gag's Terms of Service, the user has no control over who accesses the content. Furthermore, the format of the platform encourages a competitive aspect to the uploading of content, in which the user is encouraged to upload content that reaches as wide an audience as possible through the point system which places most popular posts at the top of the feed.

Figure 3.7: Screenshot from 9gag: a sensitive content meme

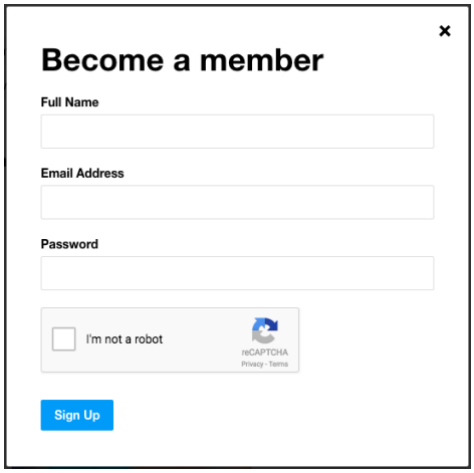


Figure 3.8: Screenshot from 9gag: the sign-up process

None of the research conducted on Reddit, Imgur and 9gag which uses discourse analysis or content analysis includes ethical considerations in the methodological framework of the study. In other words, only researchers applying ethnographic methods consider the ethical issues involved with the research participants. In one study of pro-anorexia websites, Karen Dias considers how she will protect the privacy of the participants (Dias, 2003). She applies feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis to material gathered from online public discussion forums about anorexia. Due to the sensitive subject she has removed all

names and pseudonyms from the narratives that she analyses in order to protect the privacy of the participants. I apply a similar strategy where I blur all usernames in order to secure the privacy of the users.

The AoIR recommendations point out that though certain platforms might have copyright restrictions in their terms of service, scholarly use of the content might be exempt from those rules. The Terms of Service on all three platforms have clear copyright terms which state that the content cannot be used without permission from the individual platform except for use that qualifies as "fair use" under the copyright law. This is the American equivalent of the UK Fair Dealing Law which exempts research from copyright restrictions. 9gag does not refer to fair use but does however refer to Hong Kong and international copyright laws. The copyright law in Hong Kong refers to similar exceptions where fair dealing also includes research ("Copyright in Hong Kong," 2017). Consequently, I have not sought permission from the platforms to use their content as my research falls under fair use.

Search terms

I began my research by testing different search terms and hashtags relating to #MeToo on my three platforms. Before deciding that I would limit my data to #MeToo, I had tested various search terms on a large number of social media platforms, including "rape jokes" "rape", "rape humour", "sexist", "sexist jokes", "sexist humour" and I found a number of jokes and other humorous posts on several platforms. However, this approach had some limitations as it depended on the poster tagging their post as sexist or relating to rape. I soon found that focusing my research on a specific case such as #MeToo, provided a much more substantial and useful data sample. This case-study approach allowed me to see a range of commentary about sexual violence in a context where humorous discourse circulates and where users do not necessarily tag the posts as "rape" or similar.

A case-study approach can be useful both because it allows for in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon and because it provides insights into an under-researched and unique subject area (Mendes et al., 2019). A case-study approach was useful for my research because it allows for in-depth analysis of #MeToo which was under-researched at the time of writing and it provides unique insights into the discourse of meme-production on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur.

As outlined in my introduction, #MeToo was an exceptional digital media moment, which produced both feminist hashtag activism and networks of disclosure,

as well as a backlash of anti-feminist and anti-rape culture discourses. Focusing on this specific event enables me to conduct an in-depth analysis of online reactions, which in turn is representative of mediated constructions of sexual violence more broadly on specific online spaces. The choice of three social media platforms enables an in-depth analysis of rape discourse on platforms that specifically encourage humorous discourse and it gives insight into the production of normative subjectivities and excluded others within male discursive spaces.

While in no way claiming that my specific case study is indicative of meaning making and discursive productions of rape culture on all of the Internet, or even of all of social media and meme-sharing platforms, I will argue that it provides a useful starting point for understanding discursive constructions of gender and sexuality within rape discourse on social media. The case-study approach thus provides a specific data set of humorous mediated meme-production, which might be representative of reproductions of rape culture on some social media spaces.

I started conducting searches on 9gag, as it has by far the most memes, using an array of search terms. Before deciding to include the three perpetrators in my search terms, I initially conducted searches for some of the most outspoken accusers (including Rose McGowan, Ashley Judd, Asia Argento, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Beckinsale, Lupita Nyong'o, Mira Sorvino, Salma Hayek, Paz de la Huerta, Daryl Hannah, Lena Headey, Angelina Jolie, Heather Graham and Rebel Wilson). This generated such a small number of results that I decided not to include them in my data set. The fact that they are hardly represented by name on the three social media platforms is not irrelevant. It is important to note, though, that the accusers are represented in a number of posts in my data set. There are pictures of the accusers in posts tagged with the name of the perpetrator or with #MeToo. In other words, the women who are represented in my data set are not named, they do not exist in the tags or in the headline, they only exist in relation to the man who is accused of abusing them and they thus have no voice.

Time frame

I have limited the scope of my data collection to just under three months, beginning on the 5th of October 2017, when the *New York Times* article revealed the first accusations against Harvey Weinstein (Kantor & Twohey, 2017), to the end of the year, including the 31st of December 2017. This provides me with a data sample which covers the development and reveal of abuse committed by famous and

powerful men. The Time's Up initiative started on the 1st of January 2018 and I found a lot of the humorous posts then covered this phenomenon and thus shifted the focus somewhat from the initial focus on #MeToo. This provides me with a data set where the various search terms overlap and exemplify humorous rape discourse within the same time frame. Though all data ends on the 31st of December, only the search term Harvey Weinstein starts on the 5th of October. The other search terms start on the day their respective stories were made public. Thus, the Kevin Spacey data collection starts on the 30th October 2017, the Louis C.K. collection starts on 9th November 2017 and the #MeToo collection starts on the 15th October 2017 when Alyssa Milano posted her #MeToo tweet.

Harvey Weinstein

On the 5th of October 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey published an article in *The New York Times* that outlined eight instances of sexual harassment accusations against Harvey Weinstein which all ended in paid settlements to the actresses and former Weinstein employees. Five days later, on the 10th of October, Ronan Farrow published his article in *The New Yorker* which listed 13 accounts of sexual harassment and assault by Weinstein, including three accounts of rape. Following the publication of this article a long list of women has reported similar experiences and by the end of 2017 the list of accusers was somewhere between 80 and 100 (Levin, 2017; J. Williams, 2017).

The accusations against Harvey Weinstein were the starting point which enabled other women to tell their stories involving many famous and powerful men and it led to the #MeToo response. Even after the initial accusations and as other men were accused, it was still Weinstein who was mentioned as the main perpetrator and subsequent accusations were often referred to as "the Weinstein effect" or "the Weinstein scandal" (Balch, 2017; Cobb & Horeck, 2018; Cooney, 2017; Graham, 2017; "Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded," 2017; "The Harvey Weinstein effect," 2018). Weinstein was the epicentre, patient zero. His name is often used as a tagline in my data set for memes that discuss #MeToo more broadly or comments on accusations against Hollywood men in general. Consequently, I chose Weinstein as one of my search terms because his name has become inextricably linked with #MeToo and because he is portrayed as the perpetrator par-excellence.

Kevin Spacey

The Kevin Spacey case is fundamentally different from the Weinstein case, which prompts a unique angle in most of the humorous response. Actor Anthony Rapp told Buzzfeed on 29th October 2017 that Spacey had attempted to sexually assault him when Rapp was 14 years old (Vary, 2017). Spacey responded that he did not remember the incident but that if it did happen it was due to "deeply inappropriate behaviour" for which he apologised. In the same tweet as the apology, Spacey came out as homosexual stating that "In my life I have had relationships with both men and women. I have loved and had romantic encounters with men throughout my life, and I choose now to live as a gay man." (Convery, 2017). Rapp's accusations were followed by numerous other accusations by men reporting similar acts of sexual harassment and assault by Spacey – including men who were under 18 at the time of the assaults. Netflix fired him from the production of the final season of *House of Cards* and his part in the Ridley Scott film *All the Money in the World* was reshot with Christopher Plummer.

Spacey's response to the accusations has been widely criticised, for not admitting to the accusation, for using his drunkenness as an excuse and, especially, for implying a connection between homosexuality and sexual assault of a child. He has thus been accused of using his coming out as homosexual as a deflection from his actions (Victor, 2017b). This creates a multifaceted set of memes about him, significantly different from those about Weinstein. The memes are predominantly about male homosexuality, paedophilia and about him coming out as a strategy of deflection. I thus chose to include Spacey as my second search term as this generated a different approach to sexuality and a more ambiguous portrayal of the figure of the perpetrator.

Louis C.K.

Humorous posts about Louis C.K. bring another level to my analysis as he himself is a comedian. A number of articles have alleged harassment by C.K. since 2015 (Buckley, 2017; Davies, 2015; Desta, 2017; Sargent, 2015; Yamato, 2016). His behaviour (much like Weinstein's) was an open secret in the comedy and entertainment industry (Buckley, 2017; Desta, 2017). However, it was not until after the *New York Times* article of 9th November 2017 that he admitted to these allegations. In the article five women accuse him of harassing them and masturbating in front of them (Ryzik, Buckley, & Kantor, 2017). C.K. responded to the allegations

by stating that “these stories are true” (“Louis C.K. Responds to Accusations: ‘These Stories Are True,’” 2017).

The inclusion of C.K. as a search term provided yet another layer to the discursive construction of the perpetrator: a celebrated comedian whom users of the platforms seem to sympathise with and identify with. The fact that he often talks about masturbating in his comedy shows is a reoccurring theme among the memes in my data set which seem to celebrate this fact. Furthermore, the fact that C.K. is a comedian and therefore a producer of humorous discourse creates an important link to the dichotomy I discussed in my literature review between the male comedian and the feminist killjoy, who is also often the butt of the comedian’s joke.

#MeToo

I decided to include the #MeToo search term in my data set as I found it provided an important angle that was profoundly different from the other three. Though the phrase “Me Too” was first used in a campaign by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 (Garcia, 2017), it was connected to the Weinstein case on 15th October 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged her Twitter followers to write “me too” on their timeline. “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me Too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” (Slawson, 2017). #MeToo became a worldwide phenomenon and was tweeted more than half a million times within the first 24 hours (France, 2017). It also spread to Facebook where the hashtag was used more than 4.7 million times within the first 24 hours (Santiago & Criss, 2017).

The #MeToo hashtag was the feminist response to the accusations against Weinstein as well as the larger structural mechanisms in place which allows for men to systematically abuse women. Rather than focus on one perpetrator specifically, the #MeToo data set provides memes that also address the women who have experienced abuse and it addresses the #MeToo phenomenon in more general terms. This data set enables me to analyse humorous discourse which specifically addresses sexual violence and the #MeToo event.

Cleaning the data

I catalogued all memes and took screenshots of them in order to secure my data in case the original link would be altered or deleted at a later stage. See table 3.1 for an overview of all data.

	Weinstein	Spacey	C.K.	#MeToo	**Total**
9gag	182	608	50	80	**920**
Reddit	19	45	16	6	**86**
Imgur	97	70	49	44	**260**
All platforms	**298**	**723**	**115**	**130**	**1266**

Table 3.1: Overview of memes on each platform and in total.

After having limited my data sample to the above-mentioned platforms, considering the time frame and criteria for relevant posts, I then had a total of 1266 posts (see table 3.1). Because I am interested in unique items, the data was cleaned to remove duplicates. Some posts were tagged with several of my search terms and had thus been collected several times. I kept the original posts and excluded the ones that had been reposted later with no moderation on the same platform or on one of the other two platforms. Posts that had been tagged with several of my search terms were categorised under the search term with which the post had the strongest affiliation. After excluding the duplicates, I was left with 866 unique posts (see table 3.2). All memes have been saved in folders which are stored in my private drop box. As is apparent in table 3.2., the number of memes generated by each search term varies greatly. The reasons for this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

	Weinstein	Spacey	C.K.	#MeToo	**Total**
9gag	121	381	26	65	**593**
Reddit	13	30	11	6	**60**
Imgur	82	49	43	39	**213**
All platforms	**216**	**460**	**80**	**110**	**866**

Table 3.2. Overview of cleaned data on each platform and in total.

Memes: definition and scope

The nature of Internet interaction and the fast-paced creation and circulation of online content complicates any fixed definition of memes for research purposes. Limor Shifman does however provide a useful definition of memes on three levels:

> (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (Shifman, 2013b, p. 41)

This definition thus includes any type of online memes regardless of form. Though I find Shifman's definition useful for understanding the referential nature of Internet memes, I do, however, find it necessary to distinguish between form when analysing my data. Researchers who specialise in memes do agree that memes take many different forms including moving images, text and drawings (Milner, 2012, 2013b, 2013a; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Consequently, I will argue that all the posts in my data can be categorised as memes. They have all been uploaded to the respective platforms in image format (whether still or moving) and they have been created with awareness of previous memes with cultural codes reserved for a specific online audience who has the cultural and technological affordance to decode them. I use the Internet meme reference website Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/) to look up memes and access as much information about them as possible.

Though a comparative analysis of various formats is not within the scope of this thesis, I do find it important to distinguish between different formats in order to catalogue the memes and in order to create a vocabulary of formats. I have catalogued each post to fit broadly within 5 formats: image macros, images with or without text, text, GIFs and videos. By text I mean all memes that are text-only, in that they feature neither an image nor a drawing.

Some memes have text only while others have image only – which includes comics, drawings, photos and screenshots. Comics have mostly circulated as so-called rage comics on meme-sharing platforms. Rage comics are known for using specific characters (that in time have been named similarly to the named image macros) such as the Troll Face, Challenge Accepted Guy and Rage Guy (the androcentric discourse is prevalent in the names here) (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013b). Drawings can have some of the same characters as in the rage comics.

Image macros are the most common genre of memes and the goal of creating a meme is predominantly a humorous response (Milner, 2012). Image macros consist of an image with a (predominantly) white text in all caps. Usually it features a text at the top and a text at the bottom which is often a response or a punch-line to the top text (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013b). Some image macros have circulated online for

years and have a name, for example Success Kid, Socially Awkward Penguin and Bad Luck Brian. Sometimes image macros are stacked with other images, what Milner (2012) refers to as stacked stills (Milner, 2012), those memes have also been categorised as image macros in my data set.

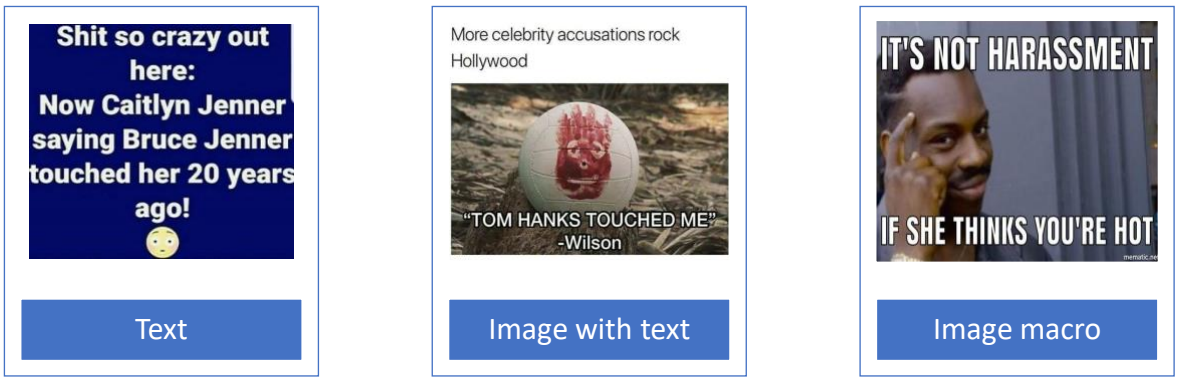


Figure 3.9: An overview of the three meme genres: Text, image with text and image macro.

The GIF (Graphics Interchange Format), in my data set, is a few seconds of moving image from film, TV or an animation which constantly loop (Eppink, 2014; Kanai, 2016). As opposed to videos, GIFs have no sound but might have accompanying text written across the image, similar to the format of an image macro, or it might have subtitles accompanying what is being said in the original piece of video. This caption is often how posters produce meaning and convey humorous purpose. As Kanai points out, in order for the reader to understand the meaning of the GIF, a conceptual alignment of the GIF with the caption is necessary (Kanai, 2016).

Videos in this context are moving images with sound. That is the main thing that sets them apart from GIFs. I have taken screenshots of GIFs and videos the same way as I have taken screenshots of all the other posts. This, however, means that screenshots of these moving images will not show the full extent of the GIF or video and limit the meaning making if only looking at the screenshot. During my analysis I have opened the link to each post in order to fully grasp the meaning.

While some of the research on memes only include image macros (Drakett et al., 2018; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), I include all forms of memes in my data set in order to present the full variety of meme-produced discourse.

Coding the memes

In order to code the memes into different categories for my discourse analysis, I imported screen shots of the memes into Nvivo 12 (2018) for Mac. Nvivo is a

qualitative data analysis software used for coding large quantities of data. I considered each meme a unit of data, thus coding it in its entirety, regardless of whether it consisted of image, text, moving image or all of the above. The data set was read repeatedly in order for me to gain a high level of familiarity with the data set (Braun, Virginia; Clarke, 2006). Utilising thematic qualitative analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), I then proceeded to the coding process where each meme was coded with one or more themes (see appendix 1 for a list of all themes). Once all memes had been coded, I examined the themes and was able to categorise them into 4 main topics and 13 sub-topics. This method of coding has been used by other scholars employing discourse analysis (Drakett et al., 2018; Hindes & Fileborn, 2019; Moloney & Love, 2018). The following chapter will discuss the main topics and sub-topics in more detail including an evaluation of how the themes emerge from different search terms.

Conclusion

Within this chapter I have discussed my methodological reflections and my approaches to building a social media data set. Where the first part of the chapter functioned as the methodological framework, the second part outlined the story of my research from initial interest to final data set. The methodological reflections in the first part of the chapter were to situate myself as a feminist researcher, which means that I acknowledge that my research is conducted through a partial, localised and bodily perspective. I situate my approach to discourse analysis within a feminist tradition in order to analyse the discursive construction of gender and sexuality within a rape discourse.

The second part of this chapter has outlined the scope, reflections, limitations and approaches to my data collection. Significantly, I have discussed how Reddit, 9gag and Imgur function as humorous discursive spaces, where users are encouraged to upload content that they consider humorous. Following my initial point about situated knowledges, I reflect on my own digital literacy as well as the consideration of digital literacy as a social practice of inclusion and exclusion. These practices will be apparent throughout my analysis along with the notion of male discursive spaces as discussed in the chapter. My considerations on ethics show how I have taken relevant guidelines into consideration and have taken measures to secure the anonymity of the users of the three platforms. The fifth part of this chapter provided a discussion of how I created the data set based on the four search terms which

provide unique aspects to the data set. The final section of the chapter provided a definition of Internet memes as well as a discussion of how I coded the memes into main topics and sub-topics.

In the following chapters I carry out a discourse analysis of my data set of humorous memes relating to Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K. and #MeToo. This analysis is carried out thematically based on common topics across search terms and across social media platforms. The purpose of this analysis is to deconstruct categories of gender and sexuality and point to how normative notions of sexual violence is constructed within online humorous discursive spaces.

Chapter 4:
An overview of the four data sets

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the Internet memes in my data set as well as how those memes have been coded into themes. I identified four main topics, which will be discussed in the following chapters: portrayal of the victims, portrayal of the perpetrators, homosexuality and paedophilia, and backlash and distraction. In this chapter I discuss the process of identifying these themes and evaluate the similarities and difference across the four data sets. I also discuss how gender, sexuality and race are portrayed across the data set. This is in order to establish how the three platforms function as male discursive spaces with a white, heterosexual centrality. Finally, I provide an overview of how victims and perpetrators are discursively constructed. This chapter is primarily concerned with my third research question which asks how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed in the memes. It will discuss the overarching similarities and differences across the four data sets.

The coding process

Before discussing the four data sets, I will outline my process of coding the memes and I will explain the appendices. As discussed in the previous chapter, I used thematic qualitative analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) to code the memes and to identify a number of themes. Nvivo 12 was used to code each meme. Any memes might have more than one identified theme – see Table 4.1 below for a list of all themes (this figure is also available in Appendix 1.)

Paedophilia	213
Spacey's coming out	116
Homosexuality	74
Minimizing sexual violence and the victims' experiences	57
Assumed male and heterosexual identity of users	49
Comparing perpetrators to other perpetrators	47
The perpetrators' careers	44
Distancing oneself from the perpetrators	42
Hollywood is the problem	41
Dehumanisation of perpetrators	41
Dehumanisation of victims	37
Politicising the issue	36
Coming out as an excuse for bad behaviour	30
Material which proofs abusive behaviour or mirrors offscreen persona	24
Ridiculing perpetrators	23
Men are the victims of #MeToo	22
OP compares themselves to rapists	21
#MeToo has gone too far	20
The fans and culture consumers are the victims	20
Celebrating the perpetrators	19
Celebration of masturbation	19
Implying that rape and sex is the same thing	17
Perfect or imperfect victims	17
Discrediting the victims	16
Disbelief in victims	15
Assumption that accusations are false	14
The magnitude of #MeToo	14
Women write #MeToo or claim rape to advance their careers	13
The casting couch	13
Disbelief or frustration that the perpetrator is accused	12
The perpetrators are the victims	11
Discrediting #MeToo	9
Targeting women or wives connected to the perpetrators	9
Belief in victims	8
Perfect or imperfect perpetrators	8
Victim blaming	8
Anti-feminist	8
Victims are attention seekers	7
Accusations are too late	7
Pro-#MeToo	7
#MeToo is a witch hunt	5
Double standard within #MeToo	5
Victims should contact police not post on social media	5
Anti-Semitism	4

Table 4.1: Overview of all themes with number of memes.

Once I had identified all of the themes, I was able to isolate four main topics: Portrayal of the Victims, Portrayal of the Perpetrators, Homosexuality and Paedophilia, and Backlash and Distraction. Within each of these main topics were

sub-topics, to which several of the themes applied. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the four main topics, indicating in which chapter they can be found. This should also provide a useful visualisation making it clear exactly how each main topic is constructed and how sub-topics and themes are organised in relation to this. Chapter 5, for example (see appendix 2 page 229) focuses on the portrayal of the victims. This main topic includes a total of ten themes which have been gathered into three sub-topics: characterisation of the victims, blaming the victims, and diminishing the victims' experiences.

The overview in Appendix 2 is organised around the chapters. The present chapter does not discuss any of the main topics but rather focuses on a single theme, assumed male and heterosexual identity of users, shown on page 228. This theme illustrates general characteristics across the data set. The first page of Appendix 2 thus appears quite differently than the other four pages, as it lists a single theme and no main topics or sub-topics.

Page 229 illustrates the themes coded under the main topic, Portrayal of the Victims, which I discussed in the previous paragraph. This main topic will be analysed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses two major topics. The first is Portrayal of the Perpetrators which can be found on page 230 of Appendix 2. The other topic which is discussed in Chapter 6 is Homosexuality and Paedophilia and the overview of this topic can be found on page 231. This topic is so large and so distinct from the overall characterisation of the perpetrators that I have identified it as a completely separate main topic. The reason I discuss this in Chapter 6 is because Kevin Spacey is, nonetheless, framed as a perpetrator. It should be noted that homosexuality and paedophilia have been grouped together in one major topic due to the fact that the memes largely draw a link between the two, not because I do. The fourth major topic, Distraction and Backlash, is discussed in Chapter 7 and the overview can be found on page 232 of Appendix 2.

Some themes were so insignificant that I decided not to include them in my analysis (see Appendix 3, see page 233). Generally, themes have been excluded when they apply to four or fewer memes, as I consider them too insignificant to analyse in this thesis. One exception has been made, relating to the theme "Anti-Semitism" which applies to four memes. I have included this as it speaks both to the characterisation of Harvey Weinstein (as I discuss in Chapter 6) and to the characterisation of Hollywood (as I discuss in Chapter 7). A number of memes have

been coded into the theme "Unable to classify" which means they had no clear decodable message and theme. These will thus not be included in my analysis.

The four data sets

The data set consists of a total of four individual data sets, generated from the four search terms: Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K. and #MeToo. There is a significant difference between the memes generated by each search term, which means that some themes might derive mainly from one data set and be non-existent in another data set. The following is a discussion of similarities and differences between the themes deriving from each data set.

The Harvey Weinstein data set (216 memes)

The Harvey Weinstein data set differs from the other three data sets in two significant ways. First is the way in which Hollywood and US party politics play a big part. Weinstein is constructed as the symbol of everything that is wrong with Hollywood and his association with US Democrats is constructed as a liberal conspiracy – a suggestion that powerful Hollywood figures fund and influence the politics of the Democrats. Hollywood and US politics are two large themes which will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

Second is the way in which the characterisation of him is less sympathetic and ambivalent than the characterisation of the other two perpetrators. Most significantly are comparisons with him to other famous perpetrators (such as Bill Cosby) and a dehumanisation and monsterisation of him. 75% of the memes that have been coded as "ridiculing the perpetrator" derive from the Weinstein data set. Conversely, memes that show support for the perpetrator are almost non-existent and not a single meme has been coded as expressing frustration with the accusations against him. This would suggest that users of these three social media platforms had little prior affective investment in him as a person which is in contrast to the fandom surrounding Spacey and, in particular, C.K. The notion of fandom is further discussed and problematised in Chapter 6 which also analyses Weinstein as a 'monstrous figure' (Boyle, 2018). Notably, humour functions mostly to ridicule him – primarily highlighting his appearance and his body size – which constructs him as the perpetrator 'par excellence'.

It is important to note though, that the antagonism against Weinstein does not in turn mean that there is a particularly great amount of support for the victims in the

Weinstein data set. Themes that express belief in the victims and support #MeToo are almost non-existent and themes that minimize sexual violence and blame the victims are still well represented.

The Kevin Spacey data set (459 memes)

The Kevin Spacey data set is significantly larger than the other three data sets (459 memes compared to 216 memes in the Weinstein data set, 110 memes in the #MeToo data set and 81 in the C.K. set). The fact that Spacey was accused of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old boy and that he came out as gay in his response to the accusation, has shaped the themes of the data set. The largest themes, which are also unique to this data set, are paedophilia (205 memes), homosexuality (110 memes) and ones that discuss his coming out (72 memes). As mentioned in Chapter 3, Spacey was criticised for implying a connection between homosexuality and sexual assault of a child (Victor, 2017b) and this connection is also drawn in the discursive construction of homosexuality and paedophilia in the memes. I elaborate on this in the characterisation of Spacey in Chapter 6, as well as the discursive construction of homosexuality and paedophilia, and how the two are portrayed as intrinsically linked.

The remarkable findings of the Spacey data set show how it both expresses a strong sense of fandom and support – mostly through the theme "the perpetrator's career is over or suffering" which is largely of no concern in the Weinstein data set – while simultaneously expressing a wish to distance oneself from him – mainly though ridiculing his sexuality as well as his coming out. The data set thus largely indicates a sense of ambivalence characterised by affective expressions of fandom. This is explored further in Chapter 6 where the complex humorous construction of homosexuality and paedophilia is taken under analytical scrutiny.

The Louis C.K. data set (81 memes)

The Louis C.K. data set is the smallest, making up less than 10% of the total data set. Significant for this data set is the way the memes are often constructed around material from C.K.'s TV show, *Louie*, and from his stand-up shows. As C.K. generally presents himself as undesirable and struggling to find female sexual partners, the memes using his material can then be analysed in two different ways: either as ridiculing him and his self-identified undesirability, or as celebrating him for owning his flaws. I will discuss this duality further in Chapter 6. The largest

theme in the C.K. data set addresses the fact that he masturbated in front of a number of women. The majority of the memes suggest a discourse of celebration rather than critique. This celebration of aggressive male sexuality and self-pleasure constructs a discourse of homosociality prevalent on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur. I will develop this argument further in Chapter 6.

The theme of fandom and idolization is particularly prevalent in the C.K. data set. Fifty percent of the memes that express disbelief of the accusations and that construct the fans as the real victims derive from the C.K data set – which is quite significant for such a small data set. Similarly, memes that portray the perpetrator as inhuman and monstrous (a theme that is well-represented in the Weinstein data set) was found in zero C.K. memes. The theme of fandom and identification in C.K. memes is explored further in Chapter 6.

The #MeToo data set (110 memes)

The #MeToo data set is the second smallest. What sets this data set apart from the other three is a stronger focus on the victims. The largest theme in the data set (19 memes) consists of memes that dehumanize the victims by comparing them to animals, puppets and inanimate objects. This is part of the characterisation of the victims which will be explored further in Chapter 5. Another large theme in the #MeToo data set is victim blaming (23 memes). Conversely, memes that express belief in the victims are almost non-existent. The discursive construction of the victims is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 5.

Thirty-one memes in this data set address the #MeToo event specifically claiming that #MeToo has gone too far (12 memes) and constructing men as the victims of #MeToo (7 memes). Though the memes in this data set discuss the victims and #MeToo to a larger extent than the other data sets, this does not in turn mean that the memes express any great degree of sympathy. The memes in the #MeToo data set overwhelmingly blame the victims, minimize their experiences and discredit #MeToo.

Gender, sexuality and race in the data set

The Internet memes in my data set produce certain notions about gender, sexuality and race. As Nicola Gavey (2019) points out, rape culture is naturalised within the logic of heteronormative sexual relationships, where men are considered inherently sexually aggressive and women inherently sexually passive. Normative heterosexual

sex thus reinforces gender norms which is apparent in the way sexual violence is discursively constructed in the Internet memes. Men are generally portrayed as the active force and often discursively constructed as subjects. They have agency and a voice. Women, on the other hand, are generally portrayed as objects without agency. Rather than speaking, women are spoken *about* and constructed as "others".

As discussed in Chapter 2, much Internet discourse is characterised by proliferating an androcentric worldview (Milner, 2013a; Phillips, 2015b). This discursively naturalises a "white male centrality" (Milner, 2016). This also extends to a heteronormative construction of sexual relations and a perpetuation of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) which constructs male sexual desire as always directed towards women. An intersectional approach to the way in which gender, sexuality and race is constructed reveals how women, non-heterosexual people and people of colour are discursively excluded from the three platforms.

Most memes do not reveal identifying characteristics about the OP. However, a closer look at the construction of the narrators in the memes reveals that, when they are gendered, they are male. An example is Figure 4.1 featuring an image of a baby with a horrified expression. The meme illustrates how the narrator feels terrified by the thought of becoming a father when he does not "know where Kevin Spacey is at the moment", thus implying that, given the opportunity, Spacey would sexually assault any child. The narrator in the meme signals maleness by using the word "father" (repeated in the tag) rather than "mother" or the gender-neutral term "parent".

Figure 4.1: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 06-11-2017.

Another example of male centrality is memes that utilise the MRW format (My Reaction When) – a popular format used to capture memes. Here the first-person narrator is often portrayed as a man, as seen in Figure 4.2: a close-up of Harvey Fierstein's character in *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) as he is about to transform Robin William's character into Mrs Doubtfire. The meme uses his facial expression to describe how the narrator of the meme feels "sickened" when reading about the accusations against Weinstein.

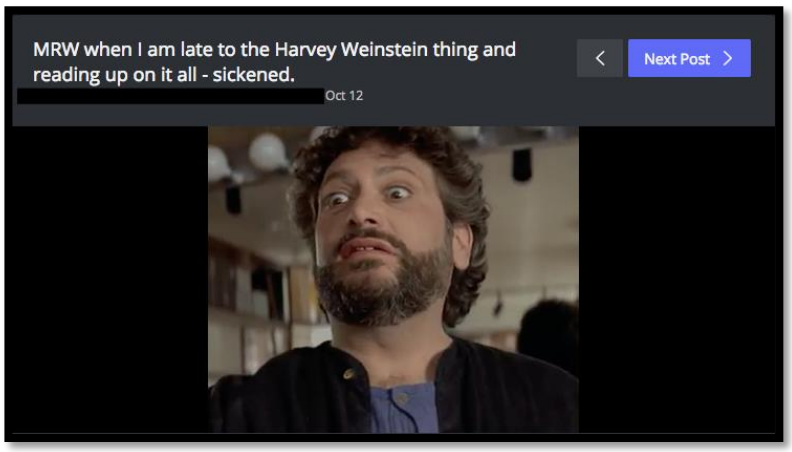


Figure 4.2: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur 12-10-2017.

The opposite is the case in Figure 4.3 which utilises the same format but rather than using the first-person narrator the format is changed to the third person narrator: "HFW" (Her Feeling When). Here the camera zooms in on a woman at an award ceremony, who is caught off-guard and suddenly finds herself applauding. Her expression of discomfort is used to illustrate how a woman might react when invited to a private meeting with Harvey Weinstein. The use of "her" rather than "my" discursively positions women as others – rendering the notion that the narrator of the meme could be a woman impossible. This meme assumes male identity on the platforms. What Figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 exemplify is how women's experience and feelings are filtered through a male perspective. Women are thus constructed as objects rather than subjects. They do not have a voice and rather than being the ones who speak, they are being spoken about and spoken for.

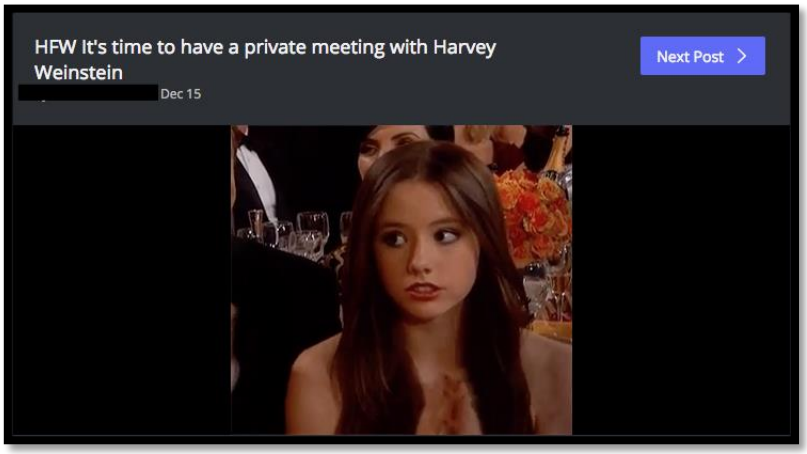


Figure 4.3: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur 15-12-2017.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I did an extensive search on the three platforms for the famous women who had spoken out during #MeToo. However, those search terms resulted in so few memes that I decided not to create my data set around those search terms. Indeed, #MeToo, which consisted primarily of women's voices, is, in my data set, filtered through a male perspective and women's experiences and voices are largely ignored. An example of this is the meme in Figure 4.4 which pictures the hip hop artist Drake on stage in Sydney on 16 November 2017 where he stopped the concert to tell a member of the audience to "stop touching girls"("Drake threatens fan after spotting him groping women," 2017). The meme celebrates Drake for rescuing women thus producing a paternalistic saviour discourse, in which men are the subjects and heroes who save the victimised women. Women then are reduced to helpless characters who are dependent on male heroes to save them. Male heroes are thus celebrated and female victims are ignored.

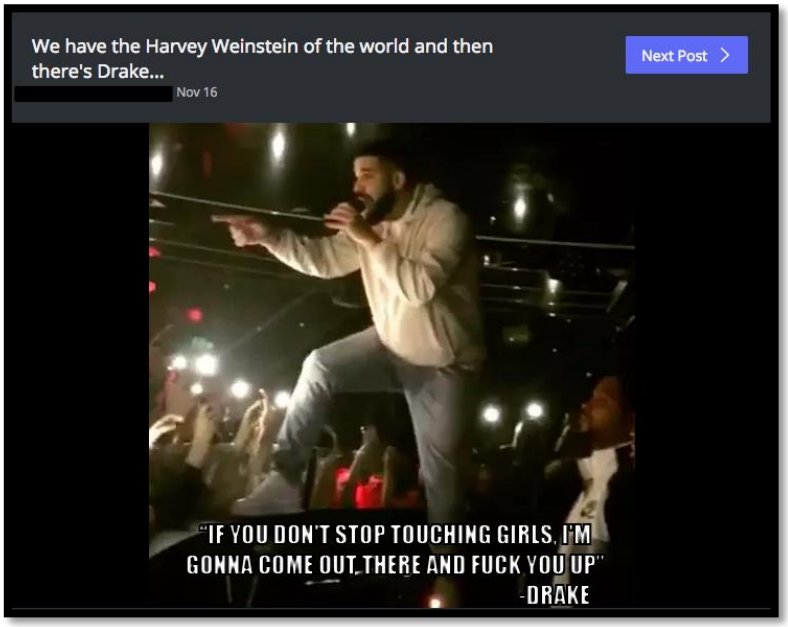


Figure 4.4: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur 16-11-2018.

Women are largely invisible in the memes. They are pictured or mentioned in less than a fifth of the memes. This can to some extent be explained by the fact that most of the memes have been collected using specific men as search terms. However, in memes picturing people other than the perpetrators, most of those people are men. An example is Figure 4.5 which pictures six famous people who died in 2017 (actor John Hurt, actor Roger More, wrestler Jimmy Snuka, actor Adam West here pictured as his character Mayor Adam West in *Family Guy*, founder of Playboy Hugh Hefner, and finally Kevin Spacey). The implication is that Spacey is as good as dead since no one in Hollywood will want to have anything to do with him now. No women are included in the list of famous deaths in 2017, as if they have been written out of history.

Figure 4.5: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 09-11-2017.

When women are portrayed in the memes it is either in the background of a picture or as appendices to a man, either as girlfriends, wives or mothers. Women are thus defined in relation to men. Andrea Braithwaite's words are illustrated throughout the data set: "Women can only be one of three things: sex objects, invisible, or the enemy." (Braithwaite, 2016, p. 5). Figure 4.5 exemplifies how women are invisible and Figure 4.6 and 4.7 portrays women as sex objects and the enemy, respectively. Figure 4.6 shows the image macro referred to as "Drake posting", which consists of two still photos of Drake from the music video to his 2015 single "Hotline Bling", where he performs a number of dance moves. The first

image shows Drake holding his hand to the side of his face with a facial expression that resembles disgust. The second image shows him with a hand gesture and facial expression that signals approval. The image macro has been developed online where users photoshop other people, creatures or objects unto Drake's face and the contrast between the two images illustrates disgust and approval to whichever image is next to them. In Figure 4.6 Kevin Spacey expresses disgust with an image of *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* model Kate Upton wearing a small bikini top, while signalling approval of an image of a small boy. As such the meme uses Upton's scantily clad body to underline the absurdity that anyone would not be sexually attracted to her.

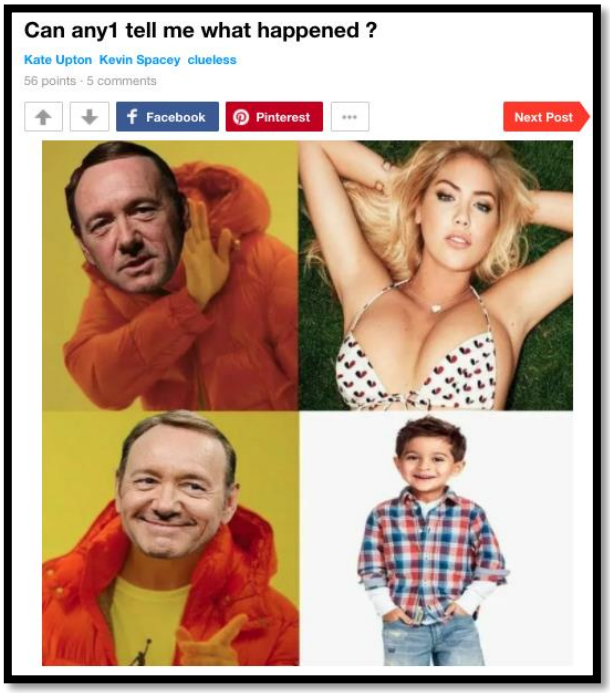


Figure 4.6: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

Figure 4.7 features the one woman who consistently is portrayed as the enemy: Hillary Clinton. The image features her resting her hands on the chest of Harvey Weinstein at what appears to be a red-carpet event. The accompanying text suggests that Harvey Weinstein would not be interested in any forms of sexual relations with Clinton, implying that she is so sexually unattractive that not even a rapist would be interested. The demonization of Clinton and the positioning of her as the unattractive woman per excellence is discussed in depth in Chapters 5 and 7.

Figure 4.7: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 11-10-2017.

In the data set, gender is portrayed as a binary based on gender norms that prioritise men's voices over women's. Men are the subjects who speak, whose experiences are centralised, who are synonymous with the public sphere and who enjoy himpathy (Manne, 2018a). Women, in turn, are othered, silenced, objectified, antagonised and voiceless. Male identity is assumed and discursively constructed as the norm against which everything else is identified. In short: the three platforms are male discursive spaces.

Sexuality in the memes is generally constructed as a heterosexual/homosexual binary in which heterosexuality is the norm and homosexuality the other. This is striking considering that Spacey in his coming out Tweet positions his sexuality as bisexual: "I have had relationships with both men and women" (Spacey, 2017). However, Spacey is never portrayed as bisexual. The heterosexual/homosexual binary can be seen in memes where the assumed (or explicitly stated) male narrator expresses desire directed towards women, such as in Figure 4.6 where the OP asks "Can anyone tell me what happened?" He expresses confusion with the notion that Kevin Spacey would reject a woman like Kate Upton, thus signalling heterosexual male sexual desire. Despite the fact that heterosexuality is constructed as the norm on the social media platforms, homosexuality is explicitly discussed in far more memes than heterosexuality due to the dominance of the Spacey data. The popularity of memes about homosexuality suggests that the three social media platforms function as homosocial spaces. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) notes, homosocial refers to bonds between men which is often based on a hatred or fear of homosexuality. Through a number of manhood acts (Moloney &

Love, 2018), users of the platform signal homosocial belonging which on one hand manifest their own heterosexuality and on the other hand excludes and ridicules homosexual others. Chapter 6 considers how masturbation is an example of such homosocial manhood acts.

Figure 4.8 does not address homosexuality but rather exemplifies an implied male, heterosexual centrality. Illustrated by Snape from Harry Potter pressing his body against the window in fear and desperation, the meme suggests that this is the feeling men get when their "crush" writes #MeToo on Facebook. The meme suggests that making eye contact is enough to be accused of sexual assault, thus suggesting that #MeToo has gone too far. The meme addresses women ("dear girls") while manifesting that the narrator of the meme is male ("unattractive males"). Heterosexual desire is assumed and naturalised.

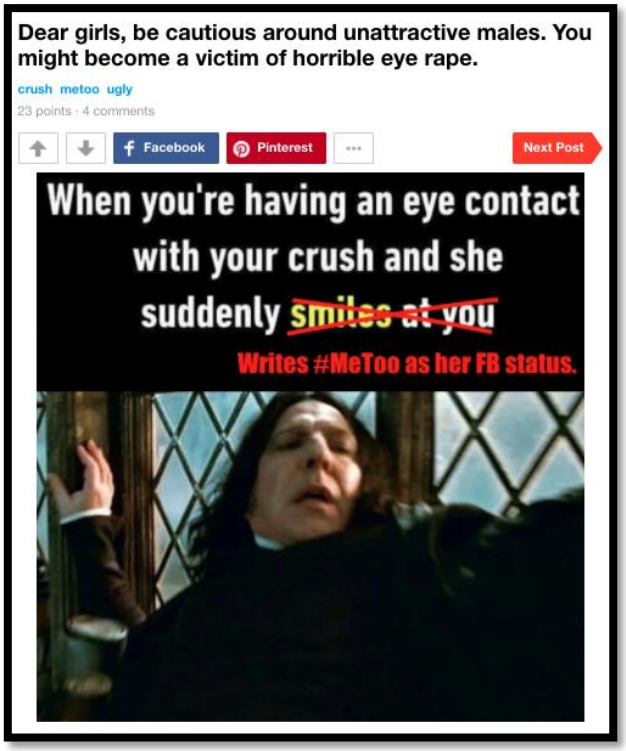


Figure 4.8: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 21-11-2017.

The discursive construction of gender and sexuality on the social media platforms centralises male, heterosexual experiences as then norm. Consequently, women and homosexual men are othered. As such the platforms are male, heteronormative discursive spaces with content produced by heterosexual men for heterosexual men.

The large majority of the people represented in the Internet memes are white. Only 7% of the memes (65 memes) include either an image or a mention of people of colour. One of the few people of colour to appear is Bill Cosby (15 memes), who is a

point of comparison for other perpetrators. This comparison broadly draws on the portrayal of Cosby as the rapist par excellence, claiming for example that Weinstein is as bad as Cosby or that C.K is not as bad as Cosby. Significantly, at the publication time of the memes (last quarter of 2017) Cosby had been accused of sexual assault by a long line of women and was charged with a few cases but was not found guilty until 2018. The memes, however, illustrate how the public opinion had swayed towards believing the victims and condemning Cosby (reruns of *The Cosby Show* were pulled by TV stations and honorary degrees were rescinded by colleges and universities).

Asian men are portrayed as Manga characters and the one named character is the American born actor, George Takei, who was also accused of sexual assault in November 2017. Middle eastern men are included in a handful of memes where they are portrayed as terrorists or as men who have sex with goats (see Figure 4.9). Apart from a few exceptions (Michael Jackson, James Brown, Morgan Freeman, Barack Obama and Drake), no people of colour are named in the Internet memes. When they do appear, it is either as image macros (such as Figure 4.10) or as unnamed people in the background of an image. Figure 4.10 is an example of how some of the memes represent people of colour as racialised stereotypes. It is an image macro entitled "Ya'll got anymore of…" depicting Dave Chapelle's character Tyrone Biggums from the sketch comedy TV series *Chappelle's Show*. Tyrone Biggums is a crack addict and the image macro includes the phrasal template "Ya'll got any more of them [blank]", usually illustrating a request or intense craving on the part of the OP. The position of a black man as a crack user in this meme thus invokes a stereotypical racialised association of crack cocaine with people of colour in the United States.

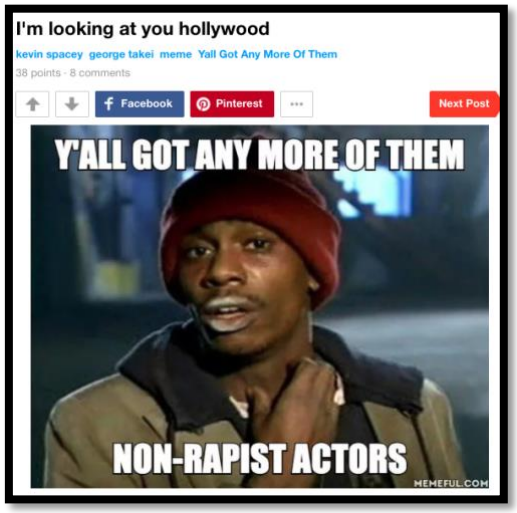


Figure 4.9: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 20-10-2017. Figure 4.10: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

Women of colour are only represented in 8 memes out 866 memes, thus making women of colour particularly invisible on the three social media platforms. This will be addressed further in a discussion of the characterisation of victims in Chapter 5. The representation of race is also included in relation to the perpetrators in Chapter 6 when analysing the comparisons between the three perpetrators in my data set and how they are constructed as perfect or imperfect perpetrators in relation to other perpetrators.

To sum up, the discursive representation of gender, sexuality and race illustrates the research on the manosphere conducted prior to this thesis: the memes are produced based on a white, male, heterosexual centrality. The platforms are male discursive spaces which not only assume male identity, but a white, heterosexual identity as well. Through manhood acts and himpathy, the users signal male homosocial belonging, which in turn functions as a practice of exclusion of women, non-heterosexual people and people of colour.

Victims and perpetrators in the Internet memes

The majority of the memes do not express definite sentiment of support for either the victims or the perpetrators. The memes often poke fun at the perpetrators without expressing support or sympathy for the victims. For example, a total of 107 memes express antagonism toward the perpetrators but only 17 memes express support for the victims.

As expected, given my search terms, the majority of the perpetrators are portrayed as men and the majority of the victims are portrayed as women and children. In only six memes are the perpetrators represented as women. These memes either ridicule the notion that a woman could sexually assault a man, or they support a discourse of backlash against #MeToo centred around a double standards logic claiming that feminists and supporters of #MeToo would not support victims who had been sexually assaulted by women.

A small number of memes (41) portray the victims as men. Most of these discuss Kevin Spacey, though 13 of them are unrelated to him. Interestingly though, memes with male victims from other data sets have overwhelmingly been coded with male perpetrators. The notion that a woman could sexually assault a man is virtually non-existent in my data set and in the few memes (6 memes) that do play with this idea, it only exists as a satirical device.

The following two chapters are dedicated to discussing the portrayal of victims and perpetrators respectively. It is significant to note that the victims are constructed in relation to and in opposition to the construction of perpetrators, and vice versa. In other words, victims and perpetrators are discursively constructed as binary oppositions, similarly to gendered binary pairs, such as men/women, nature/culture, public/private which have been criticised by feminist scholars (Jaggar, 1992; Jaggar & Bordo, 1989; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012; Probyn, 2005).[13] The notion that a person could be both a victim and a perpetrator of sexual violence is thus non-existent in the Internet memes. The perpetrator/victim dichotomy was emphasised when one of the faces of #MeToo, Asia Argento, who accused Weinstein of sexually assaulting her, was in 2018 accused of sexually assaulting actor Jimmy Bennet in 2013 when he was 17 years old (Severson, 2018). Argento was met with backlash accusing her of double standards and hypocrisy as well as discrediting #MeToo (Stevens & Severson, 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the ways in which I have coded the memes in my data set into groups of themes. I have discussed which themes I include in my analysis and which themes I do not analyse in the present research project. The coding revealed some distinct differences between the perpetrators which will be evaluated further in particularly Chapter 6. The Harvey Weinstein data set reveals a greater tendency to ridicule the perpetrator as well as employ a discourse of dehumanisation. He also seems to be tied more to notions of the political and Hollywood establishment. Spacey enjoys greater levels of sympathy than Weinstein as well as a higher number of memes that are concerned with the state of his career. Unique to the Spacey data set is the themes of homosexuality, paedophilia and coming out as gay, which run through the majority of the memes in this data set. The C.K. data set is overwhelmingly coded as sympathetic to C.K. expressing disbelief in the accusations as well as strong notions of fandom. Finally, the #MeToo data set has a greater focus on the victims though this focus expresses notions of victim blaming and ridicule rather than any great level of sympathy or empathy.

Connections have been made across the three data sets where I have identified common characteristics of gender, sexuality and race. The memes indicate

[13] See Chapter 2 for a discussion of feminist scholarly attention to this subject in relations to affect.

that the three platforms have a white, male, heterosexual centrality. A discourse analysis of examples of memes coded as assuming male and heterosexual identities reveal that the three platforms function as male discursive spaces, which privilege both a male and heterosexual worldview.

Finally, the memes reveal a strong gendered construction of victims and perpetrators where victims are predominantly portrayed as either women or children and perpetrators are almost exclusively portrayed as men.

The following three chapters analyse the main topics as outlined in Appendix 2. In Chapter 5 I carry out an analysis of memes which portray the victims. I investigate the identified themes of dehumanisation and victim blaming as well as how sexual violence is discursively constructed. Chapter 6 focuses on the portrayal of the perpetrators in the Internet memes analysing the three perpetrators separately. Finally, Chapter 7 investigates strategies of distraction where memes focus on US politics and Hollywood rather than sexual violence and how backlash discourses against #MeToo are constructed in different ways.

Chapter 5: Portrayal of the victims

Introduction

This chapter considers how victims of sexual violence are discursively constructed in the Internet memes. I investigate how victims are portrayed in different ways, depending primarily on gender and age. Drawing on the continuum of sexual violence (L. Kelly, 1988) and the cultural construction of rape culture (Gavey, 2019), I explore how the notion of "real rape" (Estrich, 1987) constructs victims of sexual violence as either "legitimate" or "non-legitimate". Victim blaming (Gavey, 2019) is also considered in reference to the feminist discussion of sexual violence as sex, power or violence (Boyle, 2019b; Gavey, 2019) as outlined in Chapter 2.

Humour, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a social act which reflects and maintains the social norm (Billig, 2005). Analysing the function of humour in the portrayal of victims thus has the potential to identify the construction of social norms within the intersection of gender and sexuality. With a focus on who is invited to laugh and who is the butt of the joke, the chapter investigates how humour functions as a practice of inclusion and exclusion (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). As humour draws up the social norm (Billig, 2005), such an analysis can point to who is constructed as deviating and in turn point to the norm.

Laughter as an affective expression of "likeneness" and belonging will be explored in investigating how humour sticks some bodies together (Ahmed, 2004). By investigating how address works in the memes, I point to the affective notions of empathy. The chapter also traces the functionality of shame in discursive constructions of victimhood – particularly in relation to female sexuality. I investigate how shame tends to stick to certain bodies and slide over others (Ahmed, 2004).

The feminist scholarship on sexual violence has a long tradition for considering terminology around victim/survivors (Gavey, 2019; L. Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1996). Both terms can exclude certain people who have experienced some form of sexual violence. However, using a single term to refer to a group with very different experiences is inevitably problematic. As such, in this thesis I refer to victim/survivors when discussing these in general terms. However, I use the term victim when specifically discussing how they are represented in the Internet memes.

This term highlights the way in which their believability is questioned. It is the most appropriate term because the credibility of their victimhood is key to my investigation.

The chapter first makes a general characterisation of the representation of victims, as well as identifying differences across the four data sets. Then I turn to a brief characterisation of male victims and child victims: whilst child victims are relatively numerous in the Kevin Spacey data set, there is little variety in the way they are represented, as I will argue. In contrast, female victims are portrayed in significantly different and complex ways, hinging on the perceived il/legitimacy of their claim to victimhood. The chapter then turns to a theme in which victims are dehumanised through a comparison to animals, puppets and inanimate objects. Finally, the chapter discusses victim blaming discourses in the data set, including how sexual violence is reconceptualised as "just sex".

A characterisation of child and male victims

The discussion in this chapter is based on a total of 207 memes which have been coded as relating to how victims of sexual violence are portrayed. The memes derive from all four data sets but noticeably more from the #MeToo data set and less so from the Spacey data set. This is due to the fact that #MeToo memes tend to deal more with the victims than the data sets about the perpetrators. When victims appear in the Spacey data set, they have generally been coded as belonging to the "paedophilia" theme and are therefore discussed in Chapter 6. The memes I analyse here have been chosen because they are representative of a number of memes with similar sentiments and because they convey these sentiments in relatively clear ways.

It is important to note that in the majority of the memes the victims are not present. They are only mentioned or pictured in 40% of the memes. The invisibility of the victims in the majority of the memes suggest that victims are positioned as discursive outsiders from the social media platforms, primarily because users are assumed to be male (as discussed in the previous chapter) and because male victims are almost non-existent in the memes – a notion I will develop further below.

There are some significant differences between the four data sets in how the victims are represented. In the Spacey data set the victims are overwhelmingly represented as children, primarily as boys, but in 17 memes as girls. In the other three data sets, victims are predominantly represented as women, primarily as Hollywood actresses. As mentioned in the previous chapter, men appear in 41

memes, primarily in Spacey memes and primarily with male perpetrators. The victims in the C.K. data set are more or less written out of the narrative: they appear in only 18 memes. In my discussion of the portrayal of the victims, I include a lengthier discussion of the portrayal of female victims, than male victims and child victims. This is due to the fact that the representation of male victims make up a very small part of the data set and although child victims are present in an great number of memes, they are only present in the Spacey data set and contribute very little to a nuanced analysis as they naturally are represented as innocent and credible.

The theoretical framework of my analysis primarily relies on the notion of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" victims. As discussed in Chapter 2, I apply Estrich's (1987) notion of "real rape" to the continuum of sexual violence portrayed in the memes and perpetrated by the three men. Rather than focus on rape specifically, I thus draw on her distinction between "legitimate" and "non-legitimate" victims. "Legitimate" victims are more likely to be believed – either on account of the type of assault or on account of who the victims are - and "non-legitimate" victims, whose experiences tend to be dismissed and discredited. This distinction is significantly more pronounced with female victims than with child and male victims, but the concept is useful to apply to male and child victims, in order to draw up the distinct differences between the discursive construction of child and male victims and female victims. While the analysis in the following relies on feminist research on rape (Benedict, 1992; Ehrlich, 2001; Estrich, 1987; Gavey, 2019), I apply this to a broader variety of sexual assault and harassment. This is to be understood within the continuum of sexual violence (L. Kelly, 1988), where a variety of abuse make up the experiences of the victims in this chapter.

Child victims

Whereas female victims tend to be evaluated in terms of credibility, this is not the case when victims are portrayed as children. Child victims are always represented as credible victims in my data set. Most of the memes that discuss child sexual abuse do not show images of children but either imply that the victims are children or mention words such as "children", "boys" and similar (most memes about Spacey feature an image of him alone). The memes with images of children primarily show generic stock images such as Figure 5.1 in which the meme suggests that googling Kevin Spacey results in a number of images of crying children. The crying children are positioned as legitimate victims who wear their injury on the outside and express it

through tears. There is no notion of disbelief or credibility when it comes to child victims – they are portrayed as innocent with no potential personal agenda.

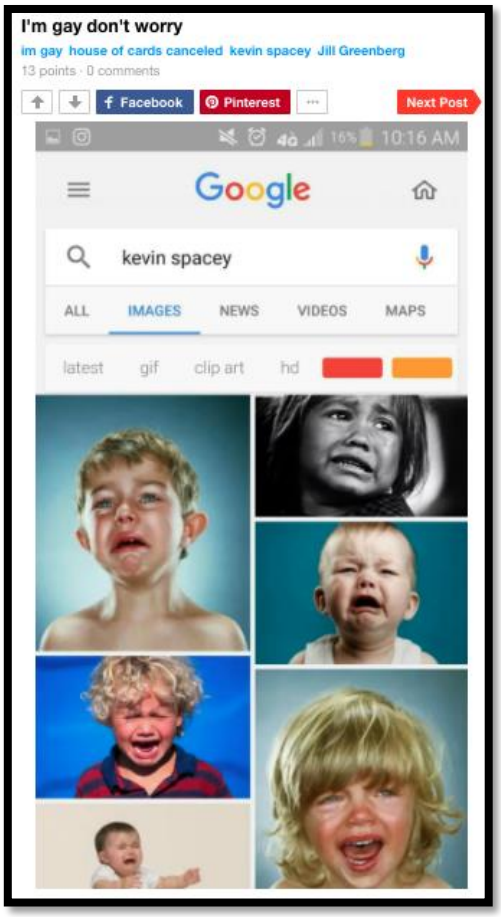


Figure 5.1: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 05-11-2017

In some cases, the memes feature images of named and famous child actors, such as Macaulay Culkin's character Kevin in the film series *Home Alone* as seen in Figure 5.2. Culkin's face here suggests horror and fear caused by the potential danger of being "home alone" with Spacey – pointing to Spacey as the dangerous perpetrator and the child as the innocent victim. The images of children are an instrument to imply or emphasize the notion of Spacey as a paedophile. While Anthony Rapp was 14 at the time of Spacey's attempted assault, most of the children pictured in my dataset are younger. They are primarily portrayed as babies or toddlers, as in Figure 5.1, which creates a greater shock effect. As such the memes produce a stronger sense of sympathy for the children as well as a stronger sense of antipathy for Spacey playing into the paedophilia discourse.

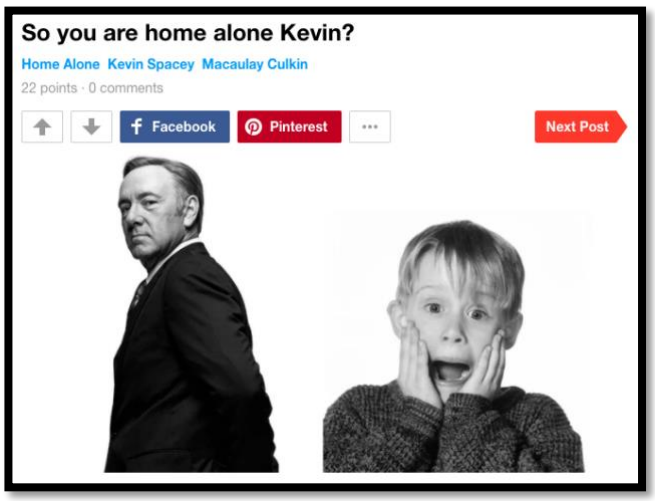


Figure 5.2: Kevin Spacey data set from9gag. 05-11-2017

Notably, the shock effect seems to be the humorous rhetorical device in both Figure 5.1 and 5.2. While viewers are not necessarily invited to laugh at child sexual abuse, empathy does not extend to the victims in these memes, who are present to create shock value rather than condemnation of Spacey's actions. Child victims are primarily a prop to construct Spacey as a paedophile.

Male victims

A significant discrepancy emerges when it comes the representation of child victim once they are grown – such as the case of Anthony Rapp. Because he is no longer a child and because so much time has passed since the attempted assault, his credibility is questioned. Memes featuring Anthony Rapp primarily focus on how his accusations have damaged Spacey's career. The himpathy (Manne, 2018a) here does thus not extend to a male victim of sexual violence, but rather to his male abuser. An example of this is Figure 5.3 in which Spacey and Rapp are placed in an image side-by-side. The title poses the rhetorical question of how Spacey's career can "be ruined by the words of a gay guy?". However, the fact that Spacey is the one speaking into a microphone could mean that the "words of a gay guy" are in fact Spacey's, which is emphasized by the fact that Spacey came out as gay in his response to Rapp's allegations, thus positioning Rapp as the man with the ruined career. That said, Rapps's career is not a recurring concern in my data set, while a great number of memes focus on the state of Spacey's career. Thus, I read the meme as discrediting Rapp – simply on the grounds of distrusting a homosexual man – as well as expressing sympathy for Spacey and his ruined career (which in turn either ignores the fact that Spacey explicitly has come out as gay or precisely plays on the irony of

both men being gay). This reading of the meme suggests that Rapp is the butt of the joke – and as such is othered due to his sexuality – which manifests the male heterosexual centrality of 9gag.

Figure 5.3: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

A shift occurs in terms of who is considered the real victim in Figure 5.3. In Figure 5.1 and 5.2 the children are unequivocally the victims, while Spacey is considered the real victim in Figure 5.3. The focus is on damage to Spacey's career rather than the physical and emotional injury to his victim. Because Rapp was an adult at the time when he made his allegations public, the discourse here ignores the fact that he was a child at the time of the assault. Consequently, he does not receive the same level of sympathy as the children in for example Figure 5.1 and his claim to victimhood is discredited. Memes about Anthony Rapp point to a tendency in which sexual assault is not taken seriously when too much time has passed since the assault. The claim to victimhood, then, does not extend to grown men, regardless of whether they were children at the time of the assault. Furthermore, these memes also point to a tendency where sympathy for victims of sexual violence does not extend further than to children and where homosexuality trumps victimhood: one cannot be both a homosexual man and a credible victim.

Female victims

The notion of the legitimate victim is complicated further when it comes to the portrayal of female victims. Two main factors determine whether women are characterised as legitimate or non-legitimate victims: their level of sexual

attractiveness, and how they present their sexuality. As such, legitimate victimhood is evaluated on the basis of male heteronormative notions of hegemonic female sexual attractiveness. Women's experiences and stories of sexual violence are thus evaluated on the basis of whether or not it seems likely that a heterosexual man would find them sexually attractive. Sexual violence is filtered through a male perspective and is conceptualised as sex. If violence or force is taken into consideration (which is often not the case), it tends to be excused and trivialised. Before turning to an analysis of female sexuality, I will focus on how the legitimate and non-legitimate victim is constructed based on age and body size.

Non-legitimate victims

The credibility of the victims in the memes is evaluated based on their sexual attractiveness and their sexualisation. Sexual attractiveness is primarily defined on the basis of age and body size. Hillary Clinton is repeatedly used as an example of a person so unattractive that not even Weinstein would be interested. An example of this is the meme in Figure 5.4, which features an image of her talking to Harvey Weinstein. She is resting her hands on his chest as he looks towards the camera with what could be considered a dismissive hand gesture. The image text suggests that Weinstein would not sexually assault Clinton – that she is an exception to the rule: Weinstein's sexuality is uncontrollable – except when it comes to Clinton. This is the one time that he is able to control himself simply because she fails to tempt him – she fails to perform female sexual attractiveness.

Figure 5.4: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.

Furthermore, Clinton is constructed as the butt of the joke: she is so unattractive that not even a rapist would be interested. The humorous discourse positions her lack of sexual appeal as the real issue and Weinstein is not held accountable for his actions. The fact that Clinton is a political figure representing the US Democratic party is not irrelevant in this context. As I discuss in Chapter 8, Clinton is seen as representing the 'liberal establishment' of US politics. She is repeatedly positioned in relation to the 'liberal' Hollywood, in an effort to politicise the issue and distract from considering sexual violence as a systemic problem.

Figure 5.5 and 5.6 also position attractiveness in correlation with victim credibility. Figure 5.5 features images of Lena Dunham exercising on the streets of what is most likely a New York City neighbourhood. The images appear to be paparazzi style, taken without Dunham's knowledge or consent. Her skin-tight exercise clothes expose un-retouched flesh (midriff and upper arms) and her face expresses her (non-feminine) effort and determination. She does not present herself as available – 'to be looked at'. She blocks others off by wearing headphones and she fails to notice or acknowledge the camera. Her failure to present herself as readily available, as feminine and approachable, is read as unattractive. This is emphasized by the expression on the face of the onlooker in the image to the left, who invites the viewer of the meme to reach a similar sentiment: that of disgust. The accompanying text suggests that she is exercising in order to become more attractive, so that Weinstein might want to sexually assault her. As such, the meme draws on the aforementioned positioning of women as temptresses, who provoke the uncontrollable male sexual drive (Gavey, 2019). Thus, they are responsible for any potential sexual assault. Dunham, however, is not considered, "Weinstein's type" because she fails to perform recognisable attractive womanhood. In other words, she is not considered a likely victim of sexual violence. Furthermore, the meme implies that the women who were sexually assaulted by Weinstein put themselves in that situation deliberately in order to further their career – a point which is discussed further in the section on victim blaming, below.

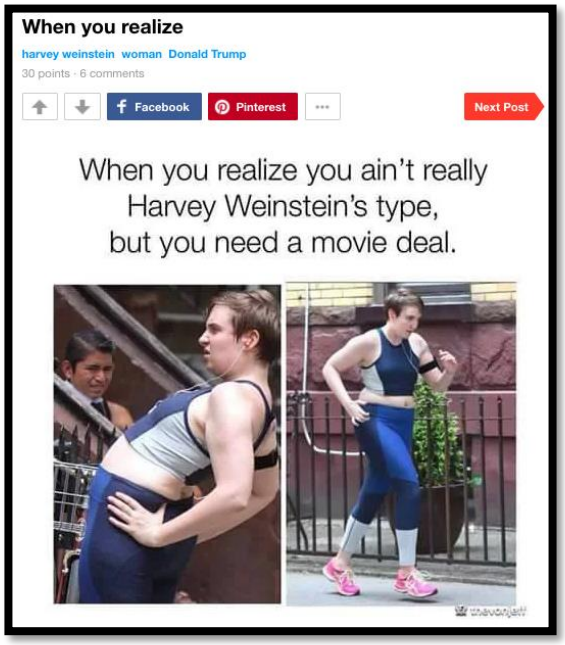


Figure 5.5: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 29-12-2017.

The meme in Figure 5.6 reproduces a similar logic, positioning writer and actress Rebel Wilson as a non-legitimate victim. Her statement during the height of #MeToo that she had experienced sexual assault and harassment by powerful men in the film industry (McKee, 2017; Nyren, 2017) is positioned as unlikely. It is implied that she is so physically unattractive that no one would be interested in sexually assaulting her – positioning sexual assault as sex filtered through a heterosexual male perspective. The OP characterises doubting her credibility as a "duty", as if to position 9gag as the voice of reason which draws a line in the sand when #MeToo goes too far.

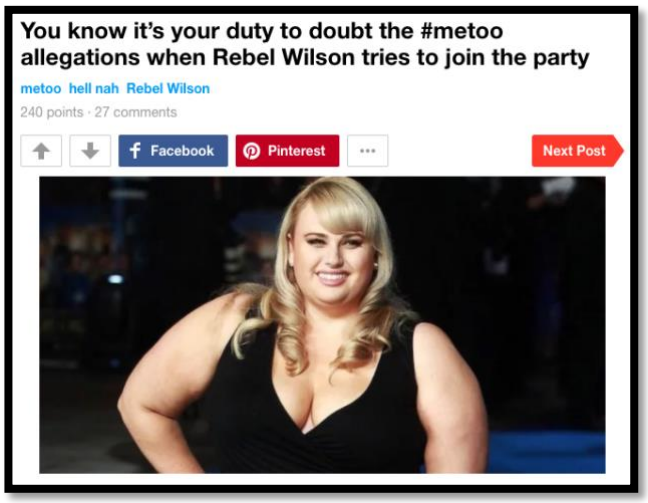


Figure 5.6: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 12-11-2017.

The image of Wilson is in a different category to that of Dunham, though. The Dunham images are paparazzi style, presumably taken without her knowledge and they have been chosen in this context to present her in a way that is as unattractive as possible. The Wilson image, however, seems to be from a red-carpet event where she has dressed up and is posing in front of the cameras – knowingly having her photograph taken and thus able to position herself as appealing as possible. The image however, which is a medium close-up, emphasises the upper part of her body, her fat arms in the sleeveless dress and her large breasts. Both memes make the same point: that the two women unequivocally are so unattractive that not even a rapist would be interested in them. The difference between the two women – and the reason the message comes across in the red-carpet image of Wilson – is due to body size. Wilson's fat body is read as unattractive simply due to its size – no further explanation is needed as it is implied that fatness always and universally equals unattractiveness. The meme casts doubt over her allegations – which is emphasised by the tagline "hell nah" positioning Wilson as an incredible victim. Figures 5.5 and 5.6 are both examples of women who fail to conform to normative beauty standards and therefore fail to claim a position of legitimate victimhood.

The women in Figures 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 are constructed as the butt of the joke. Though Weinstein is characterised as having an uncontrollable sexuality, his actions are not condemned, and the boundaries of his sexuality are drawn up in correlation with Clinton, Dunham, and Wilson's lack of sexual attractiveness. The memes exemplify how the three social media platforms function as male discursive spaces in which men evaluate women's bodies. Such signalling thus sticks men together via a shared reassurance of heterosexuality through the sexualisation of women's bodies rather than through affective work of empathy across genders.

Legitimate victims

After having outlined some identifying factors of the non-legitimate victim, I now turn to a characterisation of the legitimate victim. This is exemplified by actress Emma Watson, who is portrayed repeatedly as a legitimate victim, despite the fact that she was not one of the Weinstein accusers. She has, however, been an outspoken supporter of #MeToo and has spoken publicly about the systemic problem of sexual harassment in the film industry.[14] Though she is discredited in some memes in

[14] On the 10th of October when Ronan Farrow's article detailing 13 accounts of sexual harassment, assault and rape committed by Weinstein was published in the New Yorker, Emma Watson expressed

similar ways as the other famous actresses, she is the only actress who in some memes is presented as credible and worthy of sympathy. One meme which is repeated numerous times in my data set is Figure 5.7, where Watson walks in front of Weinstein who seems to have a firm grip of her arms behind her back. It is suggested that he directs her forward and her sombre expression could be read as concern or even fear. The meme does not question Watson's credibility but presents the images as evidence of Weinstein's abusive behaviour. The image text and the comic-like layout of the multiple images suggest that he is pushing her into his car and readers of the meme are left to speculate what might happen next: when he pushes her in such a forceful manner on a public street, what might he be able to do in the privacy of his car or his hotel room? Viewers of the meme do not have to take Watson's words for it – in fact she does not get to speak in the meme – the meme is used as photographic evidence, implying that images of this situation (which Watson has never commented on) are more credible evidence of Weinstein's abusive behaviour than the words of the many women who have detailed his abuse.

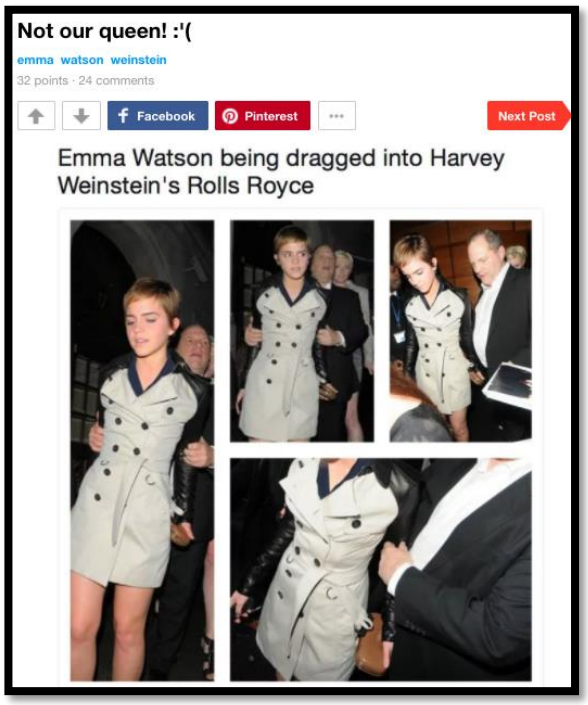


Figure 5.7: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 13-10-2017.

support of his victims on Twitter, stating that: "I stand with all the women who have been sexually harassed, and I am awestruck by their bravery. This mistreatment of women has to stop." (Gonzales, 2017; Watson, 2017). Three months later when asked about her own experiences in the film industry on the red carpet of the 2018 Golden Globes, Watson stated that she has "experienced the full spectrum" of sexual harassment (Variety, 2018). By the time of writing, Watson has not named Weinstein as a perpetrator or talked about any of her experiences in detail.

The support for Watson is emphasized by the tagline which reads "Not our queen!" followed by a crying emoticon: " :'(" which suggests that she has a certain fanbase on 9gag.[15] An assault on "their queen" then becomes an assault on the 9gaggers and a way for them to signal unity and concern. Through affective displays of sympathy, the male community signals allegiance to each other through a paternalistic discourse of wanting to save Watson from Weinstein – resonating with the discussion in Chapter 4 of the saviour discourse employed in Figure 4.4 where Drake is positioned as the hero saving women from harassment.

An intersectional approach considering age, race and body size is crucial to fully unpacking how Watson functions as a legitimate victim. As opposed to Dunham and especially Wilson, Watson's slim body and appearance is deemed sexually attractive within the heterosexual male desire expressed on the three social media platforms. Furthermore, as opposed to a mature woman like Hillary Clinton, who is positioned as an unlikely victim, Watson's young age and subtle sexual attractiveness positions her as a legitimate victim. As mentioned in Chapter 4, women of colour are close to non-existent in my data set (there is only eight women of colour pictured in 866 memes) and only once is a woman of colour represented as a victim. It is thus neither surprising nor irrelevant that Emma Watson is *the* prime example of a legitimate victim in my data set. As discussed by a long line of feminist scholars (e.g. Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1993, 1994, Davis, 1978, 1990), women of colour have historically struggled to have sexual assault against them recognised and made visible. Women of colour have thus historically and culturally been unrecognised as legitimate victims and despite the fact that the Me Too movement was originally initiated by Tarana Burke, a woman of colour, #MeToo has very much been represented by white (famous and privileged) women. The legitimate victim reproduced within the discourse of my dataset is thus exemplified by Watson: young, slim, attractive and white.

Finally, her silence in relation to Weinstein and sexual harassment in general manifests Watson's role as a credible victim. The juxtaposition between her and the way in which other actresses (which I discuss below) are portrayed is emphasised by her silence in juxtaposition with their 'speaking out'. Because she does not name any perpetrator, or give any details about possible abuse, she, ironically, is the more

[15] At the time of writing 9gag holds a total of 2400 posts using the tag "Emma Watson", which primarily celebrate her appearance, often through a discourse of sexual desire objectifying her body. A number of memes refer to her as "the queen" and "the queen of 9gag".

credible victim – a notion which in turn highlights how speaking up and having a voice are considered male traits. Furthermore, Watson's silence provides a clear role for the male saviours on 9gag who then get to explain sexual violence to women. This echoes research into rape narratives in Television, which has shown how male responses to sexual violence are often privileged, and that men get to explain sexual violence to female victims and instruct them in the right responses to their experiences (Cuklanz, 2000; Moorti, 2002).

Sexualisation within a virgin/vamp dichotomy

The reason Watson functions as a legitimate victim is also due to the fact that she presents herself as relatively non-sexualised through her boyish haircut and her buttoned-up jacket. She epitomises the virgin of the virgin/vamp dichotomy (Benedict, 1992), which is emphasised by Weinstein's seemingly forceful handling of her. The construction of her as a legitimate victim is thus in contrast to the portrayal of Weinstein as a perfect perpetrator: large, unattractive and forceful. The construction of Weinstein as a "monstrous other" will be explored further in Chapter 6.

While the construction of Watson as virginal is relatively subtle, the meme in Figure 5.8 explicitly exemplifies the virgin/vamp dichotomy. The word "whore" is used instead of "vamp", and "victim" rather than "virgin". Significantly, the meme conceptualises sexual violence as sex. The situation is constructed as a choice for the women of whether or not to "sleep" with Weinstein. The meme discursively constructs victims and whores in each end of a scale, thus suggesting that a woman displaying sexual agency is less likely to be considered a legitimate victim of sexual violence. Female sexual agency thus questions women's claim to victimhood. While not dismissing the notion that the women could still be victims (since the scale functions as a continuum rather than a dichotomy between two separate categories), the meme suggests that the person who "slept with" Weinstein to further her career is more likely to be a whore and less likely to be a victim. Either way, the notion of an assault is discursively eliminated altogether.

Figure 5.8: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur. 17-10-2017.

The meme in Figure 5.9 features a screen shot from Facebook where a woman has posted "#MeToo" on her timeline. Her profile picture, which has been enlarged, shows the image of a young woman wearing a low-cut top and posing in a way that emphasises her breasts. The composition of the image; the way it is cropped to hide her face and position her as a torso, emphasises her breasts and her red painted lips. The fragmentation of her body and her pose presents her as hyper-sexualised. The meme implies that women like her, who put their bodies on display and thus indicate sexual agency, cannot then write #MeToo on their timeline. This woman then, despite the fact that she does conform to normative notions of beauty standards, is not considered a legitimate victim precisely because she is *too* sexual. She represents the "vamp" in contrast to Watson's "virgin" (Benedict, 1992) and exemplifies the non-legitimate victim because of her shame-less sexual agency. Shame sticks (Ahmed, 2004) to her body as she is not supposed to be in charge of her own sexualisation – that should be up to the implied heterosexual male users of 9gag. By ridiculing and sexualising her, the 9gaggers secure dominance and indicate

belonging to a shared male discursive space. Affect and humour thus work in tandem to ridicule and shame the woman and discredit her position of victimhood. Figure 5.9 reinforces a discourse of rape myths in which "good girls" do not get raped and where sexually active women bring it on themselves. The woman in Figure 5.9 could thus not be considered a legitimate victim as her appearance works as de-facto consent – she is unrapable as she is considered always sexually available. Furthermore, the meme constructs girls as outsiders on 9gag (emphasised by the fact that the screenshot is from a mainstream social media platform such as Facebook) as the meme addresses male users ("True story fellaz") by talking about girls who are thus discursively excluded.

Figure 5.9: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 22-10-2017.

Figure 5.10 shows two images of actress Rose McGowan, who has been one of the most outspoken activists during #MeToo. In October 2017 she accused Harvey Weinstein of raping her at the beginning of her career in 1997 (Cain, 2018). In the Internet meme a contrast is created between a 1996 picture of a very young McGowan in a sexually suggestive position biting her lip while exposing her thighs and a 2017 close-up of McGowan in what appears to be a selfie. The text suggests that McGowan used to be attractive (in 1996) but has now lost her sexual appeal (in 2017). The first sentence suggests an alignment with Weinstein in evaluating which version of McGowan one would prefer to "fuck", thus reframing sexual assault as sex. The violence of sexual violence is thus ignored, and rape is instead positioned as sexy. McGowan's claim that Weinstein raped her is not exactly discredited, though it is reframed as sex. Rather, the meme suggest that it most likely happened, considering how sexually attractive she was at the time of the rape (a year after the 1996 picture). However, 21 years later when she has taken control of her own sexuality (McGowan describes how she resented having these kinds of promotional

images taken (McGowan, 2018)), refusing to be a sexual object upon which users of 9gag can project their sexual desires, her victimhood is delegitimised.

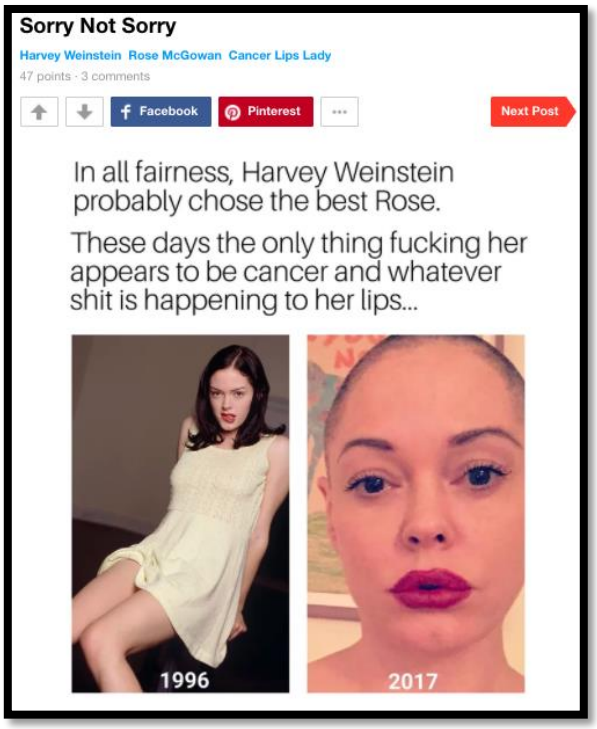


Figure 5.10: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 13-10-2017.

Figures 5.4 to 5.10 exemplify how the memes in my data set construct women as either legitimate or non-legitimate victims of sexual violence. Non-legitimate victims are either too old, too unattractive or too in control of their sexuality – this excess prevents them from being considered likely victims of sexual violence through the perspective of the heterosexual male centrality. In order for women to be considered legitimate victims, they must thus be so sexually appealing (slim, young) that the male users can imagine having sex with them, but at the same time not display sexual agency and appear too sexual.

Sexual violence is either made invisible or represented as sexy – though only as defined within the uncontrollable and natural heterosexual male sexual drive (Gavey, 2019). Within this logic, (some) women make it impossible for men to resist them and their lack of control is a natural result of this. The blame for the sexual assault is thus entirely removed from the male perpetrator and put on the female victim. When women possess sexual agency, sexual violence cannot logically exist as it is reconceptualised as sex. In this dynamic, women are positioned as being in charge of consent and within such a framework, sexual assault is made invisible. Furthermore, this reframes women's sexual agency as the real problem rather than the fact that men sexually assault women.

Dehumanisation of victims

Through humorous practices of exclusion, victims of sexual violence are discursively othered on the three social media platforms. This takes many forms throughout my data set and one distinct way is through a discourse of dehumanisation. Within this theme, victims are compared to animals, puppets and inanimate objects.

This dehumanisation of victims is first and foremost created through a comparison of victims to animals. Figure 5.11 is an example of this. The meme features an image of two goats in a leash held by a Middle Eastern man (wearing traditional Arabic clothes such as a thawb and the Muslim head piece Taqiay). A speech bubble indicates that the goats say "#MeToo" implying that they have been sexually assaulted by the man. Through the slide of metonymy (Ahmed, 2004) the tags "goatfucker" and "Isis" draw a connection between Isis, terrorists and Middle Eastern men, and also implies that Middle Eastern men are known for sexually assaulting goats. Middle Eastern men are thus portrayed as over-sexualised others who will resolve to animals in order to achieve sexual release. The humorous message draws on a stereotype of the Middle Eastern man as a "goatfucker" which becomes a shorthand for the type of meaning making that renders itself readily available for memetic spread: simplistic racial stereotypes (Milner, 2016, p. 123).

Figure 5.11: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 20-10-2017.

Beside the racialised othering of Middle Eastern men, the meme compares victims of sexual assault to goats – thus positioning them as inhuman others. Some memes portray victims as other domesticated animals such as dogs and sheep – an

interesting point since victims are implicitly and explicitly characterised as women and children. This comparison thus frames women as domesticated, as docile and as passive creatures, with whom men can do as they please. In turn, the white male centrality is manifested through the othering of people of colour.

Another way victims are dehumanised is through a comparison to puppets – primarily *The Muppets*. One example is the comparison to Miss Piggy in Figure 5.12 where she describes how she had to allow the puppeteer and creator of the Muppets, Jim Henson, to physically and verbally abuse her. The meme humorously points to the absurdity of a puppet complaining about sexual violence by describing the actions of the puppeteer as putting "his entire arm up my ass". The abuse is framed as a calculated choice that she made in order to advance her career. A comparison is thus made to Hollywood actresses, implying that they were not abused but rather agreed to offer sexual favours in return for promotions and film roles.

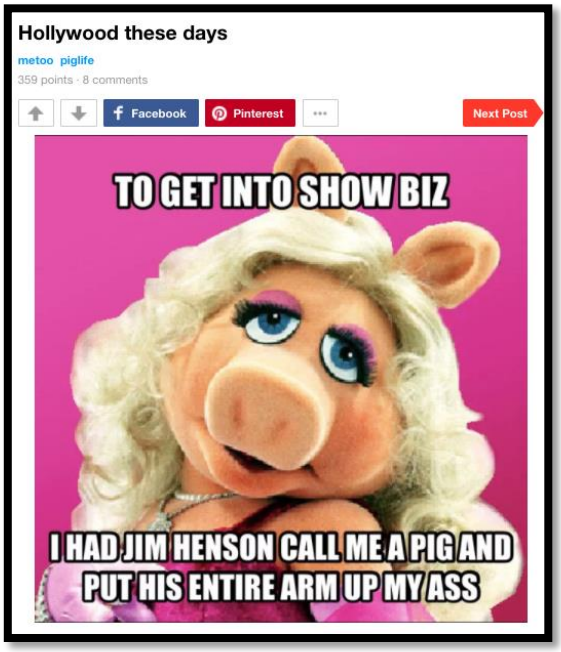


Figure 5.12: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 13-11-2017.

Another Muppet character who appears a few times in my data set is Kermit the Frog, as seen in Figure 5.13. The meme features an image of Kermit hugging his knees in a manner which in this context appears to be imitating a traumatised victim of sexual violence. He is also made to look small as if to draw comparisons to a child victim. Kermit seems to express both distress and shame which thus reproduces the notion that shame sticks to the bodies of the victims, rather than the perpetrators of sexual abuse. The accompanying text is almost an exact copy of the text in the Miss Piggy meme in Figure 5.12, suggesting that Kermit too *allowed* Jim Henson to

sexually assault him. Again, it is implied that this is the standard procedure in Hollywood thus drawing comparisons to the Hollywood actresses – who again are framed as knowing and willing participants rather than victims. A different discourse is thus at play here than in the Miss Piggy meme, even though the text is almost identical. Whereas Miss Piggy is positioned to imitate the Hollywood actresses in a discrediting strategy, Kermit's distressed body language and body size leads us to think of a sexually assaulted child, thus invoking a sympathetic sentiment. In both memes, however, the absurdity of a puppet as a victim of sexual violence becomes the humorous punch line and the victims of sexual violence are the butt of the joke.

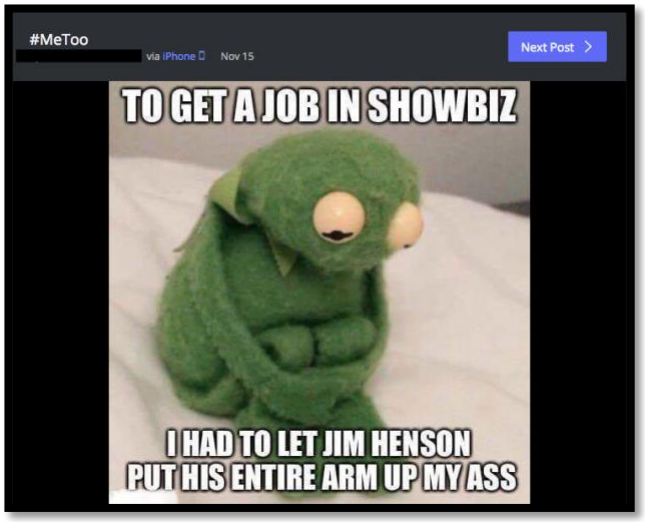


Figure 5.13: #MeToo data set from Imgur. 15-11-2017.

A literal objectification of victims is at play in a number of memes where victims are compared to inanimate objects. Beside the memes that poke fun at the story about Harvey Weinstein ejaculating into a potted plant in a hotel lobby, victims are compared to a variety of inanimate objects. An example of this is Figure 5.14 which features an image of Wilson, the volleyball that Tom Hanks' character, Chuck Nolan, makes into his personified companion in the 2000 film *Cast Away*. The absurdity of the notion that a volleyball, personified or not, would complain about Hanks' behaviour is emphasised and the comparison between Hanks touching a ball and the variety of sexual violence experienced by Hollywood actresses, reproduces a discourse of minimalizing and trivialising sexual violence.

Figure 5.14: #MeToo data set from Imgur. 05-12-2017.

The dehumanization of victims in these three examples, whether as animals, puppets or inanimate objects, works as a strategy of minimizing the victims' experiences, as well as trivialising and legitimising sexual violence. Furthermore, victims of sexual violence are not only discursively excluded from three social media platforms but excluded from a notion of subjecthood: as non-human objects. In Figures 5.11 to 5.14, the butt of the joke is the victims whose experiences are used as absurdist comments as if to suggest that #MeToo has gone too far – a notion I will explore further in Chapter 7.

Blaming the victims

Only seven memes in my data set have been identified as expressing a belief in the victims. The large majority of the memes thus, directly or indirectly, express a disbelief and question the credibility of the victims. This is expressed through a variety of victim blaming discourses. As discussed above, the credibility of children is not questioned when they are portrayed as victims and male victims are virtually non-existent. The victim blaming discourse thus only focuses on adult women.

In Chapter 2 I provided a lengthy discussion of the feminist literature on sexual violence which I will draw on here with a particular focus on victim blaming, rape myths, and the male sexual drive discourse (Gavey, 2019; L. Kelly, 1988). I will also consider the way in which sexual violence is discursively reframed as sex, drawing on feminist discussions on the matter (Boyle, 2019b; Gavey, 2019). Finally, I will analyse how victims are expected to behave in order to be considered credible,

pointing back to my discussion of the legitimate victim as well as drawing on Gavey and Schmidt's (2011) notion of a "Trauma of Rape" discourse.

Victim blaming discourses are predominantly made up of rape myths which reproduce inaccurate but widely held beliefs about sexual violence. One such rape myth is the notion that women generally have an unconscious rape fantasy, as part of "normal" female desire (Gavey, 2019, pp. 21–22). This notion is exemplified in Figure 5.15, where the image macro "Philosoraptor" ponders the myth of the rape fantasy. Philosoraptor features an illustration of a Velociraptor which is to be read as being immersed in deep philosophical thoughts ("Know Your Meme, Philosoraptor," n.d.). In Figure 5.15 the Philosoraptor wonders if it is even possible for a woman to "get raped" if she has sexual fantasies about being raped. In other words, the meme muses that the nature of her sexual fantasies directly effects how she would experience a sexual assault. Women are here represented through an implied heterosexual male perspective which simultaneously excludes female subject positions and others women's experiences. As such, the sexual assault is reconceptualised as sex and the notion that she could possibly claim to have been assaulted is obliterated altogether. The responsibility of sexual assault is thus moved from the perpetrator and put on the victim as a classic example of victim blaming.

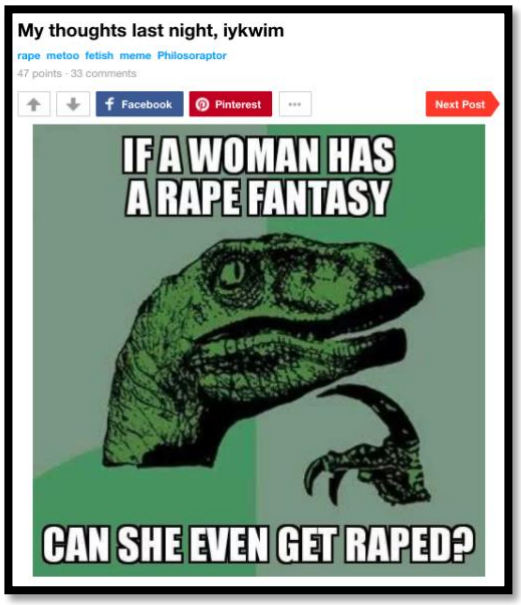


Figure 5.15: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 20-12-2017.

The title of the meme adds another dimension to context, address and interpretation of the meme. The abbreviation "iykwim" stands for "if you know what I mean" and signals double entendres online ("Urban dictionary, iYKwIM," n.d.). This thus suggests a sexual interpretation of the statement which I take to imply on

of two things: either that he was thinking about this while masturbating ("if you know what I mean" thus invoking the homosociality of male masculinity as a manhood act (Moloney & Love, 2018)) or that this could have been a thought while considering or perpetrating a sexual assault on a woman. As such the meme is positioned as a means of justifying sexual assault, which is made invisible if women are understood to always secretly enjoy sexual assault.

Women as responsible for men's abuse

The memes in my data set generally reproduce a victim blaming discourse which places the responsibility of sexual violence with the victims. In Figures 5.16 and 5.17 the women who were assaulted by Harvey Weinstein and Louis C.K., respectively, are told that they should have known better. In Figure 5.16 the notion of "women's intuition" is introduced. This is used to question why Weinstein's victims were not able to sense that they should have stayed away from him. The meme features a rather unflattering image of Weinstein, with squinting eyes and with lighting which emphasises the bags under his eyes. Weinstein is thus affectively characterised as an unequivocally unattractive person. Invoking a feeling of disgust of Weinstein's body as well as his person, invites viewers of the meme to consider whether they would feel sexually attracted to Weinstein. The answer is simple – the meme implies – no one could possibly be interested in him and the women should have known better. The blame of his assaults is removed from him and put on the female victims who, thanks to their women's intuition, should have been able to stay out of harm's way. Weinstein is thus ridiculed in a similar way to that of Dunham, Wilson and Clinton as discussed above. He is the butt of the joke and disgust sticks (Ahmed, 2004) to him. This, however, does not mean that his victims are free from blame. Rather, the female victims are blamed for his assaults because Weinstein's appearance should have worked as a warning signal. While the meme in Figure 5.16 might seem like an example of rebellious humour, as it ridicules a powerful man, the meme has a dual disciplinary function. It both disciplines the female victims for not avoiding the visibly disgusting man and it disciplines the non-hegemonic male body – a notion I will return to in the characterisation of Weinstein in Chapter 6.

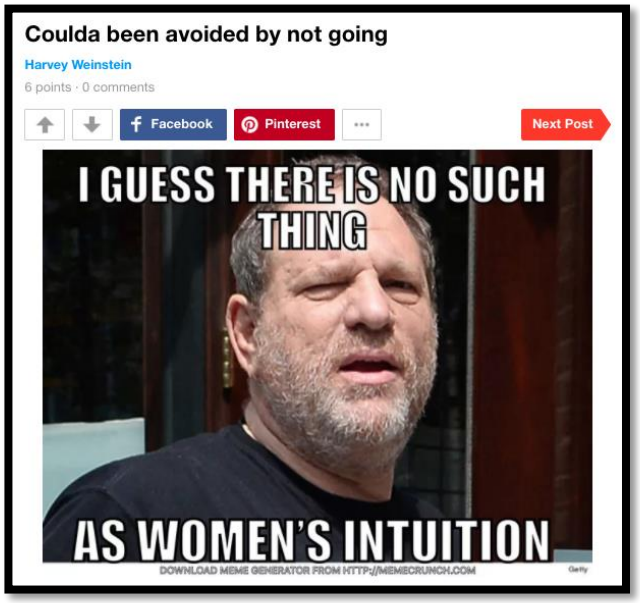


Figure 5.16: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 11-12-2017.

Figure 5.17 features an image of Louis C.K. performing one of his stand-up routines. The accompanying text expands on a joke he made in his 2013 HBO special *Oh My God,* where he discusses how everyone has a competition in their brain between the good thoughts and the bad thoughts (C.K., 2013). This inner battle he calls "Of course, but maybe" to which he gives a few examples: "Of course, if you're fighting for your country and you get shot or hurt, it's a terrible tragedy. Of course! Of course. (Pauses). But maybe… maybe if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot, it's not that weird. Maybe if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it's a tiny bit your fault."(C.K., 2013). This point is transferred to the image macro format in which the upper text represents the good thoughts and the bottom text the bad thoughts. The meme directly addresses the women who have been sexually harassed by C.K. The good thoughts claim that "it sucks" to have had to go through that experience, thus minimizing the sexual harassment. The bad thoughts point out that the women could just have left the room when C.K. started to take off his clothes and masturbate. The women are explicitly blamed for his harassment: "It's a little bit your fault." Significantly the meme addresses the women in second person (you), signalling that women are not part of the imagined audience but are addressed as outsiders – and thus othered. Similar to the portrayal of Weinstein in the previous meme, C.K. is here ridiculed for his unattractive appearance ("an overweight, bald man"). He is thus also affectively constructed as disgusting. However, though disgust sticks to him, the ridicule does not in the same way construct him as the butt of the joke. As I discuss further in

Chapter 6, C.K. is celebrated on the three platforms for owning his unappealing physical appearance. However, as with Weinstein, his appearance should have functioned as a deterrent and the women should have left the room – which in turn implies that they had a choice and were in control of the situation.

Figure 5.17: Louis C.K data set from Imgur. 27-12-2017.

In both Figure 5.16 and 5.17 the responsibility to prevent sexual violence lies with women who are expected to change their behaviour and limit the space they take up in public. This is victim blaming. The figures address women ("coulda been avoided by not going", "Of course it sucks that you had to see…"). This address simultaneously implies a "neutral" (thus male) subject position of the narrator and a positioning of women as outsiders. Though framed as directly speaking to women (especially in Figure 5.17), this address discursively creates a distance to them as they are not imagined to be part of the discursive "us". The memes thus function as manifestation of male centrality.

Women failing to "do" proper victimhood

The largest theme within the victim blaming sub-topic (see details in Appendix 2 on page 229) is the notion that victims are attention seekers that hope to advance their career by speaking up against abuse. This notion has a number of implications which need to be addressed. This claim concerns a specific group of victims: Hollywood actresses and primarily the ones who made accusations against Weinstein. Furthermore, it implies that the accusations are false and that the actresses gave consent. Finally, it speaks to the notion of the legitimate victim in specifying how victims should behave and react to experiences of sexual violence in order to take up legitimate positions of victimhood.

Figure 5.18 addresses the actresses accusing Weinstein of sexual violence. The meme indicates that these women deliberately exchanged sexual favours for film roles and later regretted this decision, which has led them to make public accusations in order to get attention. The notion that women use #MeToo as a way to become rich and famous (exactly how this should secure them fame and fortune is never explained) is a recurring theme. The credibility of actresses is thus questioned in a particular way as they are assumed to be calculative, shameless and immoral in their pursuit of fame and fortune, and they are assumed to use their sexuality to their advantage. Figure 5.18 further speaks to the rape myth often circulated on the manosphere: that most accusations of sexual assault are false and a result of a woman regretting her sexual encounters (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gavey, 2019). Reproducing the notion that "good girls don't get raped", women must either have acted "badly" in that they actively sought and enjoyed sex (which is punished with sexual assault), or the alleged assault never happened in the first place. Either way, sexual violence is made invisible and the perpetrators are exonerated as the blame is placed on the victims. This speaks to the backlash against #MeToo which will be further developed in Chapter 7.

Figure 5.18: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 18-10-2017.

Figure 5.19 further addresses the Hollywood actresses as it features images of four of them: Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Beckinsale, Ashley Judd and Asia Argento, who all accused Weinstein of sexually harassing or assaulting them (Chan, 2017; Farrow, 2017; Kantor & Abrams, 2017; Kantor & Twohey, 2017). In the images they pose for the camera at red-carpet events and they are seen smiling and laughing with him. Each image features a quote by the actress which addresses Weinstein's assaults. The meme implies that the actresses could not possibly have been sexually

assaulted and harassed by a man with whom they then interact so seemingly fondly in public. This argument is built around the physical contact between the actresses and Weinstein which the meme suggests is voluntary (Paltrow's arm around Weinstein, Argento leaning into Weinstein's chest and the three actresses kissing Weinstein's face). Ignoring what could also be construed as Weinstein forcefully demanding physical interaction (his firm hold on Beckinsale's arm and his holding Judd's hand), the meme furthermore dismisses what most likely is a situation where the actresses had no choice but to pose for cameras and pretend to enjoy Weinstein's company. As Boyle and Rathnayake (2019) argue when discussing Alyssa Milano, the visibility of actresses and their appearances on the red carpet is seen as suspicious because legitimate victims of sexual assault are assumed to be too traumatised to appear in public. Visibility becomes a key aspect of a discrediting discourse in which women who insist on being seen and heard are considered non-legitimate victims. Invoking the "Trauma of Rape" discourse (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011), the meme suggests that actresses fail to "do" victims in a recognisable way as they are not visibly traumatised. Constructing rape as the worst possible thing that could happen to a woman, deems any public appearance suspicious – especially when that appearance inevitably involves interacting with their perpetrator (Boyle, 2018; Jordan, 2011). Not only did these actresses survive their assault, they were able to speak about and continue the public part of their jobs which, within this discourse, renders their claim to victimhood unrecognisable and incredible. Visibility and voice are thus constructed as incompatible with recognisable victimhood.

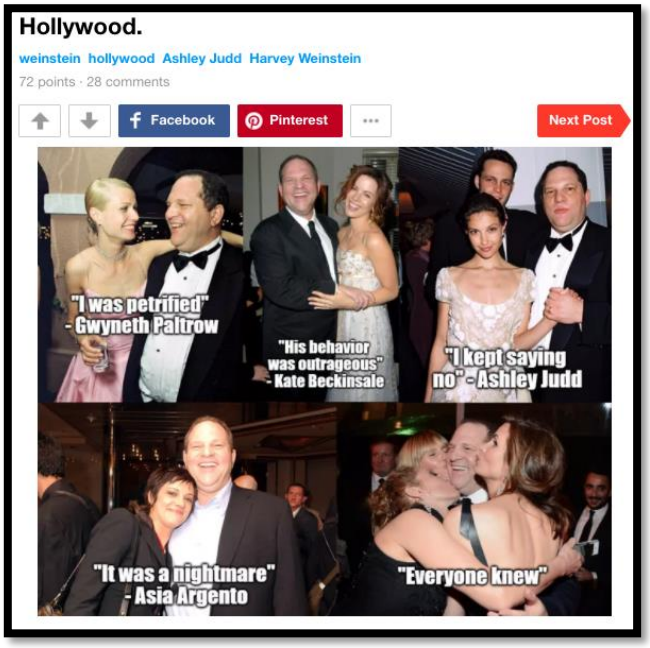


Figure 5.19: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 14-10-2017.

Reconceptualization of sexual violence as sex

The last two examples in this chapter addresses the reconceptualization of sexual violence as "just sex" (Gavey, 2019). Figure 5.20 features a photo of Rose McGowan and Harvey Weinstein smiling together at a red-carpet event. The text speaks in Weinstein's voice suggesting that he denies her accusations of sexual assault. McGowan, conversely, has no voice in the meme. The implication is that the two had sex with two possible outcomes: if she did star in his movie, she slept with him voluntarily in order to secure the role (echoing the sentiment in Figures 5.18 and 5.19), thus eliminating the notion of sexual assault. If she, however, did not star in his movie, she might afterwards (wrongfully) have accused him of sexual assault. Notably, McGowan never stared in a film produced by Weinstein and never had to audition for one of his films. However, she starred in the 2007 double feature *Grindhouse* films by Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, which was distributed by Dimension Film, then a subsidiary company of The Weinstein Company. This took place after he had sexually assaulted her. McGowan had to participate in promotion of the film together with Weinstein, which she describes in the following terms: "I had to do press events with the Monster and see photos of us together, his big fat paw pulling me in to his body."(McGowan, 2018, p. 192).[16] The image of the two in Figure 5.20 is from the premiere of the *Grindhouse* films in Los Angeles. The meme uses the image of the two of them to discredit her sexual assault accusations against him in a similar manner as to the way the actresses are discredited in Figure 5.19. Since she in fact did star in his film (or rather a film distributed by his subsidiary company), the meme suggests that any sexual encounter between them could not logically have been rape. Sexual assault is thus reconceptualised as "just sex".

[16] McGowan refuses to refer to Weinstein by his real name and "Monster" is one of the various words she uses for him throughout the book.

Figure 5.20: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 17-10-2017.

As Boyle (2019a) notes, the reading of rape as violence-not-sex or power-not sex in relation to the allegations against Weinstein, has been a useful way for feminists to respond to his explanation that he "came of age" in a different time, when sexual morals and interaction with co-workers were different than they are today. However, Weinstein's actions should be considered within the power hierarchies in place which for years allowed him to sexually assault women as a way of abusing his power.

Furthermore, the meme implies that McGowan's accusations are false. The notion that women falsely accuse men of rape as a revenge motive or in order to gain attention is a reoccurring cultural trope (Benedict, 1992; Brownmiller, 1975), which is reproduced in the Internet memes. Hollywood actresses are assumed to have had voluntary sexual relations with Weinstein and their accusations of a variety of sexual violence are assumed to be based on motives of either revenge or career ambitions, as was the case in Figures 5.18, 5.19 and 5.20. The myth of false rape accusations becomes a tool to reframe women's experiences of sexual assault to be a matter of male injury. Rather than conceptualising Weinstein as a rapist he is then re-conceptualised as a victim of false rape accusations and the category of rapist is obviated altogether (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

While the memes discussed above implicitly conceptualise sexual violence as sex, Figure 5.21 does so explicitly. The meme features a photo of a group of small boys in their school uniforms. Underneath the photo is an image of Kevin Spacey, as his character Frank Underwood in the tv series *House of Cards*. He looks directly at the camera, as he often does in the tv series when directly addressing the audience in order to share his plans and sinister thoughts. The viewer of the meme is then let in on Spacey's dark secret, that he has sexually assaulted children, and becomes complicit by association. Significantly, in the meme, sexual abuse of children is framed as "having sex", suggesting that children are able to consent to sex. Furthermore, the perpetrator of child sexual abuse is positioned as the narrator in the meme. Though child sexual abuse is reconceptualised as sex, this does not mean that the children in the meme are represented as the butt of the joke in the same way as the female victims are in most of the other memes discussed here. Child victims are used as an instrument to create a punch line or a shock effect, while female victims tend to be scrutinised in a way as to discredit their position of victimhood. The viewer is, however, invited to share a particular kind of humour existing on these humorous online spaces made to provoke and shock – which the OP appropriately refers to as "dark humour" in the first tag.

Figure 5.21: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 12-11-2017.

The reconceptualization of sexual violence as "just sex" has a number of consequences for the representation of victims of assaults. It delegitimises certain

reactions to experiences of sexual violence by acknowledging only specific victim positions: those of visible trauma and of silence. Furthermore, female victims do not have a voice but are represented by men explaining sexual violence to them. In addition, sexual violence is filtered through a male sexual drive discourse dividing female victims into categories of "rapeable" and "unrapeable" women, based on their sexual attractiveness. Finally, it blames the sexual assault on the victims while exonerating the perpetrators.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how victims of sexual violence (as understood within the continuum) are characterised in the Internet memes. Focusing primarily on the portrayal of female victims, I have outlined how they are blamed and shamed for men's abuse. Female victims are generally held responsible for sexual violence, while male perpetrators are excused and exonerated. Himpathetic discourses frame male injury (to the perpetrators' careers and reputation) as the main priority.

Applying feminist theory on rape (Benedict, 1992; Estrich, 1987; Gavey, 2019; L. Kelly, 1988) to the continuum of experiences of sexual violence portrayed in the memes, enabled me to critically analyse the way in which different women take up positions of legitimate or non-legitimate victimhood. Female victims must conform to heterosexual male notions of attractiveness, which aligns with specific representations of age, body size and sexual attractiveness, in order to be a recognisable victim of sexual violence. Female sexuality, as expressed in the memes, is sticky with shame (Ahmed, 2004) and a woman expressing sexual desire or sexual agency is considered on non-legitimate victim. In order to be recognisable as a credible victim of sexual violence, a woman must be able to ignite the heterosexual male desire. However, her sexuality can be too much and if she displays sexual agency, which traditionally is culturally constructed as a male trait (Gavey, 2019), she is considered always sexually available, which renders her "unrapeable".

The function of humour throughout the memes discussed in this chapter works through practices of inclusion and exclusion. By framing heterosexual sex as naturally aggressive within a heterosexual male perspective, humorous approaches to sexual violence become a way of signalling belonging and homosociality. The affective community of male users is united via a humorous discursive othering of women, who are either ridiculed for failing to "do" proper victim or for their excessive shameful sexuality.

Chapter 6: Monsters, perverts and anti-heroes: the discursive construction of the three perpetrators

Introduction

Where Chapter 5 focused on the portrayal of victims in my data set, this chapter explores how the three perpetrators are portrayed. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the three perpetrators have very different profiles, which influence how they are portrayed in the Internet memes. I will trace how humour and affect work in different ways, constructing Weinstein as a monstrous other, Spacey as a perverted homosexual and paedophile, and C.K. as an antihero. The main focus is on how sexual violence is characterised in different ways, depending on who the perpetrators are.

The chapter interrogates how humour simultaneously includes and excludes. While some groups of people are addressed by the memes and thus included in the humorous space, others are excluded and made the butt of the joke. While the previous chapter mainly investigated how this was the case for groups of women, a large proportion of this chapter will evidence how this exclusion extends to homosexual men. This is emphasised by how the memes are structured around narrator and address, which assumes that 9gaggers, Redditors and Imgurians are made up of heterosexual men only. The chapter then also aims to trace how some non-heteronormative voices are excluded from the communities. Additionally, this points to a characterisation of normative sexuality as well as a characterisation of sexual violence.

The memes in this chapter naturally derive from the three data sets about the perpetrators and less so from the #MeToo data set. The memes discussed here derive from the two main topics "Portrayal of the perpetrators" (page 230 of Appendix 2) and "Homosexuality and Paedophilia" (page 231 of Appendix 2). Three sub-topics have been identified under "Portrayal of the perpetrators": "Characterisation of perpetrators" which covers general characterisations in relation to their work, dehumanisation discourse and the notion of the perfect and imperfect perpetrator; "Antagonism towards the perpetrators" which includes discourses of distancing and

ridicule as well as comparison to other perpetrators; and "Fandom and support" which covers a long list of sub-topics expressing sympathy for the perpetrators and signals allegiance. The second main topic, "Homosexuality and paedophilia", which besides the themes homosexuality and paedophilia also covers Spacey's coming out. This main topic is a Spacey-specific topic.

The chapter is divided into three main sections discussing the portrayal of the three perpetrators separately. Each section begins with an outline of the sexual violence that the perpetrators have been accused of, as well as their response and the consequences to date. The first main section explores the Weinstein data set, investigating sticky affects, fat male sexuality and discourses of dehumanisation and monsterisation. The second main section analyses the large Spacey data set. This section first explores a characterisation of Spacey in relation to some of his most iconic roles. Second, I discuss how the comments to Spacey's coming out construct the homosexual man. Third, I identify how the memes create a discursive link between homosexuality and paedophilia. The last main section turns to the C.K. data set exploring how the memes address C.K.'s self-positioning as inherently sexually unattractive and a compulsive masturbator.

Harvey Weinstein as a monstrous figure

Harvey Weinstein is characterised as the perpetrator par-excellence in my data set. His celebrity and powerful position within the film industry enabled him to carry out his abuse for years. It is important to understand, though, how the film industry, his associates, and rape culture more widely functioned as a culture of complicity, which granted him access to his victims and which enabled the abuse to take place for years. Before turning to the analysis of Weinstein memes, I will briefly outline how Weinstein's career within the film industry influences the way he is characterised in the memes and how his position of power enabled him to carry out his abuse.

In 1979 Harvey Weinstein founded the production and distribution company Miramax, in collaboration with his brother Bob. It was founded as an independent company to distribute independent films that were deemed commercially unviable by the major film studios in Hollywood (Perren, 2004). However, when Miramax was purchased by The Walt Disney Company in 1993, Miramax started producing films that would come to enjoy great commercial success. In 2005 the Weinstein brothers left Miramax to set up their own production company, The Weinstein Company, which was forced into bankruptcy in 2018 after the sexual assault and harassment

accusations against Harvey Weinstein. The films he produced and distributed through Miramax and The Weinstein Company have won a total of 81 Academy Awards. Weinstein himself won an Academy Award as the producer of *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

Rumours of his sexual misconduct have flourished in Hollywood for decades, where his behaviour was considered an open secret (Farrow, 2017; McGowan, 2018). Since Kantor and Twohey exposed him in October 2017, numerous reports by his victims and former associates detail how he used non-disclosure agreements, payoffs and legal threats to shut down any accusations against him (Farrow, 2017; Kantor & Twohey, 2017). The reported abuse mainly took place during Weinstein's heyday at Miramax, where his managing style has been described as bullying and intimidating (Biskind, 2005; Farrow, 2017). Many of his victims express how they were convinced he would end their career if they did not do as he pleased or if they spoke up about the abuse (Farrow, 2017). Women who rejected his advances or tried to speak up after being assaulted by him, such as actresses Mira Sorvino, Rosanna Arquette and Rose McGowan, and model Ambra Battilana Gutierrez, describe how he later removed them from projects, dissuaded other people from hiring them and planted stories in the media about their sexual history (Farrow, 2017; McGowan, 2018).

Former executives and associates at both Miramax and The Weinstein Company report having knowledge of, or witnessing, "unwanted sexual advances and touching" in the workplace or at events associated with the films Weinstein was involved in. Employees describe a "culture of complicity" at both companies, where people would either abet his behaviour or look the other way (Farrow, 2017; McGowan, 2018).

The structures of the film industry enabled Weinstein to carry out his abuse. Casting practices provided a rationale for his abuse, which was constructed as part of the business, in turn legitimated by the success of his films (Boyle, 2018). Weinstein built an image of himself as a film mogul mirroring that of the film producers of Hollywood's golden age. As such, Weinstein is a product of an industry in which powerful male executives make decisions influencing the working conditions of actresses, creating an environment in which sexism thrives and sexual assault is allowed to take place (Hardie, 2017). This point is emphasised by Weinstein himself who explains his actions as typical of a particular era: "I came of age in the 60's and 70's, when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the

culture then." (Weinstein, 2017) He claims to have misunderstood where to draw the line as he was out of touch with the changing norms of conduct. He thus frames the story as one of sexual misreading, rather than about sexual assault and abuse of power (Boyle, 2019b).

It is important to point out, though, how such structures are not unique to the film industry or to Hollywood. Rather, these structures are upheld within a rape culture which enables and legitimises men's sexual violence against women (Buchwald et al., 1993). Weinstein exemplifies how such abuse can exist for decades if the perpetrator is powerful enough to create a culture of complicity, which enables the abuse to exist as an open secret.

Weinstein was a celebrity within the Hollywood film industry, but he is not a star the way that Kevin Spacey and Louis C.K. are. The distinction is to be understood in terms of how a star is known for the public role of their profession (Redmond & Holmes, 2007) – as the face of a film like Kevin Spacey or the embodied character of a stand-up comedian like Louis C.K. A celebrity, on the other hand, might be part of celebrity culture, such as Hollywood parties and red-carpet events, but will have a function which exists behind the scenes – such as Weinstein's role as a producer and the manager of a company. His celebrity then means that he does not enjoy the same level of fandom as the other two perpetrators. Fans might have a cinephilic relationship with him, in which they are fans of films he has produced but not necessarily fans of him as a person. The relationship expressed in the memes is thus less personal than the affective relationship a fan would have with Spacey or C.K. The memes do however express how the films Weinstein has produced are tainted by his name. The memes thus principally portray Weinstein in photos from red carpet events, rather than in relation to his films, as is the case for Spacey and C.K.

Weinstein as inhuman, disgusting and monstrous

A significant number of memes have been identified as monsterising or dehumanising the perpetrators. These memes describe them as inhuman by comparing them to animals and monstrous characters through language and imagery. The perpetrators are portrayed as something outlandish and alien, in order to signify difference between perpetrators and "ordinary people". Most of the memes in this category describe Weinstein, though a considerable number (42%) also portray Spacey. Significantly, no memes about C.K belong to this category. There is a

significant difference between how Weinstein and Spacey are represented within this category though. The memes about Spacey tend to either use words such as "creep" or making comparisons to animals and creatures less likely to induce fear or disgust, such as Chewbacca from the *Star Wars* franchise. The memes in this category about Weinstein, on the other hand, tend to use much stronger words such as "degenerate" for example. Comparisons are made to figures more likely to induce fear or disgust, like Jabba the Hutt from the *Star Wars* franchise.

In Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3, Weinstein is compared to a number of inhuman characters. In Figure 6.1 Weinstein is compared to the Dad from the American 1990s tv-series *The Dinosaurs*. A parallel frame of a close-up of Weinstein on the one side and the dinosaur dad, Earl, on the other side encourages the viewer to consider the similarities between the two. The photo of Weinstein seems to be paparazzi style catching him mid-sentence which allows his mouth to form a similar shape as Earl's thus emphasising Weinstein's double chin. The bags under the eyes and the imperfect skin is emphasised in the comparison to the rough, reptile skin. The large dinosaur body, which moves in clumsy and inelegant ways, is also important here as a construction of Weinstein as too large and offensive. The comparison of Weinstein to the dinosaur reproduces the notion of Weinstein as unattractive and plays affectively on disgust in portraying him as inhuman.

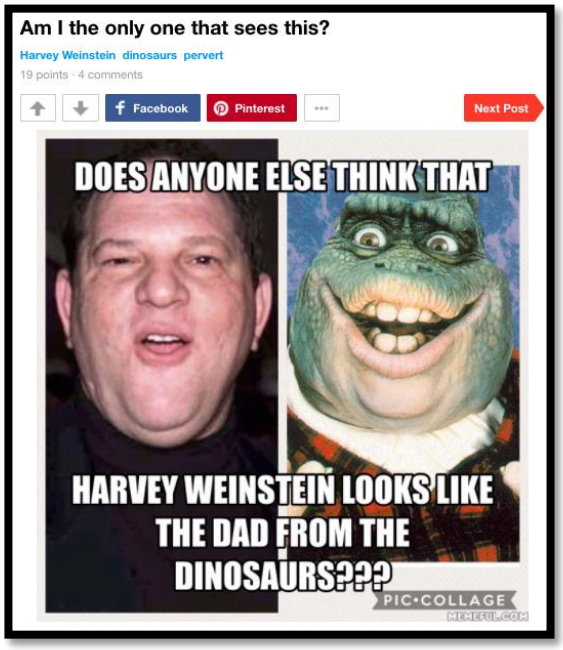


Figure 6.1: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 13-10-2017.

Figure 6.2 similarly draws a comparison to an inhuman creature, in this case to the Great Goblin in Peter Jackson's film, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*

(2012), an adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*. The Great Goblin is known in the novel as the chieftain of the Goblins who prey on travellers passing through the Misty Mountains. He is portrayed as a cruel ruler, who punishes intruders by death or forces them into slavery. In Jackson's film, The Great Goblin is portrayed as a bloated giant with a scarred face full of warts. His character is presented as a disgusting monster and the antagonist who must be defeated by the heroes of the film. This comparison thus serves to establish Weinstein as an antagonist, as a disgust-invoking non-human and as a monstrous other. In both Figure 6.1 and 6.2 the OP asks: "Am I the only one that sees this?" Though phrased as a question, this implies that the comparison should be obvious. Weinstein's physical appearance thus plays a significant part in telling a story which affectively plays on disgust and thus frames Weinstein as the monstrous other.

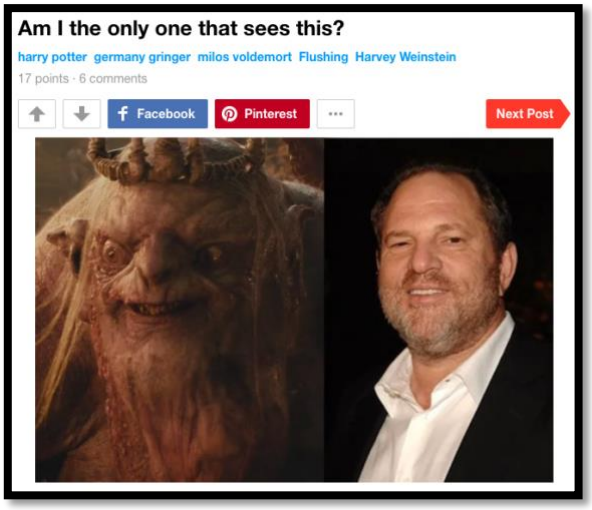


Figure 6.2: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 02-11-2017.

One recurring meme which represents Weinstein as monstrous is the one in Figure 6.3, in which Weinstein is compared to Jabba the Hutt from the *Star Wars* franchise. Jabba the Hutt is known as a powerful crime boss who tends to torture his opponents. He is portrayed as cruel, with a grim sense of humour, as well as an insatiable appetite. Furthermore, he is a huge slug-like creature, with folds of skin and a constant drool of a slime-like substance from his mouth, implying an extremely non-flattering comparison to Weinstein and especially his body size – thus positioning Weinstein as sticky with disgust. In this image we see Jabba the Hutt with Princess Leia, who is captured and made into one of his slave girls. Leia is being held by Jabba's troops and she turns her head in disgust when he sticks his tongue out towards her. Knowledge of the film and the scenes might reveal another layer of comparison with Weinstein. Leia is being held captive with Jabba the Hutt

for a period of time and is eventually dressed in a small bikini while having a chain around her neck which Jabba keeps cranking to draw her close to his body. Furthermore, he continues to say sexually suggestive phrases, thus insinuating that he is planning to sexually assault her. Thus, a comparison is drawn between Jabba's potential sexual assault of his slave girls and Weinstein's sexual abuse of a long line of women. As such, the comparison between the two denies any ambivalence in terms of whether or not Weinstein is guilty of the abuse he is accused of – a point which is questioned much more in memes about the victims in the previous chapter, which characterise them as liars and willing participants. Asking whether this humorous commentary on Weinstein and #MeToo is "Too soon?" in the headline, implies that the OP considers whether this meme crosses the deadline of propriety often used when commenting on tragedy or disaster in a humorous way. The meme is thus positioned as potentially offensive – not because of the content in isolation – but because too little time has passed since the story broke. Jabba the Hutt too is a monstrous antagonist and the comparison functions for the OP to distance themselves from Weinstein, as well as ridiculing and othering him.

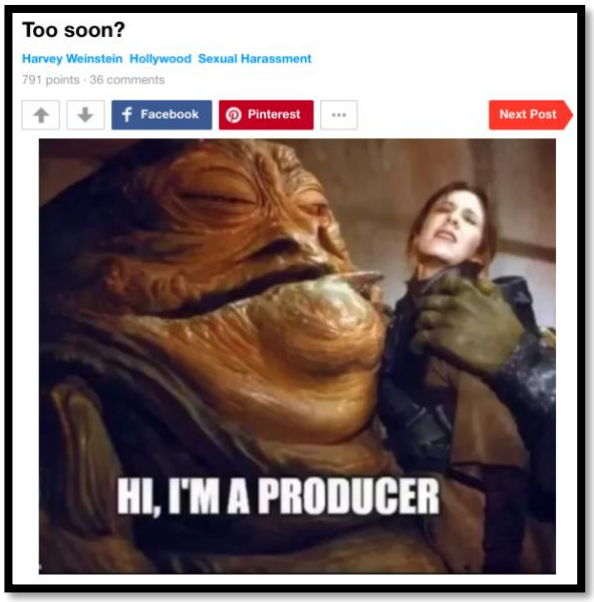


Figure 6.3: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 16-10-2017.

The memes constructing Weinstein as a monstrous other, have in common that they comment on his body size. Disgust is constructed as interlinked with fatness and the fat body[17] is understood as always sticky with disgust. This is emphasised in

[17] In accordance with the field of Fat Studies I use the word "fat" as a neutral adjective which is reclaimed as a political project in an effort to remove negative connotations from descriptions and stigma of fat bodies (Wann, 2009).

memes about Weinstein which try to make sense of him as a sexual being, in commenting on his sexual assault of women. As Harker (2016) points out when discussing cultural representation of fatness, fat male sexuality is depicted as either asexual or monstrous. Fat male sexuality is thus never unmarked and value-neutral, but rather deemed problematic or portrayed as non-existent. Asexual male fatness is portrayed as non-existent and impotent – as a failure of masculinity. When fat male sexuality does exist and is characterised by agency, it will tend to be sticky with disgust (Ahmed, 2004). Fat male sexuality is constructed as monstrous and threatening and often with the potential to destroy the object of desire (Harker, 2016). The construction of Weinstein as a monstrous figure is thus emphasised in the comparison to disgust-inducing fat creatures such as Jabba the Hutt and the Great Goblin. Their bodies are marked as excessive and sticky – literally in the case of Jabba – and they become objects of desire and, as such, disgusting others. Their fat bodies make any sexual activity suspicious and construct any potential sexuality as destructive and perverted. A contrast is created when Weinstein is pictured with his victims who are all young and thin women (see for example Figures 5.19 and 5.20 in Chapter 5). Their thin bodies symbolize attractiveness and non-marked sexuality in contrast to his body, which is constructed as the opposite: fat and sexually unattractive. Furthermore, the proximity of his body to theirs intensifies the feeling of disgust (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85): not only is his body too big, it is also too close. His fat body should have invoked a feeling of disgust and suspicion with his victims when he displayed sexual agency. His fat, disgust-inducing body should have worked as a warning sign and his victims are blamed for his assault because they should have known better.

The memes in Figures 6.4 and 6.5 comment on Weinstein's social decline by humorously speculating what will become of him after his fall from grace. Figure 6.4 features a tweet by American comedian and voice actor Elie M. Iskander, who draws a comparison between Weinstein and a homeless character in *The Simpsons*, musing that the tv show predicted Weinstein's future. The cartoon character is a fat man with a double chin and day-old stubble, which suggests a lack of grooming. The flies circulating around his head suggests a bad smell and the bins in the background invoke the trope of homeless people going through the bins. The meme comments on Weinstein's fall from grace and his unsure social and professional position (ignoring his considerable wealth), after having been fired from The Weinstein Company. The

meme suggests that the allegations against him constitute the end of his career – a theme which is repeated throughout my data set. As I will discuss below, this theme is framed considerably differently in memes about Spacey and C.K. where fans mourn the loss of their beloved characters and the films, tv-shows and stand-up shows they are part of. When this theme is discussed in relation to Weinstein, however, the fact that his career in the film industry might be over is not mourned but rather celebrated – often through discourses of justice and schadenfreude – as in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.4: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 23-10-2017.

Figure 6.5 similarly speculates on the condition of Weinstein's life post-allegations. It features an image of a honey badger, which the meme suggests resembles Weinstein in rehab. Following the sexual assault allegations, Weinstein entered the high-end Arizona clinic, The Meadows, to seek treatment for "sex addiction" ("Harvey Weinstein: US and UK police launch investigations," 2017; Hyde, 2017, 2018). This "rehab" is most likely what the meme refers to. The choice of the honey badger as the animal to represent him is hardly random, as the honey badgers are known as particularly aggressive animals and videos of them fighting with large animals, especially snakes, have circulated online. The meme portrays the honey badger clinging on to a tree stub with its long claws and exposes its teeth in a seemingly hostile expression. The comparison to a honey badger positions Weinstein on one hand as unattractive and inhuman. On the other hand, this also points to Weinstein as a (sexual) predator in parallel to the carnivore and aggressive behaviour of the honey badger. Either way he is characterised as an inhuman and monstrous other, separate from the hegemonic display of masculinity on the platforms.

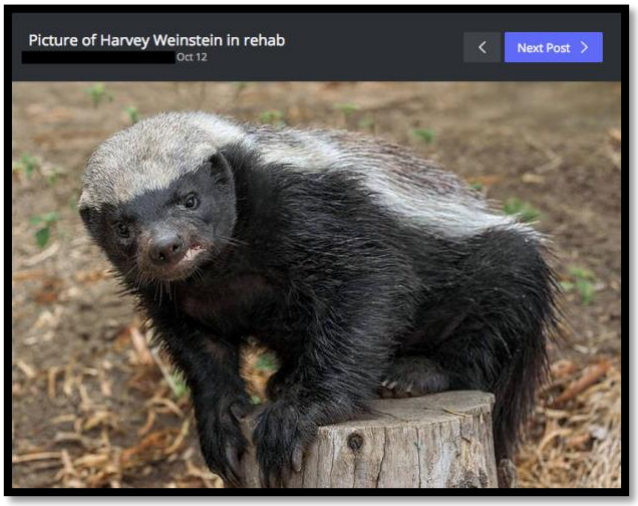


Figure 6.5: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur. 12-10-2017.

Figures 6.1 to 6.5 exemplify rebellious humour that effectively has a disciplinary function (Billig, 2005). While they ridicule a powerful man, they simultaneously employ a disciplinary discourse that polices hegemonic masculinity and positions the fat body as wrong and monstrous.

Figure 6.6 features an image of Weinstein's face photoshopped onto the body of a whole roasted pig on a spit. The text explicitly tells Weinstein to "roast in hell" – a point emphasized by the sea of flames surrounding him and the image of the devil in the background. The imagery allows for a number of interpretations of this meme. The expression "burn in hell" is turned into "roast in hell" for the purpose of the roasting pig imagery. The choice to portray Weinstein as a pig could play on a number of associations. First of all, the phrase of the "male-chauvinist pig", which would work as a commentary on Weinstein's treatment of women. This would then situate the meme as displaying a condemnation of Weinstein, while simultaneously showing support for his female victims. The pig metaphor could also draw on religious aspects where it is often portrayed as the dirtiest of all the animals – thus making Weinstein affectively sticky with disgust. This could furthermore suggest a comment on Weinstein's Jewish heritage and the choice of the pig then makes Weinstein himself an animal considered to be unclean.

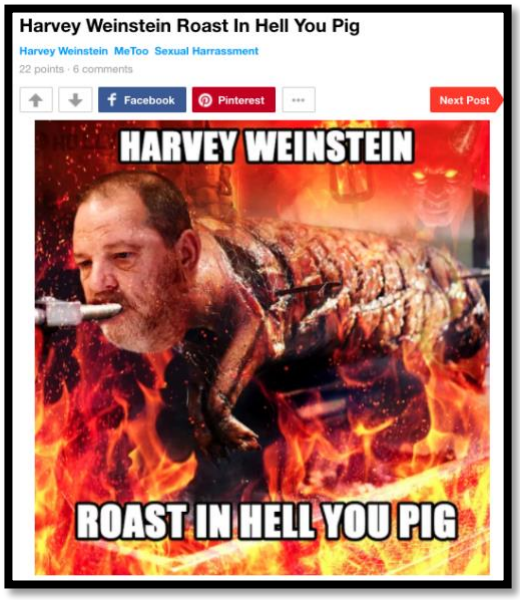


Figure 6.6: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 27-10-2017.

The roasting spit penetrating his mouth and his rear end, as well as the positioning of the devil behind Weinstein, could suggest that the meme functions as a revenge fantasy where Weinstein is sodomised. Entries on "roasting" on Urban Dictionary support this sexual use of the roasting pig imagery. One entry defines roasting as the "Sexual act of two men and one girl. One guy in her mouth, one in vagina. Looks as though the girl is on a spit roast. Lindsay was well up for Carlton and Titus to give her a serious roasting." ("Urban Dictionary, Roasting," n.d.). Another entry suggests a similar definition: "Multiple males having sequential sex with a single female. Origin: UK – stuffing a bird (as if for roasting). *At a party: Most of the rugby team is in the back roasting Lucy.*" (Ibid.). Whether simultaneously or sequentially, the sexual act involves two or more men having sex with a single woman. Though none of the entries explicitly suggest that the women are sexually assaulted rather than consenting to sex, the wording suggests rough sex which is *done to* the women and in which they are dehumanised and outnumbered. The roasting of Weinstein could thus be read as a sexual assault in which the meme suggests giving him "a taste of his own medicine", so to speak. The slang language used and discussed (often humorously) on Urban Dictionary derives from Internet youth culture (R. E. Smith, 2011), which could very well be the same type of slang used by 9gaggers, Redditors and Imgurians. It was the same term used by the "Roastbusters", a group of teenage boys from New Zealand who infamously discussed sexual exploitation of teenage girls on social media (Gavey, 2013, 2019). Regardless of how the meme is analysed, it is unequivocally antagonistic towards

Weinstein and the tag “MeToo” seems to be used unironically and as a statement of support for his victims, and more broadly for all the women sharing their #MeToo stories about Weinstein. The meme invokes a shock-effect, a ridicule of Weinstein and a notion of righteousness of Weinstein getting what he deserves.

Where figure 6.6 possibly hinted to Weinstein’s religious heritage, Figure 6.7 does so explicitly. The meme features Harvey Weinstein’s face photoshopped onto the infamous 1942 SS publication *Der Untermensch* (Reichsführer-SS, 1942). The title roughly translates to “the subhuman” and was used by the Nazis to refer to Jews and other “non-Aryan” people. Throughout the 50-page publication a pseudo-scientific argument is put forward juxtaposing the German people against the “Untermensch”, pinning the Soviet Jew as the ultimate “Untermensch” (“Der Untermensch: ‘The subhuman,’” 2008). The meme is explicitly anti-Semitic in referring to Weinstein’s Jewish ancestry by calling him an “untermensch”. The discursive othering of Weinstein then becomes an othering of Jewish people. The dehumanisation of Weinstein is thus taken to the extreme in suggesting that his behaviour can be explained by his Jewish heritage, implying that he is not just a monstrous other – he is a Jewish sub-human.

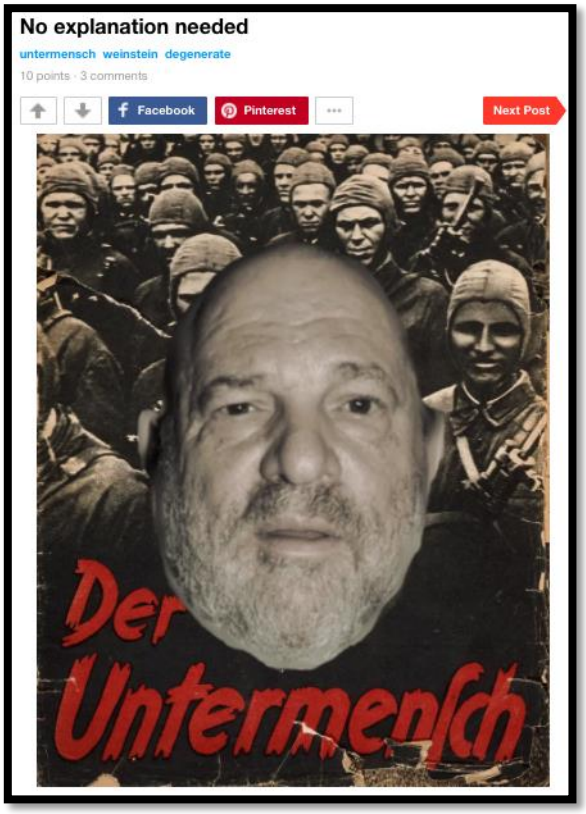


Figure 6.7: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 11-10-2017.

All memes discussed above position Weinstein as the butt of the joke. He is either the disgusting, undesirable, fat body or the monstrous other, who is characterised as inhuman or subhuman. However, this also emphasises his position as the likely perpetrator. Fatness, disgust and monstrosity are thus positioned as warning signs which his victims should have noticed. Though his victims are mostly invisible and voiceless, they are still implicitly characterised as ignorant or willing participants in his abuse. Thus, victims of sexual violence are blamed for his abuse.

Celebrated actor, perverted homosexual and potential paedophile: ambivalence in Kevin Spacey memes

The portrayal of Kevin Spacey throughout my data set is characterised by ambivalence. On one hand, he is celebrated for his iconic on-screen performances and users of the platforms demonstrate affective engagement with him through a sense of fandom. This is notably expressed through the predominant use of Spacey's characters in the memes, thus blurring the boundaries between the on-screen and off-screen Spacey. On the other hand, Spacey is ridiculed for coming out as gay in his response to the allegations from Anthony Rapp and he is characterised as a de-facto paedophile. Significantly, this comparison between homosexuality and paedophilia is perpetuated in the memes where Spacey becomes the figure of the perverted homosexual man, who is always a potential paedophile. Before turning to the analysis of the Internet memes, I will briefly outline Spacey's career and his history of sexual violence.

Spacey's more than 35-year long career includes a long line of successful and critically acclaimed films, including two Academy Awards for *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *American Beauty* (1999). He started his career as a theatre actor which he took up again late in his career when he became the artistic director of the London theatre the Old Vic, where he starred in numerous productions. Much like Weinstein, Spacey's sexual harassment and assaults were an open secret within the film industry. After the first allegations emerged against him, previous co-workers have spoken out about the abuse they experienced when working with him on a number of productions including *The Usual Suspects* (1995) (Shortall, 2017), *House of Cards* (2013-2018) (Kornhaber, 2017; Melas, 2017; Puente, Jensen, & Alexander, 2017) and in theatre productions at The Old Vic (M. Brown & Weaver, 2017). Throughout his career, there has always been much speculation about his sexuality because he

kept his private life to himself. Rather than answering personal questions, he always presented himself as an actor first and foremost (Rollo, 2018). When asked about his sexuality he tended to avert the questions and to answer them in general terms, highlighting his right to privacy (Day, 2017; White, 1999). Speculations never ceased to exist and his homosexuality was assumed by fans and the media (Rollo, 2018).

Kevin Spacey as a loveable rogue, a plot-twist villain and an evil genius

Memes about Spacey express an affective engagement with him, which is significantly different to memes about Weinstein. This is primarily portrayed through a fondness of his on-screen characters. When portrayed as his off-screen persona, rather than a character, it is mostly in pictures of him on stage at award ceremonies (for example receiving his academy awards), from press images and from red carpet events where he poses for the cameras. None of the images are paparazzi style. As mentioned above, he is an actor first and foremost, to the extent where even presenting himself to the public seems like a role he is playing. Whilst 35% of Spacey memes do not portray him directly, nearly a quarter of them represent him as one of his characters. This is significant in terms of understanding how users of the platforms blur the boundaries between his on-screen and off-screen persona.

Four on-screen characters are reoccurring in the data set and they all represent Spacey as a villainous character or an anti-hero: Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*, Roger "Verbal" Kint (revealed to be Keyser Söze) in *The Usual Suspects*, John Doe in *Se7en*, and Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*. They are lead characters (Underwood and Burnham) or significant supporting roles (Verbal[18] and John Doe). They are characterised as loveable rogues (Underwood and Lester), master manipulators (Underwood, Verbal and Doe) and evil geniuses (Underwood, Verbal and Doe). Significantly, in these productions, the viewers are invited to sympathise with his characters, despite being aware of their dubious, mischievous and sometimes evil actions. This is less so the case for John Doe, who is presented unequivocally as the antagonist, however, the viewer is invited to feel intrigued and to an extent admiring of his evil genius. This ambivalence works to draw the viewer in to the story and to make them complicit – a point made explicitly in *House of Cards*, where Underwood breaks the fourth wall and addresses the viewer directly.

[18] Though considered an ensemble cast, Verbal functions as the narrator throughout most of the film thus playing a significant role beyond what could be associated with that of a supporting character.

As Spacey points out: “I think people just like me evil for some reason … They want me to be a son of a bitch.” (Nashawati, 2013).

The lines between Spacey on-screen and off-screen are often blurred and the memes muse that he also was a “plot twist villain” in real life. This could refer to both *The Usual Suspects*, where narrator and seemingly good guy, Verbal, is revealed to be the mastermind villain Keyser Söze, and to *Se7en,* where he makes a surprise appearance as the mass-murderer John Doe who, is responsible for the plot-twist at the end of the film leading to the surprise death of main character David Mills’ (Brad Pitt) wife, Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow).

This blurring between Spacey’s on-screen and off-screen persona is picked up by Spacey himself in a video posted on YouTube, with a link on his official Twitter profile (Spacey, 2018a) on Christmas Eve 2018, shortly after the release of the Spacey-free final season of *House of Cards*. The video shows Spacey doing a monologue in the style of Frank Underwood (Spacey, 2018b). The title of the video, Let Me Be Frank, alludes to his *House of Cards* character’s name in what seems to be a plea to return to the show, as well as a means for him to speak freely about the sexual assault allegations against him. Blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, Spacey employs the characteristics of the Underwood character (Southern US accent and trademark ring) in order to address his (Spacey’s) fans in the classic *House of Cards* direct-to-camera address: “But you wouldn’t believe the worst without evidence, would you? You wouldn’t rush to judgement without facts, would you? Did you? No not you. You’re smarter than that.” (Ibid.). The distortion of reality and fiction allows for Spacey to allude to a desire to come back to the screen, as well as to respond to the allegations against him. Speaking to Underwood’s actions, he simultaneously alludes to the allegations against himself: “If I didn’t pay the price for the things we both know I did do, I’m certainly not gonna pay the price for the things I didn’t do.” (Ibid.). This suggests a denial of the allegations against him. Spacey adds: “Of course they’re gonna say I’m being disrespectful not playing by the rules. Like I ever played by anyone’s rules before. I never did. And you loved it.” (Ibid.). Implying that the viewer has always known his true nature – casting his abuse as an open secret – the condemnation of him is framed as inauthentic and misjudged (Boyle, 2019a). Like Weinstein’s “apology”, the Let me be Frank video recasts the abuse allegations as a question of moral standards, which have changed over time. If the audience celebrates the immorality of his characters, they cannot rightfully condemn the actions of Spacey.

Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*

Half of the memes portraying him as an on-screen character have him represented as his *House of Cards* role, Frank Underwood. This is his most recent role (apart from the much less-watched *Baby Driver* and *Rebel in the Rye*, both from 2017) and the show has enjoyed significant critical and popular acclaim. The magnitude of memes referring to *House of Cards* suggest that it has a significant fanbase on the three social media platforms. Furthermore, the fact that the users tend to portray Spacey as Underwood suggests a complex and significant relationship with this character specifically. The show portrays Underwood as a cold-blooded psychopath, who is willing to do pretty much anything (including committing several murders) in order to achieve his goals – including the ultimate goal: becoming the President of the United States, which he achieves at the end of Season 2.

The Internet memes using *House of Cards* and the Underwood character often utilise Underwood's knowing look when he breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the viewers. This is the case in Figure 6.8, where Spacey's knowing look suggests that the viewer knows what Spacey would think when seeing kids playing in the park. The viewer is drawn in and made complicit both in terms of knowing what Spacey would think in such a situation and in terms of implying that the viewer is in on Spacey's secret: that he has been a paedophile all along. The headline emphasises this complicity in humorously suggesting that the master manipulator, Spacey-as-Underwood, made the OP upload the meme.

Figure 6.8: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 23-12-2017.

Figure 6.9 plays on the same knowing look, though the setting (the Oval Office) emphasizes his position of power. The quote in the meme is not spoken by Underwood but the character Harvey Dent/Two Face (Aaron Eckhart) in Christopher Nolan's Batman film *The Dark Knight* (2008). He utters the line in a meeting with Bruce Wayne/Batman, when discussing the nature of Batman's heroism. Since 2012 the quote was adapted to Internet memes, where image macros flourished on humour and meme sharing platforms in the format "You either die a X or you live long enough to see yourself become the Y" (Jacob, n.d.). The meme in Figure 6.9 ties this notion to the sexual assault allegations against Spacey,[19] implying that Spacey, who used to be a heroic and much-loved figure, has now fallen from grace. The implication of the image macro and the use of the quote is that it was only a matter of time: the hero is inevitably going to fall from grace if he lives long enough. The headline functions as a meta commentary which contextualises this sentiment within the #MeToo era of "late 2017", thus expressing a sense of fatigue with #MeToo, since Spacey is now among the people accused of a variety of sexual violence. The meme does not seem to suggest that Spacey is guilty of these accusations but rather seems to celebrate him via his Underwood character.

Figure 6.9: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 25-11-2017.

Verbal in *The Usual Suspects*

Memes utilising Spacey's character Verbal/Keyser Söze from *The Usual Suspects* primarily refer to the police interrogation of Verbal where he discusses Keyser Söze. Two sentences uttered by Verbal during this conversation are repeated by Spacey's

[19] I read the sentence "to see yourself being inculped of sexual assault" to mean "to see yourself become inculpated in sexual assault allegations".

voiceover during the big plot twist at the end of the film, when Verbal is revealed to be Keyser Söze. Discussing Söze's genius and power, Verbal notes: "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." (Singer, 1995). This line is referenced in a number of memes, an example of this is Figure 6.10, which shows the image of Verbal when he is revealed to be Söze at the end of the film and the line is repeated via Verbal's voiceover. In the meme, however, the line is changed so that the devil in this case convinces the world "he was gay". The meme thus comments on Spacey's coming out as a response to the sexual assault allegations. Spacey is presented as the devil and the admirable evil genius, and his coming out is construed as a trick he plays on the public in order to distract from the sexual assault allegations against him.

Figure 6.10: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 03-11-2017.

The second quote is from the same interrogation where Verbal discusses how Söze has disappeared and become a myth: "And like that, he's gone.". Like Figure 6.10, the meme in Figure 6.11 comments on Spacey's coming out as a response to the allegations against him. The meme suggests that after "one sexual assault allegation" he decides that he is gay – just like that. Figure 6.10 and 6.11 both imply that Spacey's coming out was a distraction tactic and question whether he really is gay, or just used his coming out story as a way to distract from the allegations against him. Furthermore, both memes use the exposed villain, Verbal/Söze, to characterise Spacey as the villain and the master manipulator – further blurring the lines between his on-screen and off-screen personas.

Figure 6.11: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 07-11-2017.

John Doe in *Se7en*

The memes using Spacey's character John Doe from *Se7en* (1995) are almost all from the climax of the film, when Doe's master plan is revealed and we learn that he has killed detective David Mills' wife. The viewer learns that Doe has placed her severed head in a box and hopes for Mills to react with vengeance and kill him thus completing Doe's plan. The memes in my data set all revolve around the scene in which Mills points his gun at Doe while yelling in distress: "What's in the box? What's in the fucking box?". The memes then make alternative suggestions as to what could be in the box in the wake of the sexual assault allegations against Spacey, as well as his coming out response. This includes a sample of large dildos, a new-born baby, Spacey stating "my career" and Spacey stating "my dick". Figure 6.12 is an example of this type of meme but rather than revealing an alternative item in the box, Spacey simply states "I'm gay". This can be read as the big reveal at the end of the film: the surprise, that Doe promises, is in fact that his real-life persona, Spacey, is gay. The meme could then suggest that the feeling Doe wants Mills to act on: wrath, could be triggered simply through the information that Doe/Spacey is gay. Alternatively, the meme could be read as if coming out as gay is Doe/Spacey's Get Out of Jail Free Card, which can be used as an excuse to get out of any difficult situation.

Figure 6.12: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 09-11-2017.

Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*

The memes about *American Beauty* (1999) tend to comment on Spacey's character Lester Burnham's sexual obsession with his teenage daughter's friend, Angela (Mena Suvari). His fantasies about an underage girl then becomes a parallel to the allegations of Spacey's sexual assault of teenage boys and the footage from the film works as proof that Spacey is sexually attracted to teenagers. The memes ignore the fact that Spacey has only ever been accused of sexually assaulting a teenage boy – never teenage girls. When it comes to children, the memes tend to not distinguish between boys and girls. The meme in Figure 6.13 takes this point slightly further by reversing the gender of his victim. The meme portrays the scene in the film where Lester fantasises about Angela in the bath. He creeps up to Angela, completely captivated by her, while she is lying in the bath, rose petals covering her body with her shoulders and leg exposed. Instead of the face of the teenage girl, the meme features a photoshopped image of the *South Park* character, Mr. Slave. Functioning as a gay character in sexualised leather attire mimicking the outfit of Glenn Hughes of *The Village People*, Mr Slave is a caricature of a hyper-sexualised stereotype of a gay man. The meme suggests that in order to pretend to be sexually attracted to

Angela, Spacey must imagine that she is a gay man. And this ability is what makes Spacey a "great actor".

Figure 6.13: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

The four characters all represent non-normative sexualities: Underwood as bisexual (he has sex with both men and women), Verbal as asexual (his character displays no sexual interest), John Doe as potentially sexually inadequate or homosexual (his inability to "play husband" with Mill's wife), and Lester as a paedophile. Apart from comparisons between Lester's paedophilia and Spacey's sexual assault of teenage boys, the memes do not comment on the character's sexuality.

Though the memes cover Spacey's homosexuality, his ill-timed coming out and his sexual assault of a teenage boy, they do not condemn or ridicule his actions. Rather, by focusing on his iconic roles, they emphasise the viewing pleasure of the fans and celebrate the portrayal of him as a lovable rogue, a plot-twist villain and an evil genius.

The hypersexual and perverted homosexual man

Homosexuality in my data set is characterised as a deviation, as a perversion and as an othering. Homosexuality is portrayed only as male homosexuality, which makes sense considering how all memes about homosexuality comment on Kevin Spacey in some way. However, even memes that do not mention Spacey at all, except for in the title or in the tags, characterise normative homosexuality as male homosexuality. As such, female homosexuality is never represented in the data set.

As Michel Foucault points out in *The History of Sexuality*, homosexuality has historically and culturally been discursively constructed as the perverted other to the heterosexual norm (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1986). In my data set, homosexuality is

discussed as a hypersexual practice, primarily characterised as a sexual act, rather than an expression of romance and love. Homosexuality is primarily signified through explicit and implicit allusions to anal sex. This is exemplified in Figures 6.14 and 6.15. Figure 6.14 suggests the launch of "the Kevin Spacey program" as an alternative to Elon Musk's SpaceX program. SpaceX was founded in 2002 by entrepreneur Elon Musk to enable the colonisation of Mars (Chang, 2016; Mosher, 2017). The meme is set up in the classic disapproval vs. approval image macro style, as seen in Figure 4.6 in Chapter 4, where Spacey disapproves of the bikini-clad Kate Upton, but approves of the image of a small boy. In Figure 6.14 the contrast is illustrated by the stern disapproving look of Spacey in the top right corner, in contrast to his approving look in the lower right corner. He points towards his award (as can be seen in other memes in my data collection) but the photo is cropped as to indicate that Spacey is in fact pointing towards the Spacey text and the photo of Uranus. The use of Uranus here refers to "your anus". Uranus jokes are a popular-cultural trope, not just in Internet culture. As Urban dictionary suggests, Uranus is "The focus of every astronomy joke ever" and "every joke about planets in the 5th grade" ("Urban Dictionary, Uranus," n.d.). Despite noting the infantile nature of the joke, every entry about Uranus on Urban Dictionary is formulated as a Uranus-joke – perhaps a testimony to the pre-pubescent nature of the humour on Urban Dictionary.

Figure 6.14: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 03-11-2017.

Another meme muses that teenage actors describe working with Spacey as "a pain in the ass", thus reproducing the trope of gay sex as always anal sex. Homosexual sex as deviating and abnormal is illustrated further in Figure 6.15,

where it is construed as perverted. In a similar format as Figure 6.12, the meme refers to the reveal at the end of *Se7en*, where Mills desperately asks Doe "What's in the box?". The sequence of images illustrates how Mills' partner, Somerset (Morgan Freeman), opens the box only to find it containing two large, dark dildos. Though it is difficult to see the exact size and shape of the dildo in the right side of the picture (the text on the wrapping allows for this reading: "Make dildo. Not war"), the one to the left is easily determined to be a very large dildo. This again points to Spacey's sexuality as abnormal and positions homosexual sex as always anal sex. The sex toys are large and dark – almost threatening – and function to construct homosexual sex as the perverted and disgust-inducing other to clean, non-threatening, heterosexual sex. Homosexual sex as abnormal and in binary opposition to heterosexual sex reaffirms the "normal" and "natural" nature of heterosexual sex.

Figure 6.15: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

As Judith Butler (1990) points out, homosexuality is discursively constructed in opposition to heterosexuality. Similarly, men and women are constructed as distinct and binary gender categories. Significantly, this construction exists within a power hierarchy in which man and heterosexual is the norm, and woman and homosexual is the other. Butler notes how these concepts exist within what she refers to as the heterosexual matrix. This is the system within which biological sex, in relation to culturally constructed gender, determines desire (Butler, 1990). The heterosexual matrix, and the understanding of gender and sexuality as binary oppositions, is reproduced in my data set as exemplified in Figures 6.16, 6.17 and 6.18. Illustrated by the two separate toilet doors, girls and boys are in Figure 6.16 advised to enter into one of the two rooms. This thus positions girls as Weinstein's heterosexual object of desire and boys as Spacey's homosexual object of desire. Those are the only two options, there is nothing in between this binary. Furthermore, the use of those gendered nouns, rather than the adult "women" and "men", idealises children as objects of desire. The headline suggests the possibility that some people would feel offended by this meme, though it is unclear whether the OP suggests that viewers would feel offended by the reproduction of gender and sexuality as binary or the fact that the meme pokes fun at sexual violence. Regardless, the title underlines how the discourse on the platforms aims to provoke and offend (Drakett et al., 2018; Phillips, 2015a).

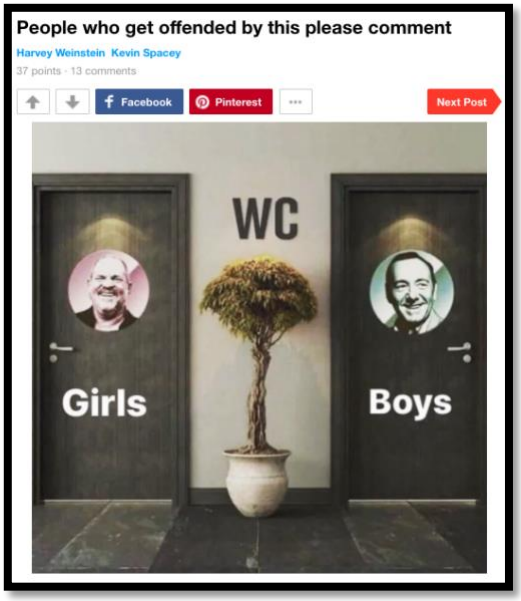


Figure 6.16: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.

Figure 6.17 features an image of Donald Trump, presumably during a speech, while he, mid-sentence, makes a dismissive hand-gesture towards the audience. The

image text refers to the recorded conversation from 2005, published by The Washington Post in 2016, in which Trump talks about his practice of sexually assaulting women. The most famous line comes when he notes how he tends to kiss women without waiting for their consent: “And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything … Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (Fahrenthold, 2016). The meme references this now famous statement but points out that Spacey simply misunderstood what Trump said. The implication is that Spacey’s only offence is that he sexually assaulted a man rather than a woman. Consequently, sexually assaulting a man and directing his sexual desire towards the same sex – thus indicating homosexuality – is a greater offence than sexually assaulting a woman, which would have upheld the heteronormative matrix. The meme is an example of rebellious humour with a disciplinary function (Billig, 2005), as it might aim to ridicule Trump and the “Grab her by the pussy”, incidence while it simultaneously reproduces a practice of disciplinary heteronormativity.

Figure 6.17: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.

Figure 6.18 expresses a similar sentiment, as it reproduces heteronormativity while simultaneously constructing homosexuality as the perverted other. The meme contrasts Bill Clinton’s heterosexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky with Spacey’s sexual assault of men and boys. The cigar refers to the details given by Lewinsky during the 1998 Grand Jury hearing, where she detailed how Clinton had inserted a cigar into her vagina (Starr, 1998). Posing together for a photograph, Clinton and Spacey appear to be friendly – a sentiment the meme comments on in suggesting that the two of them have shared stories about sexual conquests. The image text imagines that Clinton might have made a joke about the difference between his heterosexual sex and Spacey’s homosexual sexual assaults. The meme thus suggests that rather than using the cigar as a sexual prop in a “clean”

heterosexual way, Spacey, embodying homosexual deviant sex, would have used the cigar with an anal focus – again positioning homosexual sex as always anal sex and de-facto disgusting.

Figure 6.18: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 9-11-2017.

The construction of the gay man as a sexual deviant is taken to another level in Figure 6.19, which draws a parallel between the homosexual man and the rapist. This meme deploys the image macro Philosoraptor (which I discussed in Chapter 5). The meme makes the claim that a lot of people being accused of rape are gay and that this must mean that there is a correlation between being gay and raping people. Using Kevin Spacey as one of the tags in the meme again characterises homosexuality as male homosexuality. Thus, the homosexual man is discursively constructed as the ultimate sexual deviant: the perpetrator of sexual assault. This notion is taken one step further in the discursive construction of the homosexual man as a de facto paedophile – a point I develop further in the section below on paedophilia

Figure 6.19: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.

Mocking Spacey's coming out

As discussed in Chapter 3, critics accused Spacey of using his coming out as a distraction from the accusations against him. The memes that comment on his coming out largely mirror this sentiment. One of the most repeated memes in my raw data set (before it was cleaned for duplicates) is a variation of the meme seen in Figure 6.20. The meme suggests that "The Kevin Spacey Defence" means coming out as gay in order to "distract the crowds" from the paedophilia accusations. This, the meme suggests, is an example of the "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome."-strategy as portrayed in the Internet meme by the same name. The "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome"-meme is an image macro series featuring an image of writer and adventurer Bear Grylls from the reality series *Man vs Wild* (2006-2011) pointing at the viewer in a similar way that Spacey does in Figure 6.20. The caption "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome." is known as a US Marine Corps mantra on Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/improvise-adapt-overcome)[20] and functions in this image macro to illustrate how to overcome everyday obstacles and adapt strategies when an initial plan fails. The image of Spacey here, which features him on stage at the 2017 Britannia Awards in Los Angeles, suggests that he has overcome the sexual assault allegations by coming out as gay in order to distract the

[20] Know Your Meme claims that "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome." is a "common Marine Corps mantra". This information, however, is taken from a Wikipedia page which references the website 4mermarine.com which claims to be an "Unofficial Unabridged Dictionary for Marines" (Knight, n.d.). The origin of this saying is thus not confirmed as a US Marine Corps mantra but that does not change the usage of the meme and the spread and understanding of the words.

public. The meme is structured around the second person narrative used in a general sense, to suggest that the speaker of the meme both includes themselves and assumes that the viewer of the meme will relate to the sentiment. The speaker and the viewer are thus both considered complicit in Spacey's assaults – similarly to how the viewer is constructed as complicit in memes referring to *House of Cards* and Underwood as discussed above.

Figure 6.20: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 31-10-2017.

A number of memes utilise *Magic Cards* to illustrate how Spacey's coming out functions as a trump card, which will clear him of all accusations. *Magic Cards* (officially known as *Magic: The Gathering*), as exemplified in Figure 6.21, is a collectible card game created by Richard Garfield and released in 1993 by Wizards of the Coast (Lucking-Reiley, 2016; "Wizards of the coast," n.d.). Drawing on fantasy role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, *Magic Cards* is a battle between wizards represented by different types of cards. The card in Figure 6.21 is a spell card with which the player can cast a spell in order to beat their opponent. The meme is thus a Spell card which players can use "When you are accused of child molesting". Emphasized by the title of the card and the headline, the meme suggests that Spacey played "the gay card" when responding to the accusations against him – thus deflecting the accusations and avoiding any responsibility.

Figure 6.21: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 06-11-2017.

Another variation of memes commenting on Spacey's coming out suggest that coming out can be an excuse for a number of criminal and otherwise malevolent acts. One example of this is Figure 6.22, which was circulated widely on all three platforms. It features an image of a police officer talking to the driver of a car he has stopped for ignoring a stop sign. Framing the situation as "Kevin Spacey logic", the meme muses that Spacey's response to such a situation would simply be "I'm gay". The Kevin Spacey logic would thus mean that he assumes he can get out of any kind of situation by coming out as gay.

Figure 6.22: Kevin Spacey data set from Imgur. 01-11-2017.

This logic is applied to a long line of other memes where perpetrators of mass shootings and terrorist attacks come out as gay in response to charges against them.

This includes the perpetrator of the Sutherland Springs church shooting in 2017, the driver in the New York City truck attack in 2017 and the shooter behind the 2011 Norway attacks. The most used example of this type of meme is one where Adolf Hitler responds to allegations against him in relation to World War Two and the Holocaust, as exemplified in Figure 6.23. This meme features an image of Hitler reclining in an idyllic landscape while laughing with a male companion. The absurd comparison between Spacey and Hitler takes Spacey's excuse to the extreme, by imagining that being gay could excuse genocide. This meme, as well as the previous three memes, ridicule Spacey for attempting to distract from the accusations against him and for using his sexuality as an explanation and an excuse for his actions. The comparison to Hitler seems to be used to emphasise the absurdity of Spacey's coming out, rather than stating that Spacey is similar to Hitler or as bad as Hitler. In fact, though ridiculing Spacey, the tags in Figure 6.23 read "Kevin Spacey did nothing wrong", suggesting support for Spacey despite his actions – though this could also be read as ironic.

Figure 6.23: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 03-11-2017.

Figures 6.20 to 6.23 ridicule Spacey's choice to come out in the same tweet as he addressed Rapp's accusations of attempted sexual assault. The focus of the ridicule is on the ill-timed manner of this, rather than his alleged abuse. Taken together with the celebration of his iconic roles above, the characterisation of Spacey is one of admiration for immorality and disregard of customs. This is complicated in the characterisation of him as a homosexual man, which primarily paints him as a sexual deviant. The portrayal of Spacey is thus defined primarily by ambivalence.

This is complicated further in the next section which addresses the characterisation of Spacey as a paedophile.

The discursive construction of the homosexual man as a potential paedophile

Spacey is to a large extent characterised as a paedophile in the memes. Half of the memes in the Spacey data set imply that he is sexually attracted to children, either by using the word "paedophile" specifically, or through the use of similar words or imagery. While Spacey had been accused of sexually assaulting and harassing adults as well as children ("'I woke up with Kevin Spacey lying on me,'" 2017; Jung, 2017; Rannard & Hutton, 2017; A. Romano, 2018; Vary, Cheng, & Levy, 2017), the focus is widely on child victims rather than adult victims – as discussed in the previous chapter. Most of Spacey's victims were young men in their 20s, but this is not how his victims are represented in the data set. Some memes thus refer to his victims and his sexual interests as "teenage boys", and often as "14-year-old boys", which refers specifically to Anthony Rapp. However, a large proportion of the memes portray children as toddlers and babies rather than teenagers – presumably as an attempt to create a shock-effect and gain popularity in the online communities by uploading the most extreme memes with biggest potential for offence.

Figure 6.24 is an example of this. The meme is a version of the "The girl you like" meme, which in this case has been changed to "boy" in order to emphasize Spacey's homosexuality. The "The girl you like" meme usually features four or six photo frames, the first one always featuring an image of "the girl you like" and the last one an image of "you". The other two or four frames feature images of, for example, "her father", "her ex", "her brother", "her first love", and "her crush". The meme often functions to position "you" as the odd one out who is unlikely to win the affection of "the girl you like". The "The girl you like" meme exemplifies how platforms, where this meme is shared, function as male heteronormative discursive spaces, where the assumed identities of users are male and heterosexual. The meme in Figure 6.24, however, reverses the heteronormative meme to position Spacey's desire towards a boy rather than a girl. The boy in this instance is a small toddler and the other two frames are images of his mother and father. The youth of the boy is emphasized by the young age of his parents (the mother is most likely actress Kiera Knightley, the father I am not able to recognise) who are significantly younger than Spacey. Thus, the age difference between Spacey and his victims (who were all under the age of 30 even when Spacey was in his 40s and 50s) is emphasised and the

child victim is made significantly younger for absurd comedic effect. The tags "ticket to hell" could have a double meaning, on one hand suggesting that Spacey's sexual assault of a child could be his ticket to hell. On the other hand, it could be the OP's acknowledgment that joking about child sexual abuse and deliberately portraying Spacey's victim as a young toddler is potentially offensive, overstepping some sort of line of morality, which in turn would be the OP's ticket to hell.

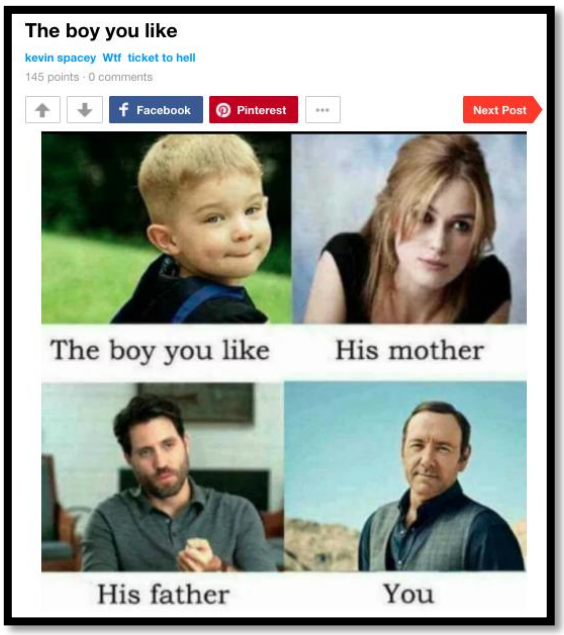


Figure 6.24: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 14-11-2017.

Some memes feature footage of Spacey in the company of children, as if to prove Spacey's sexual assault and as if to claim that the public should have been aware. A common way to express this is by attaching an image of Spacey and children with a sexually suggestive text. An example of this is Figure 6.25, which shows a photograph of Spacey posing with a group of children at a visit to a children's health clinic in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2016 (Rosen, 2016). This meme and variations thereof were one of the most reoccurring memes in my data set before it was cleaned for duplicates. This particular version of the meme has the logo of the website Brazzers photoshopped onto the image. Brazzers.com is a porn website with a heterosexual male focus. It does not include gay sex (except for a lesbian category, which seems to cater more to male heterosexual voyeuristic pleasure than to lesbian viewers) and the website makes a point of the fact that all porn actors and models on the websites are above the age of 18. The inclusion of the Brazzers logo does thus not allude to neither homosexual nor child pornography. Rather, the simple addition of a porn site logo onto an image with Spacey and a group of children is sufficient

for the viewer to contextualise Spacey with children as an always sexual encounter. Porn is thus another way to signal homosocial belonging by pointing to the manhood act of masturbation.

Figure 6.25: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

In some memes, the narrator is positioned as the victim of sexual violence. In Figure 6.26 the narrator draws three people together musing that they touched him as a child. Kevin Spacey is in this meme positioned with two other figures associated with child sexual abuse: Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Hart, and singer Michael Jackson. At the time of writing, the documentary *Leaving Neverland* (2019) has recently been aired in which Wade Robson and James Safechuck talk about years of sexual abuse by Michael Jackson during their childhood (Reed, 2019). The meme, however, being produced in 2017, demonstrates how Jackson was also at that point associated with child sexual abuse. Rumours started emerging about this in the early 1990s and two previous cases were brought against him in 1993, where the charges were dropped, and in 2005, where he was acquitted (Brockell, 2019; "Jackson cleared of child molestation," 2005; McDonnel-Parry, 2019). Jackson was thus associated with child sexual abuse and the meme draws on this in a construction of him as the figure of the paedophile.

Figure 6.26: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 21-11-2017.

Dennis Hart, however, has not been accused of child sexual abuse and does not personify the paedophile figure the same way as Michael Jackson. There is, however, an association of Hart with child sexual abuse in a number of ways. Hart's predecessor as Archbishop of Melbourne was George Pell, who has been convicted of multiple charges of child sexual abuse (Davey, 2019). Furthermore, in 2017, when a law change was suggested requiring Australian institutions to report child sexual abuse, Hart stated that he would rather go to jail than break the sacramental seal, should someone report child sexual abuse during confession (Davey, 2017). Hart is thus associated with child sexual abuse due to his affiliation with another offender but also just as much due to his association with the Catholic church. The meme implies that simply being affiliated with the Catholic church is enough to be deemed suspicious by association and considered a potential paedophile. This is illustrated in another meme in which Pope Francis says to Kevin Spacey: "The Church is proud of you son". Child sexual abuse thus sticks to representatives of the Catholic Church, who are constructed as always potential paedophiles. Comparing Spacey to two people who are associated with child sexual abuse thus creates an alignment which manifests Spacey as a paedophile figure. Though the narrator of the meme positions themselves as the victim of sexual abuse in the text "Things that touched me when I was a child", they are not the butt of the joke. Rather, the potential perpetrators become the butt of the joke – further emphasised by the dehumanisation of them by calling them "things".

A number of memes reference the infamous Pedobear meme. Pedobear originally emerged from the Japanese textboard 2Channel, but became an Internet phenomenon due to later spread and renaming on 4chan's notorious b/board ("Know Your Meme, Pedobear," n.d.). Pedobear is a cartoon image of a bear, as can be seen

in Figure 6.27, which originally was used on 4chan to signal illegal pornographic content on the platform (Ibid.). However, Pedobear now symbolises paedophilia on the Internet and the spread functions to recontextualise images as a way of mocking paedophiles and making paedophilia jokes. The meme in figure 6.27 has combined Pedobear with a racialised pun suggesting "too young" could sound like a Chinese name. The image of Pedobear serves to signal paedophilia and underlines the double meaning of the name: if too young is "just a name" this would indicate that there is no such thing as a person who is too young to be an object of sexual desire. Pedobear thus functions as a tongue-in-cheek stamp of approval for child sexual abuse and serves to trivialise child sexual abuse. The tags "Kevin Spacey did nothing wrong" unequivocally positions the meme as supportive of Spacey and underlines how the meme is positioned as provocative and dark humour about child sexual abuse in general, rather than as a means to ridicule Spacey. The headline "I'm gay" could be read in two ways: either as a genuine declaration of sexual identity positioning the OP as a gay ally to the otherwise heteronormative manosphere (Ging, 2017), or as an ironic statement which only works because of the assumption that heterosexuality is always the norm. I find the latter reading the most likely considering that the revealing of offline identity is faux pas in these online spaces and considering how many layers of ionic humour the posts are often drenched in.

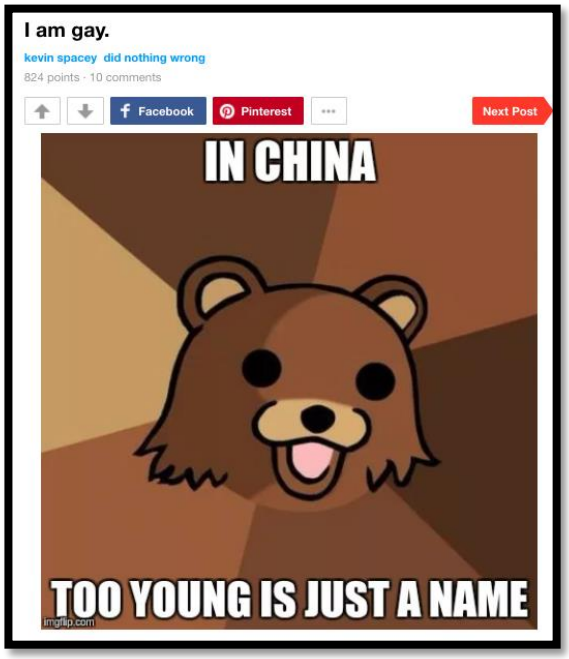


Figure 6.27: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

Though memes about Spacey generally poke fun at him and celebrate his acting performances rather than celebrate his abuse, they do not necessarily condemn

his actions. Thus, child sexual abuse is not to a large extent characterised as a condemnable offence. Rather, the memes largely position paedophilia as the dark humour joke par excellence: the darker the humour, the more likely the chance is for upvotes seems to be the logic at work. The lack of condemnation of child sexual abuse is taken to the extreme in a number of memes where the narrator is positioned as the potential perpetrator of sexual assault – such in Figures 6.28 and 6.29.

Figure 6.28 utilises the "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome." image macro, as discussed in connection with Figure 6.20 above. The meme in Figure 6.28 features an image of the aforementioned Bear Grylls, as he points at the viewer as if convincing the viewer that they are able to improvise, adapt and overcome whatever obstacle is in front of them. Similar to the meme in Figure 6.27, this meme seems to have been constructed and spread before the Kevin Spacey story broke, as the only mention of Spacey is in the tags and the headline and not in the meme itself.[21] This meme has thus been recontextualised to suggest that Kevin Spacy approves of child sexual abuse. The image text tells the story of a (presumably male) narrator, who pays a visit to his girlfriend's house to have sex with her. When it turns out that the girlfriend is not home, the narrator improvises and adapts his strategy to sexually assault her younger brother instead. The narrator overcomes the obstacle of having to abstain from having sex. Sex is framed as a necessity that was going to happen whether or not an appropriate partner was available and consenting, thus reproducing notions of male sexual entitlement. Furthermore, the use of the slang term "smash" here, though often used as a synonym to "having sex" ("Urban Dictionary, Smash," n.d.) has a distinctively violent nature emphasising the notion of forceful sex. The fact that the focus changes from (presumably) male heterosexual desire directed at a girl, to male homosexual desire directed at a boy, lets the meme comment on Spacey's coming out as gay. The use of the general "you" in the image text suggests that this could both be the narrator's personal experience, but also an assumption that this is a recognisable sentiment for users of the platform. Furthermore, the meme positions sexuality as fluid when the male subject becomes desperate enough and male sexual desire thus trumps sexual preference.

[21] There is no obvious explanation of the tag "Madeleine McCann" which I take to either mean that the tag can be characterised as a random tag or the fact that it is a (presumed) abduction of a child thus suggesting a comparison in terms of potential child sexual abuse.

Figure 6.28: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 19-12-2017.

In Figure 6.29 the narrator is similarly positioned as the potential perpetrator of sexual assault. The meme consists of a screenshot from Amazon.co.uk, conveying the content of a wish list – in this context constructed as a Christmas wish list. The two items are a tub of Vaseline and a Kevin Spacey mask. Combined, this suggests that the narrator would take on the persona of the perpetrator of sexual assault by wearing the Kevin Spacey mask. The Vaseline in this context symbolises anal sex – again constructing homosexual sex as always anal sex. The meme does not necessarily suggest child sexual abuse – the focus is on Spacey as a homosexual. The fact that the meme was published on the 1st of December and the headline "Christmas is a magic day" could however allow for a reading of the meme in which the Spacey mask is a stand-in for the Santa Claus costume and thus a way to lure in small children. The construction of the narrator of memes as a potential perpetrator of sexual assault in the memes discussed here functions to humorously trivialise and, to an extent, normalise sexual violence.

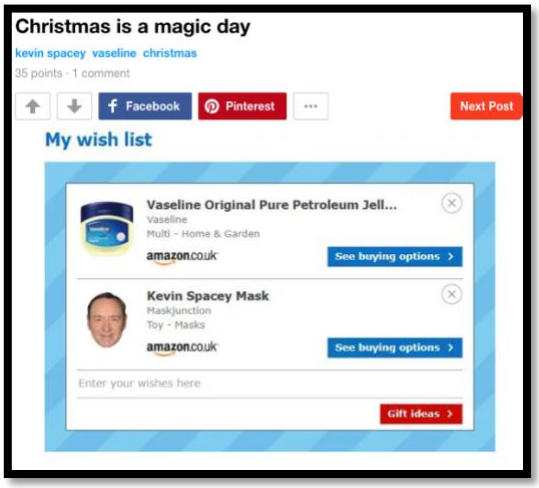


Figure 6.29: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 01-12-2017.

The figure of the paedophile is often constructed as the monstrous-other par excellence (Boyle, 2018; L. Kelly, 1996), which problematically serves to distract from the structures in place that enable men to sexually assault women and children in the first place. As Jenny Kitzinger argues:

> The concept of the 'paedophile' […] locates dangerousness in a few aberrant individuals who can be metaphorically (if not literally) excluded from society and it focuses attention on stranger danger in ways which ignore the scale and nature of sexual violence throughout society and, especially, within families."(Kitzinger, 1999, p. 207).

Constructing the paedophile as a an abnormality and a monstrous other, who exists separate to society, thus limits political solutions to child sexual abuse and distracts from critically addressing the social construction of masculinity and male sexuality (L. Kelly, 1996). In my data set the paedophile embodies the notion of the stranger danger – as someone who lurks in the shadows outside of the community and the family.

This is exemplified in Figure 6.30, where an image of a van is positioned as a tool for child molesters to attract their victims. The van as a symbol of sexual assault has become part of popular and online humour, where it is known as a 'rape van' ("Urban Dictionary, Rape van," n.d.). The 'rape van' is characterised by no windows or blacked out windows and it is implied that the rapist drives around seeking out victims, who he lures into the van where they are sexually assaulted. The van in Figure 6.30 is specifically implied to attract children, luring them in with free candy. The van, which is in poor condition, driving around after dark and with a hand-written promise of free candy, is positioned as suspicious and the notion of the

paedophile as a stranger lurking around after dark is reproduced. The notion of candy as the means for the paedophile to attract children that do not know him is repeated in the headline which sexualises the lollipop. Notably, the only mention of Kevin Spacey is in the tags, which suggest that this meme might have existed prior to the story of Spacey's sexual assaults and harassment. This is not unique to this specific meme, but rather suggests that memes about child sexual abuse is a reoccurring and popular theme on the three social media platforms. Furthermore, this meme is constructed in traditional joke format with a question and a punch line. Though child molesters seem to be the butt of the joke here (there is only one good thing about them), the joke is constructed at the expense of victims of child sexual abuse.

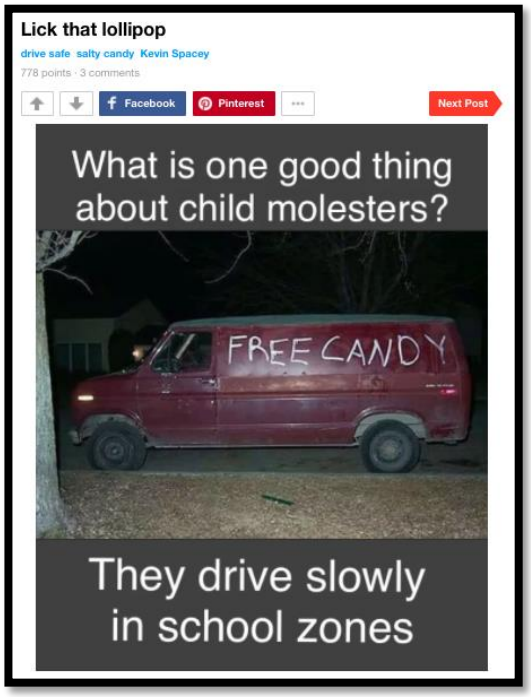


Figure 6.30: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 19-11-2017.

The memes in my data set point to a linking of male homosexuality with paedophilia. As discussed in the previous section, male homosexuality is portrayed as perverted, deviating and often as always potentially threatening. The connection between homosexuality and child sexual abuse was instigated by Spacey, when he addressed Rapp's allegations with his coming out announcement. This connection is further reproduced in many of the memes discussing child sexual abuse. The notion that the homosexual man is always a potential perpetrator of child sexual abuse has been historically and culturally constructed and reproduced (Weeks, 1985).

This can also be explained through Sara Ahmed's writing on the slide of metonymy (Ahmed, 2004). When the words gay and paedophile (or variations

thereof) are used repeatedly throughout hundreds of memes in my data set, they stick together and "constitute their coincidence as more than just temporal" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 76). In other words, the slide of metonymy sticks the words homosexual and paedophile together as an "implicit argument about the causal relations between the two" (Ibid.). Significantly, words and bodies are not inherently disgusting. Rather, the historicity of a word as disgusting invokes the stickiness of disgust to certain words and bodies. Thus, the history of the homosexual, as outlined by Foucault (1978), as a perverted other, means that disgust historically has stuck to that word and those bodies that come into contact with the word. As Ahmed claims: "Anything which has had contact with disgusting things itself becomes disgusting" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 76). If Spacey is marked as a paedophile and this word is sticky with disgust, disgust will then spill into other words associated with Spacey such as 'homosexual'. Disgust thus works to stick both "paedophile" and "homosexual" to Spacey and the metonymic slide between the words works to associate the two words with each other, so that they simultaneously constitute each other as disgusting. In other words, homosexual becomes synonymous with paedophile.

Figures 6.31 and 6.32 exemplify the discursive connection between the homosexual man and the paedophile. Figure 6.31 uses the promotional image for season 1 of *House of Cards*, in which Spacey as Frank Underwood sits in Abraham Lincoln's seat of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. An image of a small boy has been photoshopped into the promotional image in a way to suggest that the boy is performing oral sex on Spacey. The image text is phrased as a quote by Spacey referencing, his coming out as gay as a response to the sexual assault allegations against him. Though the sentence is constructed to separate the two words, the metonymic slide between paedophile and gay sticks the words together, creating similarity rather than contrast. This is emphasised by the child performing oral sex on Spacey and the meme thus questions Spacey's statement.

Figure 6.31: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

Figure 6.32 directly draws a link between homosexuality and child sexual abuse, stating that the only difference between "gay Kevin Spacey" and "pedo Kevin Spacey" is "about three beers". This is a reference to the part of Spacey's response to Rapp's allegations which he refers to as "deeply inappropriate drunken behaviour". The meme is set up in traditional joke format, consisting of a question and a punch line. Though the butt of the joke seems to be Spacey and his response to Rapp's allegations, the expression of slight amusement on Spacey's face seems to suggest otherwise. Either it could be read as if Spacey told the joke himself – thus accompanied by a slight grin. Or it could be read as if Spacey is well aware of the absurdity of his statement and that he gets the last laugh. It could thus be suggested that the butt of the joke – again – is Anthony Rapp and thus the victims of sexual violence rather than the perpetrators.

Figure 6.32: Kevin Spacey data set from Reddit. 30-10-2017.

The memes about Kevin Spacey reproduce notions of the paedophile as a monstrous other, who lurks in the shadows and exists outside of society, local communities and families. The conflation of paedophilia with homosexuality, as instigated by Spacey's "excuse" to Rapp, is reproduced by memes drawing on histories of the homosexual man as a deviant and perverted other and therefore always potentially sexually threatening. The metonymic slide between the two words is thus exemplified in the hundreds of memes that comment on homosexuality and paedophilia in connection with each other. The paedophile is constructed as always homosexual and the homosexual is constructed as always potentially a paedophile. Significantly, though Spacey is ridiculed for drawing the connection between the allegations against him and him being homosexual, child sexual abuse is not condemned in the memes. Rather, it is used as a means to create the darkest and most potentially offensive memes to generate notoriety for the OPs. Though Spacey and paedophiles sometimes – far from always – might be the butt of the joke, the joke is usually at the expense of the victims who again are deprived from having a voice. Victims of sexual violence are not assumed to be part of the 9gag, Reddit and Imgur communities. Finally, despite the ridicule of Spacey's coming out and the othering of him due to his sexuality, Spacey is also celebrated for his acting performances which are characterised as iconic. Thus, the ambivalence runs through the data set in which fans are positioned as the real victims of #MeToo because their idol has fallen from grace.

Failed masculinity and male sexual entitlement: Louis C.K. as an anti-hero

The Internet memes about Louis C.K. primarily portray him in character, either on stage or on the screen, and the lines between private and public are blurred in a similar way to the memes about Spacey. C.K.'s career as a comedian spans over more than 30 years and includes film making and writing for other comedians (including *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (1993-1994), *Late Show with David Letterman* (1995) and short-lived comedy shows such as *The Dana Carvey Show* (1996)). He gained fame with his stand-up comedy shows through the 2000s and 2010s and with his tv-show *Louie* (2010-2015) which he stars in, writes and directs.

C.K. has been described as a feminist ally for helping young female comedians advance their careers and for discussing gendered relations on stage

(Carroll, 2016; Heritage, 2017; Jeffries, 2019). His sexual harassment of female comedians and colleagues, however, has been described as an open secret (Redden, 2017). Similar to Weinstein and Spacey he too had a network of people around him who either protected him or who turned a blind eye to his actions (including prominent comedians such as John Stewart and Sarah Silverman) (H. Freeman, 2018b; Redden, 2017). As I discussed in Chapter 3, rumours about his sexual harassment existed in the industry for years before the 2017 *New York Times* article and were discussed in several interviews with and articles about C.K. (Czajkowski, 2016).

The way C.K. presents himself in both his stand-up comedy and in *Louie* is central to how he is portrayed in the memes. The nature of stand-up comedy means that comedians tend to use themselves and their own experiences as the material for their comedy. C.K. is no different in this respect, as his style of comedy is self-referential and self-centred – similar to his character in *Louie,* whose life seems to be based on his own life, including details such as him being a divorced New York-based comedian with two daughters. Both *Louie* and his stand-up routines draw on C.K. presenting as and commenting on his middle-aged, overweight and balding appearance. The memes celebrate his imperfect body image as, for example, in Figure 6.33. The meme portrays C.K. during a stand-up show exposing his stomach flesh, which spills over the top of his trousers. As discussed above in connection with Weinstein, feminist research on fatness demonstrates how male fatness is culturally constructed as either asexual or monstrous. C.K. self-positions his body as always in need of sex but as failing to find female sex partners. He thus embodies the notion of the fat body as a failure of masculinity (Harker, 2016). There is a significant difference between the portrayal of Weinstein and C.K. though. While Weinstein is compared to monstrous figures such as Jabba the Hutt and the Great Goblin, C.K. is not portrayed as monstrous. To some extent, this can be explained by the fact that Weinstein's body is significantly larger than C.K.'s. But more importantly, the shame that sticks to Weinstein's body slides over C.K.'s precisely because he embraces this perceived imperfection and uses it to his advantage for comic effect. As the meme in Figure 6.33 points out, because C.K. does not care – whether about his imperfect body or about the sexual harassment allegations against him – he manifests his position as an idol for failed masculinity and as an anti-hero. By claiming not to care, he reclaims agency and becomes immune to potential hurtful rejections from women.

Figure 6.33: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.

C.K.' comedy is, on one hand, self-deprecating, as he is sharing embarrassing stories about his life. On the other hand, he makes sharp comments on the condition of contemporary American life, which has made him somewhat of a 'liberal' hero in the US (Sturges, 2019). His comedy has often been considered subversive, characterised as "poking fun at the inequalities of American society, while simultaneously acknowledging the ways they benefited him." (Jeffries, 2019). C.K.'s comedy is characterised by a strong use of profanity, as well as an aim to provoke and push boundaries. The themes he takes up are controversial to the point where he has been celebrated for "smashing taboos" and saying the unsayable (Carroll, 2016). Themes include religion, race and child sexual abuse. As he noted in a controversial come-back show in 2018: "Yes that was a joke about fucking a child. Which, by the way, I know fucking children is wrong. Joking about it is not, obviously." (Durkin, 2018). He has made several rape jokes during his career including: "I'm not condoning rape. Unless you have a reason. Like if you want to fuck somebody and they won't let you – in which case what other option do you have?" (C.K., 2007). C.K. has continuously claimed his right to joke about any subject imaginable in an effort to break taboos. This attitude is what shapes his comedy as well as the Internet memes about him.

Masturbation, homosociality and male sexual entitlement

One theme which runs through his comedy more than anything else is sex and, in particular, masturbation. In most of his stand-up shows (particularly the earlier ones) he would at some point make a joke about masturbation – primarily about himself masturbating – and often accompanied by hand gestures for emphasis. He discusses how masturbation to him seems like a compulsory act which, he stresses that he takes no pride in: "Sometimes you find ecstasy, but it's followed by the deepest self-

hate and depression you've ever felt. It's an amazing drop from way up here this like, 'Aw, yeah, aw … What the fuck is wrong with me, goddammit!"(C.K., 2005). In another show he describes his thoughts as perverted: "Some things I'm sick of, like the constant, perverted, sexual thoughts. I'm so tired of those … It makes me into an idiot." (C.K., 2011). In another bit he confesses: "I jerk off way too much and it upsets me and I don't know why." (C.K., 2008). Though highly self-referential, many of the masturbation jokes are still framed as something he does because he is a man – something that is common for all men. Masturbation is constructed as a compulsory act for men whereas women are constructed as being in control of their sexual actions and as the gate keepers of heterosexual sex. This representation of sex thus echoes the construction of the male sexual drive as uncontrollable (Gavey, 2019), as discussed in Chapter 2.

His stories about masturbation are often expressed in correlation with his own sexual ineptitude and assumption that women will not find him attractive. In the light of the allegations against him, the bits about masturbation in his comedy seems to be framed in a way as to seek approval, as well as painting the women as responsible – had more women engaged in sexual relations with him, he might not have had the need to give himself release to the same extent. He thus becomes an anti-hero for men who struggle with self-esteem, who fail to live up to notions of hegemonic masculinity and who find themselves rejected by the women they are interested in. The memes about C.K. thus echoes sentiments from the so-called manosphere online.

What my data set illustrates is how the users of the social media platforms form homosocial bonds through their shared need to masturbate, as this is presented as their only means of sexual release, since they are unsuccessful in securing female sex partners. C.K.'s outspoken relationship with masturbation is thus celebrated by the manosphere community. An example of this is Figure 6.34, which is a scene from *Louie* where C.K.'s character is sat on the toilet casually checking his laptop while smoking a cigarette. The image illustrates a moment of solitude where C.K. can do as he pleases without any witnesses or any judgement. Of course, as this is a scene from the show, he is sharing this private moment with the world thus inviting the audience to witness his worst sides – which is largely the theme of the show. The headline suggests that this is C.K.'s attitude to the current allegations and debate about him: he is simply "here to read comments and masturbate". In other words, he might read the comments currently discussing his actions, but they have no effect on

him as he carries on with his life as usual – illustrated by the practice of masturbation. The meme could also function on a meta level, illustrating the OP's reactions to scrolling through Imgur looking at memes and reading comments about C.K. Masturbation is thus characterised as a private and intimate activity, but one which functions as a means of signalling homosociality in these online communities.

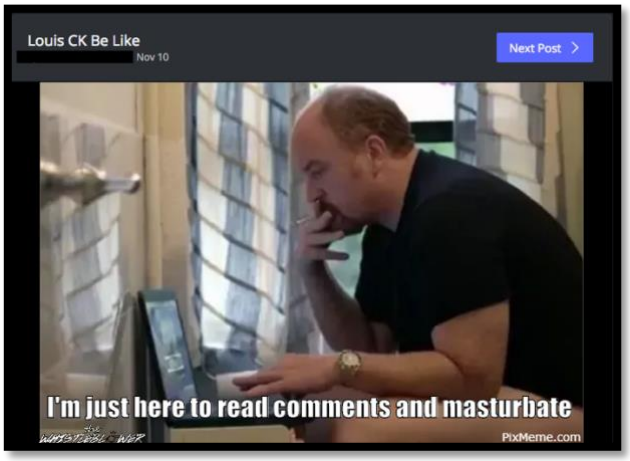


Figure 6.34: Louis C.K. data set from Imgur. 10-11-2017.

The sexual harassment allegations against C.K. are presented as obvious and unsurprising, as he hinted at this behaviour in his stand-up shows and in *Louie*. His victims should have known better, considering how he repeatedly hinted to his sexual compulsive behaviour during performances. Figure 6.35 is one such meme that compares his on-screen persona to his off-screen persona. The meme consists of five images which have been stacked on top of each other, in order to create a narrative and suggest continuity – so-called stacked stills.[22] The first three images are stills from episode 8 of the second season of *Louie*. The main character, Louie, is invited on to a debate on the morality of masturbation on the Fox News program, *Red Eye w/Greg Gutfeld*. The woman in the stills, Ellen Farber (Liz Holtan), represents the group Christians Against Masturbation and Louie is invited onto the program because he was the only person they could find who was willing to defend masturbation. The three stills capture the final part of the debate, where Louie explains why masturbation is important to him and he finishes by telling the chaste Farber that he is going to think about her later while masturbating. This statement is contrasted to the fourth image, which is a news story covering the sexual harassment allegations against C.K., focusing on how he masturbated in front of women without their consent.

[22] See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the variety of different types of memes.

Figure 6.35: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017.[23]

[23] Due to the fact that this meme is a composite meme consisting of 5 images stacked on top of each other the entire meme is very long. In order to take a screen shot of the entire meme I had to zoom out to such an extent which makes it impossible to read when inserted into a document. Since the meme is saved as a screenshot and not an image file (it is not possible to save meme as image files from 9gag) it is not possible to enlarge the meme in a proper quality that does not blur the meme. Consequently, I have taken a screen shot of each component of the meme and stacked them on top of each other in the original form.

This positioning of the images suggests a continued narrative, where C.K.'s threatening to think about a woman while masturbating leads to him masturbating in front of several women without their consent. The final image underlines this point. This image macro is known as "That escalated quickly"[24], which features an image of the character Ron Burgundy (Will Farrell) from *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), along with a quote from the film uttered by Burgundy: "well that escalated quickly" ("Know Your Meme, That Escalated Quickly," n.d.). In Figure 6.35 the word "escalated" has been replaced with "ejaculated" for emphasis of the theme of masturbation, as well as effectively sexualising Faber/Holtan in a manner to suggest that thinking of her while masturbating would lead to a quick ejaculation. The headline positions the OP as a compulsive masturbator similar to C.K., thus signalling allegiance and homosociality.

Male sexual entitlement is an ongoing theme in memes that comment on C.K.'s failure to attract women and that celebrate masturbation. An example of this is Figure 6.36, which is a still from the film *Mallrats* (1995). The still features a scene from the film where one of the main characters, Brodie (Jason Lee), is competing in a dating show against Gill (Brian O'Halloran). During the dating show, Brodie proceeds to tell a long story about how his cousin once publicly masturbated on a plane, as he assumed the plane was going down and he was about to die. After the end of the long elaborate story, where the plane lands safely, Gill's only reaction is "Well did he cum or what?"(K. Smith, 1995) thus positioning male ejaculation as the most important part of the story. The headline recontextualises the meme to function as a comment on the allegations against C.K., suggesting that the most important issue in connection with C.K.'s sexual harassment is whether he managed to ejaculate while masturbating in front of a number of women. Himpathy (Manne, 2018a) runs through the discourse, prioritising male ejaculation over women's safety. This is an example of male sexual entitlement: nothing is more important than male ejaculation and men are entitled to this. The experiences of the victims are thus disregarded as less important. This is emphasised in the title, where C.K.'s sexual harassment is framed as "shenanigans".

[24] Though the original quote is "Boy, that escalated quickly" over time the use of "well" has taken over from "boy".

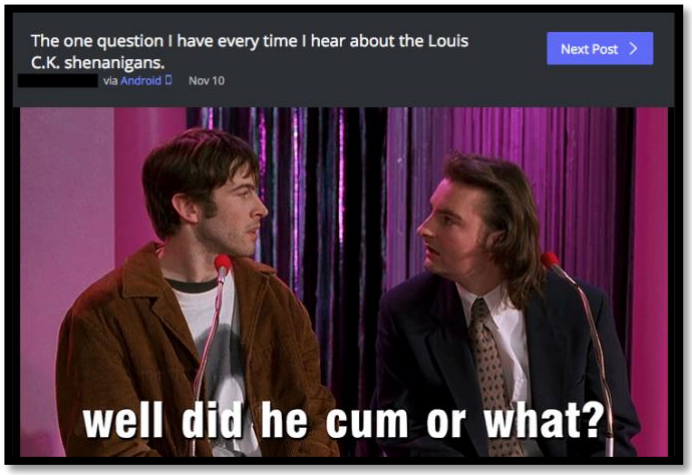


Figure 6.36: Louis C.K. data set from Imgur. 10-11-2017.

Figure 6.37 shows an image from C.K.'s stand-up show *Oh My God* (2013), where he does his "Of course, but maybe" routine, as discussed in Chapter 5. In this meme C.K. is presented as discussing his inner battle, where he knows it is wrong to "jerk off in front of the ladies". The good thoughts represent the moral and ethical side of the brain. The bad thoughts in this case are not fully developed. Rather, the viewer is invited to fill in the blanks knowing exactly what C.K. has been accused of doing. The juxtaposition between the good thoughts and the bad thoughts suggests that C.K. was able to come up with an argument as to why it would be acceptable for him to masturbate in front of women without their consent. Similarly, the nature of the meme means that it is only fully decipherable for fans who have watched the stand-up show. Creating and sharing such a meme thus indicates fandom of C.K. and functions as a humorous practice of inclusion and exclusion between those in the know and those who will not get the joke.

Figure 6.37: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

Though the memes broadly express sympathy and identification with C.K., some memes express disbelief and disappointment with his alleged sexual

harassment. In Figure 6.38, the OP shares his reaction to the allegations against C.K. – referred to as a "scandal", thus ignoring the abuse. The meme expresses disappointment with C.K. through the meme "You were the chosen one!". This meme references a scene from *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005) in which Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) expresses despair with the actions of his former apprentice Anakin Skywalker, who has turned against his former master and led a genocide against the Jedi. In the scene Kenobi cries out: "You were the chosen one! It was said that you would destroy the Sith, not join them. You were to bring balance to the Force, not leave it in darkness." The meme is used to express disappointment with someone who was at one point considered promising ("Know Your Meme, You were the chosen one!," n.d.). In Figure 6.38 the narrator expresses disappointment that C.K. has now become one of the "creeps" – in other words, one in a long line of men accused of perpetrating sexual assault or harassment. The meme highlights how C.K. was considered a feminist ally and a liberal hero, who highlighted inequalities in the American society – here symbolised as "the chosen one". However, after his fall from grace he is positioned as having joined "the dark side" of the creeps who mistreat women. Though the meme in no way doubts the allegations against him and creates distance by othering him as a creep, the real victims here are his fans. The desperation on Kenobi's face mirrors the desperation and disappointment of the fans who idealised and identified with C.K. The strong affective engagement is turned to sadness for the fans who have been let down by their hero.

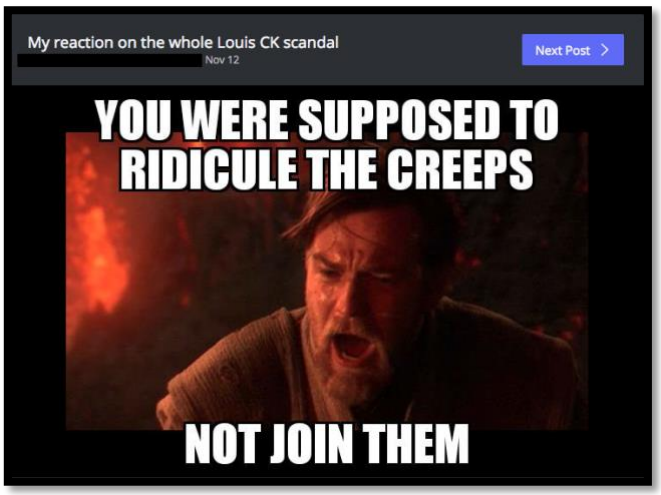


Figure 6.38: Louis C.K. data set from Imgur. 12-11-2017.

This sentiment is shared across memes about C.K. and Spacey, but is significantly different in memes about Weinstein. In Figure 6.39 a comparison is

drawn between Spacey and C.K through the use of the meme "Confession Bear". The meme features an image of a bear resting its paws on a log. The image macros are captioned with confessions about controversial opinions and taboo behaviour, which have otherwise been kept secret ("Know Your Meme, Confession Bear," n.d.). In Figure 6.39 the narrator confesses to finding the work of Spacey and C.K. more important than the experiences of their victims. In fact, the narrator admits to not caring about "all the sexual assaults", because he wants to see C.K.'s 2018 special (presumably the planned Netflix special which was cancelled) and Spacey in the next season of *House of Cards*. The grievance is thus with the fact that the allegations against the two have disrupted the culture consumption for the fans. The use of the confession bear macro contextualises the sentiment in the meme as "bad thoughts" – as if referencing C.K.'s stand-up routine "Of course but maybe" (C.K., 2013). The confession reveals the improper or "true" thoughts in a similar way to C.K.'s sharing of one of his most intimate moments while sat on the toilet in Figure 6.34. The narrator signals knowing that the statement is considered controversial through the use of the Confession Bear meme and signals realising this is bad taste. However, the meme positions C.K.'s and Spacey's fans as the real victims, thus illustrating that fandom trumps sympathy for victims of sexual violence. The comparison between C.K. and Spacey thus functions as a way to argue in favour of separating the art from the artist. The reality of the sexual assault claims thus become an obstacle for the fan to enjoy the art, while at the same time, a way for them to signify allegiance and sympathy.

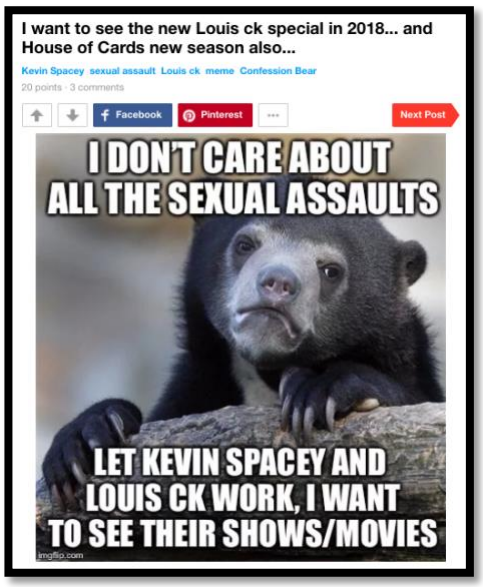


Figure 6.39: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

While Figure 6.39 drew a comparison between Spacey and C.K. pointing to similarities, most comparisons between C.K. and Weinstein emphasize differences. One meme, for example, states that: “Louis CK (sic) was wrong but is not the same as Weinstein”, thus acknowledging C.K.’s wrongdoings and contrasting them to Weinstein’s. Figure 6.40 explicitly states this difference, claiming that “public masturbation should [not] be treated as severely as rape”. Through the use of the “Unpopular Opinion Puffin” meme, which functions similarly to the Confession Bear meme in that it shares opinions that are assumed to be controversial, the narrator indicates that his opinion might be unpopular but implies that the statement is necessary. Phrasing C.K.’s sexual harassment as “public masturbation” minimises his actions, implying that no one could feel violated and that his actions were victim-less. The distinction between rape and non-consensual masturbating in front of women is presented as if the two are in competition about which one is the worst. This sentiment is illustrated in another meme which refers to this as “different levels of abuse”. This sentiment speaks against the stories of #MeToo, which seek to illustrate the variety of abuse experienced by women worldwide. The meme thus prevents an analysis of the continuum of sexual violence (L. Kelly, 1988) and an understanding of the plurality of abuse as a systemic problem and a symptom of a rape culture. The comparison to Weinstein relies on him as the figure of the monstrous rapist – thus creating a sharp contrast to C.K. who, because he has not been accused of rape, is positioned as a good guy. The comparison to Weinstein thus functions as a defence of C.K.

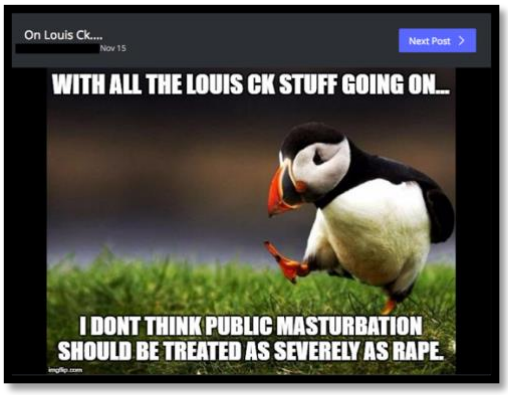


Figure 6.40: Louis C.K. data set from Imgur. 15-11-2017.

Memes about C.K. are different to memes about Weinstein and Spacey, in that they tend to defend him and his actions to a much larger extent. He is not portrayed as a monster or a pervert, but rather constructed as an anti-hero, who the users of the platforms are able to identify with. This identification mainly relies on

C.K.'s expressions of failed masculinity, sexual ineptitude and celebration of masturbation. C.K.'s sexual harassment is legitimised through a discourse of male sexual entitlement in which women are blamed for men's abuse.

Likely and unlikely perpetrators

All three perpetrators are to some extent characterised as likely perpetrators. The memes suggest that their victims, as well as the public, should have known what they are capable of, based either on their appearance, their on-screen characters or their on-stage persona. This is illustrated by comparisons to other infamous perpetrators and contrasted with famous "good guys" of Hollywood. A number of memes draw comparisons between the other famous men who have been accused of a variety of sexual violence during the height of #MeToo. The one person who shows up repeatedly in this comparison, is actor Bill Cosby, who famously has been accused of sexual assault by over 60 women – for which he was sentenced to jail in 2018 on three accounts ("Bill Cosby sentenced to state prison for sexual assault," 2018; Bowley & Coscarelli, 2018). A comparison is drawn between Cosby and Weinstein in Figure 6.41. The meme suggests that not even Cosby would be "desperate" enough to sexually assault Courtney Love. While Love is characterised as a non-legitimate victim, due to her lack of sexual attractiveness (much like the characterisation of Hillary Clinton as discussed in Chapter 5), Weinstein is characterised as a likely perpetrator through the comparison to Cosby. This comparison works throughout the data set on account of age and lack of sexual attractiveness – they are both overweight and past their prime. They thus both fit into a characterisation of the perpetrator as a monstrous other. Positioning Cosby as the ultimate figure of the predatory rapist, works to classify the other perpetrators: they are either as bad as or not as bad as Cosby.

Figure 6.41: Weinstein data set from 9gag. 01-11-2017.

The comparison of the perpetrators to other monstrous figures is emphasised by memes which in turn create contrast to the "good guys" of Hollywood. This is the case in Figure 6.42, which features a spoof article from *The New York Times*, featuring an image of Keanu Reeves talking to a woman while the headline humorously claims that he has been "accused by several women of taking them on nice dates".[25] The meme positions Reeves as an unlikely perpetrator and draws an absurdist contrast to the likely perpetrators, by suggesting that women would "accuse" him of being nice to them. The title emphasizes the notion that #MeToo has gone too far if this is the logical conclusion to the event. The tags in the meme, "whynotme" and "iwantto", function as variations of "MeToo", with the opposite sentiment, suggesting that the narrator would want to be taken on a date by Reeves. The positioning of women as Reeves's potential partners, and the phrasing of those tags, could suggest that the OP positions themselves as female, thus creating an exception to what otherwise would suggest that 9gag functions as a male discursive

[25] The article seems to be a spoof of the article which broke the story about C.K.'s sexual abuse (Ryzik et al., 2017). Though the publication date is different, it has the same authors and carries a very similar headline to the original: "Louis C.K. is accused by 5 women of sexual misconduct". It could be argued then, that the meme categorises the C.K. allegations as a non-story too; a story which can legitimately be dismissed and ridiculed.

space. In another meme with an almost identical framework, Tom Hanks is positioned as the target of a woman who accuses him of "being nice". Reeves and Hanks are thus constructed as unlikely perpetrators, drawing on the popular cultural understanding of them as examples of the "good guys" of Hollywood. The idea that they would ever mistreat women is so absurd that the contrast works in the memes.

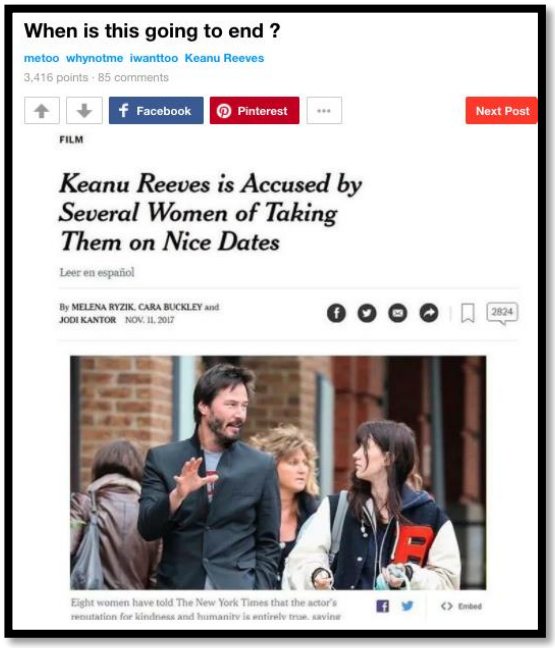


Figure 6.42: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 13-11-2017.

The contrast to Hanks and, especially, Reeves is particularly stark in the case of Weinstein. Reeves' slim and athletic body (which is emphasised by how he tends to be cast as the hero of fighting-heavy action films, such as *The Matrix* trilogy and the *John Wick* trilogy) is in stark contrast to Weinstein's fat body. The construction of Weinstein as disgust-inducing and monstrous is thus emphasized by Reeves' sexually desirable body. Furthermore, while there is only 12 years difference between Reeves and Weinstein, Reeves' fit and young appearance is used to characterise Weinstein as old and past his prime. The figure of the likely perpetrator of sexual violence, is a man who has no other way of securing sex partners, and a sexually desirable man, who could easily attract women, is deemed an unlikely perpetrator. Sexual violence is thus constructed around an idea of male sexual desire as uncontrollable and something that will inevitably happen to women, either through voluntary intercourse with sexually desirable men or through sexual assault by undesirable perpetrators.

Conclusion

This chapter has brought together the representation of the three perpetrators across differences and similarities. Through a discourse of disgust and fatness, Weinstein is constructed as the monstrous other par excellence. Spacey is portrayed through notions of ambivalence, in which he is on one hand celebrated for his iconic roles and on the other hand is othered due to his sexuality, which is constructed as perverted and in correlation with child sexual abuse. Through an emphasis on C.K.'s performances of hypersexuality and compulsive masturbation, he is constructed as an anti-hero with whom users of the platforms can identify, through notions of aggrieved masculinity and male sexual entitlement. As such, all three perpetrators are positioned as likely perpetrators, whether it being due to Weinstein's fat body, Spacey's perverted homosexuality or C.K.'s compulsive masturbation. All of these identifiers are positioned as warning signs that the public should have noticed and that their victims should have been alert to.

Significantly, the victims of the sexual violence perpetrated by these three men are widely invisible and voiceless. The address of the memes is positioned as male and mainly as identifying with the perpetrators rather than the victims. This means that the perpetrators (mainly C.K., to some extent Spacey and to a significantly lesser extent Weinstein) are sometimes positioned as the real victims. The possibility that this might mean the end of their career is mourned by the users of the platforms. This seems to be portrayed less so through sympathy for the perpetrators and more so through expressions of potential loss of cultural consumption for the fans. Ultimately, though the perpetrators are often constructed as the butt of the joke – as the fat, perverted, disgusting or monstrous others – the humorous Internet memes are widely constructed at the expense of the victims. Sexual violence is thus trivialised, and the victims are blamed for the abuse.

Chapter 7: Distraction and backlash

Introduction

While previous chapters have discussed the ways in which the Internet memes represent sexual violence – through portrayal of either the victims or the perpetrators – this chapter focuses on the ways in which the memes avoid the subject through discourses of distraction and backlash. The central question for the chapter is what these discourses do to the conceptualisation of sexual violence, as well as how these discourses are gendered.

In order to address this question, I investigate how affect and humour 'stick' (Ahmed, 2004) men together in a homosocial community, while excluding women. Research on the manosphere is taken into consideration, especially these three concepts: "himpathy" (Manne, 2018a), which applies to the sympathy men enjoy in cases of sexual violence; the zero-sum logic (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Braithwaite, 2014; T. Shepherd et al., 2015), where gender equality is constructed as taking away power from men; and male sexual entitlement (Gavey, 2019; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016), which constructs men's access to women's bodies as a right.

The chapter is divided into three parts. First, I turn to memes which politicise #MeToo and the allegations of sexual violence. Politicise in this context refers to how the memes draw US party politics into discussions of #MeToo, in order to target politicians and supporters of, particularly, the Democratic Party – especially Hillary Clinton. The memes draw connections between representatives of the Democrats and the Hollywood entertainment industry, which is the focus of the second section of the chapter. Here, I discuss how a portion of the memes contextualise #MeToo and sexual violence as a Hollywood-specific problem. Finally, the chapter turns to the backlash against #MeToo. This section investigates how some memes characterise #MeToo as an attack on all men, thus positioning men as the real victims.

The #MeToo data set is represented more in this chapter than in the other chapters, though the first two sections on strategies of distraction primarily derive from the Weinstein and Spacey data sets. The themes that I draw on for my analysis (see Appendix 2 for overview) hold a smaller number of memes than the themes discussed in the previous two chapters. The specific memes discussed in this chapter

have been chosen as they are representative of the data set at large and of the specific theme discussed. The memes in this chapter are more diverse, with less repetition of similar sentiments, but they do, however, share some main common threads which the chapter will discuss.

Politicising #MeToo and sexual violence

This first section explores memes which politicise #MeToo and the accusations against famous Hollywood men, reframing #MeToo as a US party political issue – and, in particular, as an issue for the Democratic Party – rather than a gender issue. Twenty-five memes in my dataset focus on Democrats and only 10 target Republicans, or more specifically, Donald Trump. As such I will briefly discuss memes targeting Trump before turning to memes about the Democrats. Many of these memes seem to criticise Democrats or Hollywood actresses, rather than Trump, by pointing out their hypocrisy. One meme, for example, features a photograph of Jennifer Lawrence posing with Weinstein while she has openly criticised Trump.

A number of memes compare Kevin Spacey's character Frank Underwood in *House of Cards* to Donald Trump - as in Figure 7.1. The meme claims that Spacey is held to a higher standard than Trump. Spacey as Underwood suffers the consequences of his actions: being written out of *House of Cards*, as well as being replaced by Christopher Plummer in *All the Money in the World* (M. Brown, 2017; P. Collins, 2017). Trump, on the other hand, has been accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault by over 20 women (Barbaro & Twohey, 2016; Mindock, 2019; Relman, 2019) and has infamously bragged about grabbing women "by the pussy" (Fahrenthold, 2016), without any consequence for his career. The meme expresses antipathy towards Trump by highlighting the sexual assault allegations against him and by entitling the meme "Dotard" – a word popularised online to refer to Trump after North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un referred to Trump this way in 2017.[26] At the same time, the meme could also suggest the absurdity of holding a fictional president – i.e. Spacey - to such a high standard – thus suggesting that the accusations against him are unreasonable. As opposed to many of the memes about Spacey discussed in

[26] In September 2017 North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un responded to a UN speech in which Trump threatened North Korea. The English translation of Kim's speech used the word "dotard" twice to refer to Trump (Griffiths, 2017; Wong, 2017). The word, which was mostly used as an insult in medieval literature, is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "An old person, especially one who has become physically weak or whose mental faculties have declined." ("Oxford Living Dictionaries, Dotard," n.d.). Since then, "Dotard" trended online and has been used to refer to Donald Trump derogatorily ("Know Your Meme, Dotard," n.d.; "Urban Dictionary, Dotard," n.d.)

the previous Chapter, which feature a self-assured, cunning Spacey-as-Underwood, this photo seems to portray a much less self-assured Underwood. He is on the defence rather than his usual scheming offence and the meme seems to suggest that he has become the target – perhaps unfairly so.

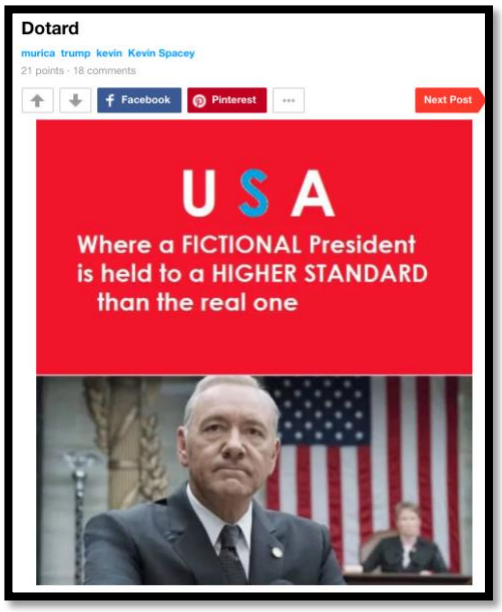


Figure 7.1: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 03-11-2017.

The meme frames the story as US-specific, highlighted by the colours of the US flag in the text, as well as the large flag in the background. The tag "murica" is used online to refer to extreme US patriotism, often used derogatorily to describe so-called redneck culture and southern US stereotypes ("I don't understand why everyone is always saying 'murica' or 'merica' meaning America.," n.d.; "Know Your Meme, 'Murica," n.d.; "Urban Dictionary, Murica," n.d.). It can be found in image macros of memes and in hashtags primarily denoting ironic patriotism and mostly works as an internal criticism of what is deemed negative traits of US culture (Ibid.). The usage of "murica" in this meme signifies a ridicule of US culture and society by criticising the lack of consequence for Trump's actions and perhaps an overreaction to those of Spacey. Framing Spacey's and Trump's actions as US-specific constructs the sexual abuse revealed during #MeToo as a problem that is contained within certain industries: those of politics and the film industry.

Targeting Democrats and the gendered attacks on Hillary Clinton

Memes that target US Democrats overwhelmingly target Hillary Clinton – a point I will return to shortly after briefly discussing male Democrats. Some memes deem all Democrats suspicious by association with Hollywood figures accused of some

variety of sexual violence – primarily Harvey Weinstein – while others feature specific Democrats, such as Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. Obama is only included in two memes, which both feature an image of him rewarding Bill Clinton with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, while pointing out his hypocrisy for condemning Weinstein. Memes about Bill Clinton, however, point to the sexual assault allegations against him,[27] thus referring to him as a "rapist" and a "sexual predator". Memes that feature images of him with Weinstein are presented as proof of his abusive behaviour and their seeming camaraderie is presented as proof that Clinton is as bad as Weinstein. Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky is used to portray him as a womanizer. Lewinsky, on the other hand, is sexualised and objectified, underpinning the notion that women only exist on these platforms as "sex objects, invisible or the enemy" (Braithwaite, 2014).

Hillary Clinton is represented significantly differently than the male Democrats. She is primarily pictured with either Weinstein or Bill Clinton and the memes I discuss in the following are thus representative of the way she is portrayed in the data set at large. She is framed as suspicious in two different ways: either by association with Hollywood figures, primarily Harvey Weinstein, or by pointing to her failure to perform normative female attractiveness. The first way is exemplified in Figure 7.2, which combines a tweet by Clinton with a photo of her and Weinstein laughing. The image could imply that the two share an inside joke, thus supporting the notion of a "liberal conspiracy" with Hollywood – a point I will explore further in the second section of the chapter.

[27] Bill Clinton has been accused of several accounts of sexual harassment and one account of rape (Matthews, 2017; Relman, 2018). Lewinsky maintains that while Clinton did take advantage of her because of her young age (she was 22 when the relationship commenced), the relationship was consensual (Lewinsky, 2014).

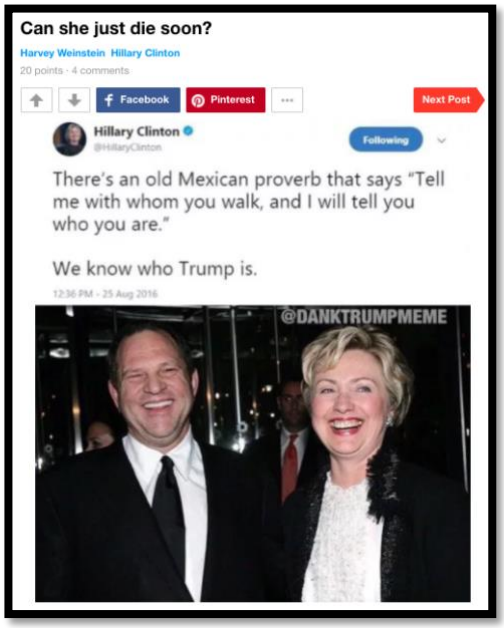


Figure 7.2: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 30-10-2017.

The tweet refers to a speech given by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign, in which she points out Donald Trump's racism (Clinton, 2016; Fortune, 2016). She discusses Trump's association with then UKIP politician, Nigel Farage, and then CEO of the far-right website Breitbart, Stephen Bannon, who Trump had just appointed to his presidential campaign. Clinton's tweet suggests that this makes Trump racist and extremist right-wing by association. This notion is turned against Clinton in the meme, which claims that Clinton is a hypocrite: she condemns Trump but seems to enjoy the company of Weinstein. The handle "@danktrumpmeme" printed on the image refers to a Twitter, Facebook and Instagram account which features pro-Trump and anti-Democrat propaganda (https://www.facebook.com/DankTrumpMeme; https://www.instagram.com/danktrumpmeme/; https://twitter.com/danktrumpmeme). This exemplifies how some of the memes echo alt-right rhetoric which opposes left-wing thought and multiculturalism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nicholas & Agius, 2017). The title wishing for Clinton to "just die soon" sends chilling links to offline violence and killings, where perpetrators cite alt-right and manosphere rhetoric, such as the 2011 Norway attacks and the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings – as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

All memes about Hillary Clinton reproduce an anti-Democrat discourse. This often echoes the rhetoric used by Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential

election campaign[28] and picked up by the US alt-right. A small number of memes use alt-right rhetoric inspired by Donald Trump such as "fake news" and #maga ("make America great again" which was Trump's slogan during the 2016 presidential elections). One meme refers to Clinton as "nasty", thus echoing Trump's infamous characterisation of Clinton as a "nasty woman" during the third presidential debate in 2016 (Woolf, 2016). The demonization of Clinton during the election by Trump (Manne, 2018a) and online alt-right communities spreads into the culture on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur. A small number of memes use distinct alt-right rhetoric such as "snowflakes", "feminazi" and "Swedistan".[29] Combined with the fact that the memes overwhelmingly reproduce an anti-Democrat discourse, this suggests a sense of US political right-wing and alt-right allegiance. The memes about Clinton illustrate how the manosphere consider the potential of her as president of the US, not just a threat to conservative-Christian values and the status quo, but as the threat of a feminized nation and, ultimately, a fear of emasculation (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Hillary Clinton as a failure of desirable womanhood

Besides being deemed suspicious by association, Hillary Clinton is positioned as unequivocally unattractive and, as such, a failure of womanhood. This was the case in Figure 5.5 of Chapter 5, in which a picture of Clinton and Weinstein is captioned with "The one time Weinstein was able to control himself" – thus positioning Clinton as an unlikely victim of Weinstein's sexual assault. In fact, she is positioned as the unlikely victim par-excellence in my data set. Portraying her as a failure of desirable womanhood works to construct her as suspicious. Womanhood is thus positioned as incompatible with positions of political power – echoing voices of backlash against feminism as far back as the first wave of feminism, when feminists fought to secure women's suffrage (Laughlin et al., 2010).

[28] See Ross & Rivers (2017) for a discourse analysis of Internet memes about Trump and Clinton during the 2016 presidential election. While the article investigates discourses of delegitimization, it does, however, not account for gendered differences in how the two are portrayed.

[29] "Snowflake" is used by the alt-right community to refer to people on the political left who are deemed over-sensitive and easily offended (Nicholson, 2016; Regehr & Ringrose, 2018). The term "Feminazi" was popularised by US Conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s and now refers to feminists deemed radical and militant and as a way to signal that they have gone too far in a debate (Rudman, 2012; Z. Williams, 2015). "Swedistan" refers to a hoax campaign born on the alt-right "Politically correct" board on 4chan referred to as "Operation Swedistan". This consists of fake photoshopped news stories made to poke fun at politically correct "leftist" Swedes by suggesting changing the Swedish flag to a Turkish-style crescent and star (Wendling, 2017).

The meme in Figure 7.3 ridicules Clinton for her lack of sexual appeal in a similar way to Figure 5.5 in Chapter 5. This meme suggests that all her "male friends" – i.e. Bill Clinton, Harvey Weinstein and Anthony Weiner – are rapists. Weiner sent images of his genitals to several women, including a 15-year-old girl (Weiser & Rashbaum, 2017). The latter led to him being sentenced to prison for 21 months and registering as a sex offender for the rest of his life (Pager, 2019). As discussed in Chapter 6, the construction of male sexuality in my data set reproduces the notion of the male sexual drive discourse, in which heterosexual male sexuality is uncontrollable but in turn dependent on being ignited by sexually attractive women (Gavey, 2019) Clinton, however, is considered so unattractive that not even three rapists, whom she allegedly socialises with, are interested in "touching" her in any way. Notably, Weiner was never accused of rape. In a sense the meme then discursively creates an equivalence between rape and other forms of sexual violence – which is exactly what #MeToo has been criticised for doing. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of considering sexual violence within a continuum (L. Kelly, 1988), precisely draws *connections* between different experiences of sexual violence rather than *equivalences* (Boyle, 2019c).

Figure 7.3: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 17-11-2017.

The image of Clinton here emphasises how age is considered an undesirable quality for a woman – as discussed in Chapter 5: her wrinkles and bags under the eyes are visible and she looks down and does not smile or look at the camera, which can be read as failing to accommodate to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) – which in turn suggests that proper womanhood is defined by submissive but flirtatious behaviour. Her facial expression, as well as the title of the meme "It must be rough", suggests that she would be disappointed not to be sexually assaulted by her "male

friends". The male friends are here positioned to be: Bill Clinton, Harvey Weinstein and Anthony Weiner, as the tags specify. The fact that they have not assaulted her, is constructed as a rejection rather than the result of a professional, friendly or marital relationship. Bill Clinton's alleged sexual assault is here deemed a failure on her part rather than his – ridiculing her lack of sexual attractiveness. Within this logic, likelihood of victimhood correlates with attractiveness – a notion I discussed in depth in Chapter 5. Significantly, neither Bill Clinton nor Weiner are constructed as the butt of the joke here, though they are grouped together as perpetrators of sexual violence and thus deemed "as bad as" Weinstein. Rather, Hillary Clinton is the butt of the joke, as she is ridiculed for her failure to perform desirable womanhood. In turn, sexual violence is constructed as sex and as an experience worth hoping for, since it would signify that one was sexually desirable. Furthermore, echoing the words of Andrea Braithwaite (2016), since Clinton is neither a sex object nor invisible (taking up space publicly and politically) she is deemed the enemy.

Figure 4 compares Clinton to Huma Abedin, the former wife of Anthony Weiner.[30] The meme features an image of the two on either side of Harvey Weinstein at the Planned Parenthood 100th anniversary gala in 2017. The meme implies that Clinton and Abedin express allegiance with Weinstein – turning towards him while applauding, which could suggest that they are applauding him (he does not seem to applaud). As noted in the previous chapter, Weinstein is characterised as disgusting. Disgust in this case, due to the proximity between their bodies, sticks to Clinton and Abedin. The meme draws a connection between the two women due to their husbands' actions, while ignoring their work-relationship: Abedin has worked for Clinton for decades – among other things as deputy chief of staff and personal assistant during Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign (Burleigh, 2016). They are furthermore linked by their fight for women's rights, emphasised by the fact that they are pictured at the Planned Parenthood Gala. They are thus deemed suspicious and hypocritical, as they on one hand support women's issues, while on the other hand socialise with men who have been accused of sexual violence. This mirrors media discourse about her, as well as other prominent figures criticised for their association

[30] The tags in the meme refer to Weinstein and Clinton. The tag "Martin Hellwig", however, does not seem to refer to anything relating to Weinstein or Clinton. One article appears on Wikipedia of a Martin Hellwig, who is a German economist which suggests no relation to Weinstein or Clinton. It is a common practice on 9gag to add random names (mostly famous people) to the tags, as discussed in Chapter 3. I am thus considering the tag irrelevant and will not consider it for analysis.

with Weinstein, such as Meryl Streep and Weinstein's former adviser Lisa Bloom (Boyle, 2019a).

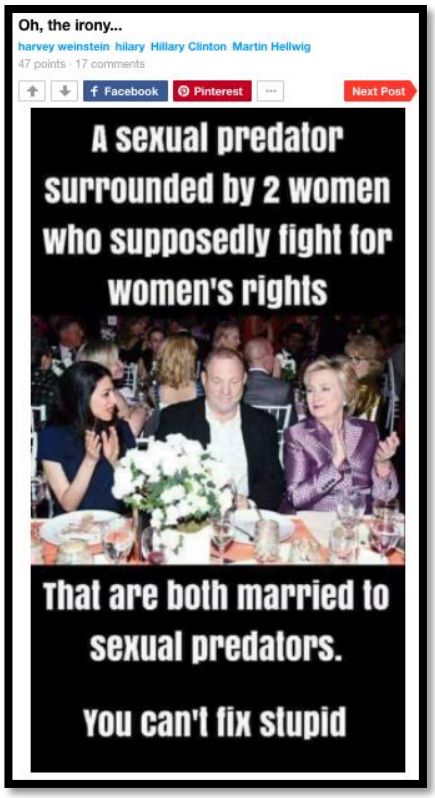


Figure 7.4: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 15-10-2017.

Similar to Figure 7.3, Clinton and Abedin are positioned as the butt of joke – rather than their sexually abusive husbands. They are deemed "stupid" due to their marriages to "sexual predators" – though Abedin filed for divorce after Weiner pleaded guilty to the accusations against him. This does not, however, suggest allegiance with Weinstein and Weiner's victims, or a condemnation of the two men. Rather, sexual violence becomes an instrument with which to attack Clinton and Abedin, and through them, the Democratic Party. Significantly, feminism is constructed as an object of suspicion – a notion I explore further in the third section of this chapter when analysing the backlash against #MeToo.

This section has demonstrated how the memes use #MeToo, and the accusations against Harvey Weinstein in particular, to politicise sexual violence. The US Democrats are targeted, primarily through Hillary Clinton, who is deemed suspicious by association and who is delegitimised as a political leader, due to her failure to perform sexually attractive womanhood. The shame of not being attractive enough and of her husband's sexual assault sticks to her – she is the sticky object of shame and disgust (Ahmed, 2004). The focus is on US politics, rather than the

perpetrators and their abuse. The victims are written out of the narrative, their experiences are made invisible and women are held responsible for men's abuse.

#MeToo as a Hollywood-specific problem

From a focus on US politics, I now turn to a focus on Hollywood and the connection between the two. The memes draw a discursive connection between Hollywood and US Democrats – primarily represented by Hillary Clinton, as discussed above, but also by pointing to political statements made by representatives of the Hollywood film industry, such as Meryl Streep.

The memes hint at the notion of a left-wing conspiracy in the entertainment industry. This extends to the comedy scene, where the hosts of US late-night shows (including Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Meyers, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon and James Corden) were criticised for not making fun of Weinstein in the immediate aftermath of the *New York Times* article (Hanson, 2017; Hudson, 2017). All the late night shows did eventually include jokes and segments about Weinstein (Bradley, 2017; Nevins, 2017) – though James Corden received massive criticism for "punching down", and for his lack of sympathy for the victims when making Weinstein jokes at the AmfAR gala in Los Angeles on the 13th October 2017 (Bernhardt, 2017; M. Brown & Slawson, 2017).

An example of the left-wing conspiracy is the meme in Figure 7.5, featuring an image of Harvey Weinstein and actress Meryl Streep at, what appears to be, a red-carpet event. The meme implies that they enjoy each other's company – Streep leaning towards Weinstein, and the two smiling at the camera. The image text features a manipulated quote by Streep from her acceptance speech when receiving a Lifetime achievement award at the 2017 Golden Globes Awards (Victor, 2017a). Criticising Donald Trump for mocking a disabled journalist (BBC, 2015; CNN, 2015) and talking about the importance of a free press, Streep said: "Disrespect invites disrespect, violence incites violence. And when the powerful use their position to bully others, we all lose." (Victor, 2017a). The meme uses the quote to point out a double standard: she will condemn Trump but not Weinstein, because he has donated large sums to the Democratic Party. Thus, the meme reproduces the notion of a liberal conspiracy: Weinstein funds the Democrats who turn a blind eye to his abuse and allow Hollywood representatives to dictate US politics.

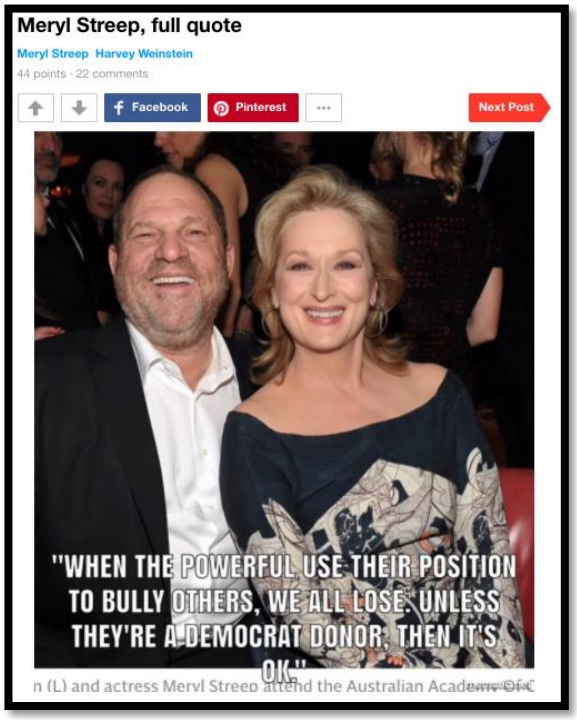


Figure 7.5: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 09-10-2017.

The meme also speaks to the criticism Streep met in the immediate aftermath of the first allegations against Weinstein, when a large number of actresses condemned Weinstein's behaviour. Streep was criticised for not immediately speaking out, though she did condemn his actions a few days later (Ali, 2017). When she did speak out, she was subsequently criticised, by Rose McGowan amongst other people, for claiming that she did not know about Weinstein's abuse (Ali, 2017). The same image in the meme was used on the "She knew" posters spread across Los Angeles, which also made the rounds online (Carroll, 2017). The poster simply featured the image of Streep and Weinstein with the text "She knew" across Streep's eyes, thus suggesting that Streep was well aware of Weinstein's abuse while it was going on. The poster, as well as the meme in Figure 7.5, produce the notion that Hollywood was full of enablers for Weinstein and that the film industry is corrupt and hypocritical. Furthermore, it manages to pit women against each other and make #MeToo about the failure of certain women to live up to notions of feminist solidarity between women. This meme is thus an example of a strategy of distraction which directs the focus away from the perpetrators of sexual abuse and blames women for men's abuse.

Streep is portrayed as a symbol of the Hollywood establishment – similarly to how Clinton has been targeted by Trump and the alt-right for representing the political establishment of Washington D.C. Both Streep and Clinton are then

positioned as the enemy, because they not only represent the left wing of US politics, but because they represent powerful women in the public sphere. The attempt to silence these kinds of women echoes manosphere logic – as discussed in Chapter 2: that women do not exist in public spaces (Jane, 2017b; Milner, 2013a; Phillips, 2015b), that they only have value as sexual objects (according to the "Tits or gtfo"-logic), that their attempts to take over male territory (such as the presidency of the US) causes a risk to men's rights (according to the zero-sum logic (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Braithwaite, 2014; T. Shepherd et al., 2015)), which in turn justifies personalised attacks on those women.

The notion that "she knew" also extends to Weinstein's victims. Some memes criticise them for not speaking out sooner – suggesting that they could have stopped Weinstein's abuse and thus helped other women. Of course, as discussed in Chapter 6, many of Weinstein's victims did in fact try to speak out years before Kantor and Twohey's 2017 article, but were silenced by Weinstein and the "culture of complicity" (Farrow, 2017) he had built around him. This culture refers to how Weinstein's associates covered for him and sometimes organised the meetings where women were assaulted (Farrow, 2017; Kantor & Twohey, 2017; McGowan, 2018). This is exemplified in Figure 7.6 which features a GIF from the US TV show *Friends* where the characters Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) and Joey (Matt LeBlanc) feign ignorance when told about the fact that Rachel is pregnant with Ross's child ("Friends - Phoebe - 'Brand New Information' HQ," n.d.; "The One Where Rachel Tells...," n.d.). Phoebe, in an effort to convince Ross that she was not already aware of this, bursts out: "This is brand new information!". The meme is used when indicating that someone has mentioned something blatantly obvious that the listener was already well aware of (Ashurst, 2017). In Figure 7.6, Phoebe and Joey represent "everyone in Hollywood right now", who claim that they were unaware of Weinstein's abuse. The meme suggests that those people in Hollywood – and especially Streep (who is tagged) – are purely feigning ignorance. Though the meme addresses "everyone in Hollywood", Streep is the only one who is tagged, which supports the notion that women are held responsible for men's abuse: none of the male actors or directors who worked with Weinstein have been targeted by any of the memes in my data set the way that Streep is targeted.

Figure 7.6: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 11-10-2017.

Hollywood is also portrayed as a powerful industry in control of US politics. This characterisation is prevalent in Figure 7.7, which features an image of the Hollywood sign with the signature smile, sunglasses and thumbs-up of the Picardía meme. Originally popularised on the Argentinian humour website Taringa, the Picardía meme (also known as Strawman Ball or Memeball) has since circulated on 4chan mocking different political ideologies ("Know Your Meme, Picardía," n.d.). The meme has been adapted in many ways to mock double standards and point out stereotypes about various political ideologies – often using the strawman informal fallacy. In Figure 7.7, the Picardía meme is used to portray Hollywood as a "despicable place", where the people in charge are "rapists, pedophiles and gangsters", but simultaneously so influential that they dictate how the US population should "behave, vote and think". The usage of the Picardía meme thus mocks the double standards within Hollywood, questioning how "despicable" people like Weinstein and Spacey can possibly have the moral superiority to dictate the behaviour of the American people. The notion of a liberal conspiracy is thus reproduced in this meme by suggesting that Hollywood has political power over the country.

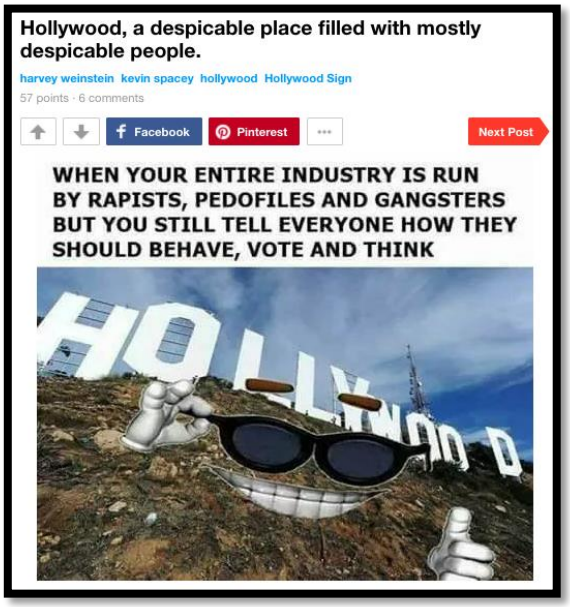


Figure 7.7: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

The notion that Hollywood is a breeding ground for rapists and particularly paedophiles, is repeated throughout my data set. One meme renames Hollywood "Rapewood" and another "Pedowood". These titles categorise sexual assault and child sexual abuse as a Hollywood-specific problem. An example of this is Figure 7.8, which features a scale with Planned Parenthood at one end and Hollywood at the other end, as if asking: "On a scale from Planned Parenthood to Hollywood, how much do you love children?". Planned Parenthood is a US non-profit organisation which provides a variety of reproductive health care, including birth control, sexual education and research into reproductive technology (Plannedparenthood.org, n.d.). It also provides abortions. In Figure 7.8, Planned Parenthood represents the absolute absence of love for children, thus suggesting that having an abortion equals hating children. On the other end of the scale is Hollywood, which represents a "love" for children. This love indicates a sexual desire for children – emphasised by the Kevin Spacey tag. Child sexual abuse is thus reconceptualised as an act of love, rather than as sexual assault of a child. The scale is presented as a "Hollywood fact", as if to suggest that it is a well-known fact that Hollywood is a hunting ground for paedophiles – illustrating the complicity of "everyone in Hollywood" as suggested in Figure 7.7. The satirical approach of the meme pokes fun at the idea that Hollywood in any way is concerned about family values. The family in this case is a Christian Conservative construction, suggesting that abortion equals killing a child based on the idea that life begins at conception. The construction of Planned Parenthood as an extremist organisation of child-killers supports the general right-wing and perhaps

alt-right political framing of the memes in my data set.[31] Finally, the ironic suggestion that Hollywood should be the ones that care for children and Christian Conservative family values, is emphasised by how Hollywood is a stand-in for paedophiles.

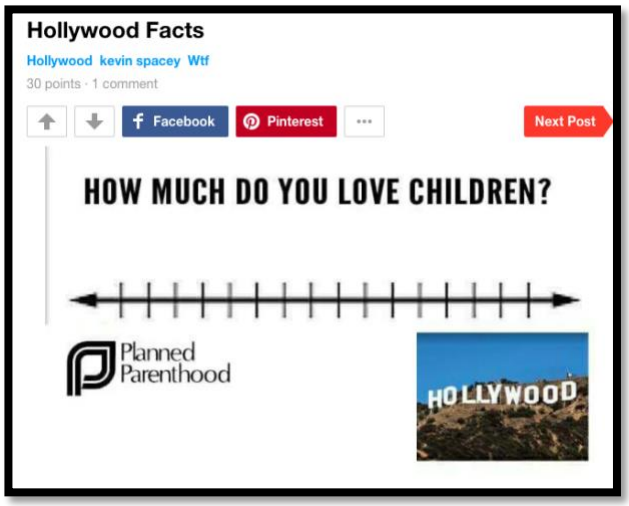


Figure 7.8: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 13-11-2017.

As discussed in Chapter 6, a few memes highlight Weinstein's Jewish heritage. Some of these memes draw connections between Weinstein's Jewish heritage and Hollywood, reproducing a left-wing conspiracy suggesting that the Hollywood entertainment industry is controlled not only by Democrat supporters, but by the Jewish community. As one meme notes: "After the Harvey Weinstein news. Is this what people meant by "those fucking Jews in Hollywood?"". The anti-Semitic undertone in such memes thus support the extremist alt-right rhetoric which antagonises any voices that are non-white and non-Christian (A. Kelly, 2017; Koulouris, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

The casting couch

A number of memes comment on the Hollywood casting couch. This refers to the practice of powerful Hollywood producers from the Hollywood Golden Age of exploiting and sexually assaulting aspiring actresses with promises of acting jobs and careers, a behaviour very similar to what Weinstein practised (Adams, 2017; Dessem, 2017; Fallon, 2017a; Hutchinson, 2017). The meme in Figure 7.9 draws a direct line between the Hollywood casting couch trope and the genre of pornographic videos known as "casting couch porn". Typing in the search term "casting couch" on

[31] See Manne (2018) for an excellent discussion of the Republican discursive construction of motherhood in relation to restriction of abortions as based on Christian Conservative values.

a variety of the most popular porn sites (youporn.com; Pornhub.com; xvideos.com) returns thousands of videos which replicate the casting couch trope. The narrative in these videos rely on the same story: A young woman (often a model or an adult film actress) walks into the office/backroom of the casting director under the pretence of a job interview. This eventually leads to the two of them (or more people) having sex on the couch. Often the woman is tricked into having sex – either coerced by the powerful director who she does not want to reject or because he forces himself on her thus re-enacting a rape narrative (Cole, 2018).

Figure 7.9: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 17-10-2017.

The woman can also be tricked into the backroom under false pretences: to interview for a job that does not exist (Cole, 2018). The website printed on the image in Figure 7.9, backroomcastingcouch.com, replicates this notion. A tagline on the web page reads: "I would hire them all, however I'm not a talent agent … and there is no modeling job." (Backroomcastingcouch.com). The stories tend to take place in a simple office such as in Figure 7.9, featuring the prominent black leather couch. In many of the memes, the black couch stands alone without context or explanation, suggesting that 9gag users are familiar with the casting couch trope – whether it being through a knowledge of porn or the cultural trope of the Hollywood casting couch. The reference to casting couch porn on 9gag, Imgur and Reddit draws a link to the manhood act of masturbation (Moloney & Love, 2018) – as discussed in Chapter 6, which signals homosocial belonging. This in turn functions as part of the boundary work on the manosphere (Miltner, 2014), assuming that women have less familiarity with porn and would thus be excluded do to their failure to decode porn references.

Film posters

Ten memes feature spoof film posters, where the famous Hollywood perpetrators are grouped together to create a narrative of sexual violence – often emphasised by a pun on the film title – a practice used in porn films as well, which suggests a sexualisation and pornification of sexual violence, and again manifests the notion of masturbation as a homosocial manhood act. Examples of this can be seen in Figures 7.10, 7.11 and 7.12 below.

Figure 7.10 features a pun on *The Planet of the Apes.* The film poster mimics the design of the film posters from the 2010s reboot of the franchise. The menacing chimpanzee which emerges from the dark background of the original film posters has been replaced by three Hollywood men: Bill Cosby, Kevin Spacey and Dustin Hoffman who for this purpose are identified under the category "rapist". As discussed previously, Bill Cosby has been accused by numerous women of sexual assault but Hoffman has also been accused by seven women of sexual harassment and sexual assault (Holloway, 2017). The poster furthermore includes The Weinstein Company as producers of the film and Roman Polanski as director (who famously has been accused of raping a 13-year-old girl in 1977 (H. Freeman, 2018a; Wakeman, 2017)).

Figure 7.10: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

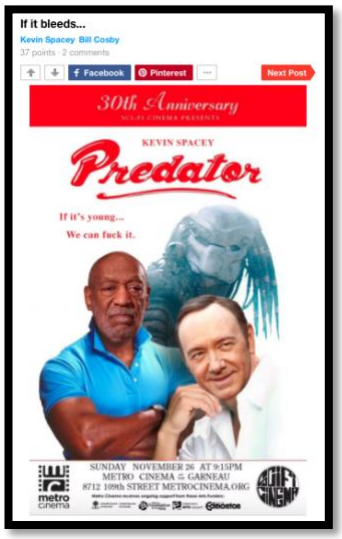


Figure 7.11: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 09-11-2017.

Figure 7.12: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 09-11-2017.

Figure 7.11 similarly plays on a comparison between perpetrators of sexual violence and menacing and dangerous film creatures. The meme has Bill Cosby and Kevin Spacey photoshopped into a 30th anniversary *Predator* film poster, replacing the actors Carl Weathers and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The tagline to the original poster "If it bleeds… We can kill it." has been replaced with "If it's young… We can

fuck it." Both Spacey and Cosby have been accused of sexually assaulting primarily very young people in their early 20s, as well as some teenagers[32] and the focus on young victims creates an alignment (Ahmed, 2004) between the two. The meme furthermore aligns Cosby and Spacey with the Predator – thus categorising them as sexual predators and monstrous others.

Figure 7.12 features a poster for the film *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (1989). Instead of the face of Rick Moranis, who plays the father, a blurred image of what appears to be a penis has been photoshopped into the image. Rather than jumping from the dog to the tip of their father's nose, the children in the meme climb onto their father's penis. The meme muses that had Spacey taken the role of the father, the film might have played out very differently.

The memes in Figures 7.10 and 7.11 group together several famous perpetrators of sexual violence. This same strategy is at play in a number of memes using film posters, such as the entire crew of *X-Men* (redubbed "Sex-Men") and the line-up from *The Usual Suspects* replaced with a variety of the famous men accused of various acts of sexual violence during the height of #MeToo. The men are then aligned together, and in Figures 7.10 and 7.11 they are categorised as dangerous and inhuman. The humorous aspect of the memes is built around puns on the film titles and the tagline (as in Figure 7.11). The memes position the perpetrators as the protagonists of the films. The victims are not pictured (except in Figure 7.12) and when mentioned they are dehumanised "If *it's* young… We can fuck *it*." (as in Figure 7.11 – my emphasis). This further positions the perpetrators as the subjects and the victims as the objects. Sexual assault is characterised as rape in Figure 7.10, but both Figure 7.11 and 7.12 characterise it as sex (through the use of the word "fuck"). This echoes my discussion in Chapter 5 of the representation of sexual assault as sex, which has been a reoccurring criticism within the feminist scholarship. The position of the perpetrator is open for identification within the humorous discursive spaces of 9gag, Imgur and Reddit and victims are discursively excluded.

The representation of these perpetrators and their abuse within the frame of film posters further contextualises their assaults as existing within the Hollywood film industry and thus separate to the rest of society. Beside contextualising perpetrators of sexual violence as existing within the vacuum of the Hollywood film

[32] As discussed at length in Chapter 6, Spacey has been accused of sexual assault and harassment of four teenagers. Cosby has been accused by over 50 women of drugging and/or sexually assaulting them. At least three of them were under 18 at the time of the assault – one of them as young as 15 (ETonline, 2018; Ioannou, Mathis-Lilley, Hannon, & Wilson, 2018).

industry, the focus on the spectacular individual stories of female celebrities as victims of this abuse further manifests #MeToo as a Hollywood-specific problem. This then distracts from understanding #MeToo as a symptom of systemic abuse and rape culture in society at large.

Backlash against #MeToo, women and feminism

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, feminism has become popular. This "popular feminism" is often met with "popular misogyny" meaning that when feminism gains popular traction and threatens to change the status quo, it is met with a backlash from voices that consider feminism a threat. #MeToo being a feminist moment has thus been met with a misogynist backlash, which is what I unpick in the current section.

As established throughout this thesis, 9gag, Reddit and Imgur privilege a white, heterosexual male centrality, which echoes sentiments from the manosphere. The sentiments which are prevalent in this part of my analysis, is a zero-sum logic, a gender-war logic and the construction of feminists as the enemy. With a particular focus on "himpathy" (Manne, 2018a) and male sexual entitlement (Gavey, 2019; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016), I investigate the various discourses of backlash against #MeToo.

Hysterical women and witch hunt discourses

This subsection discusses some general characterisations of #MeToo in the data set centred around the three sub-topics: "#MeToo has gone too far", "The magnitude of #MeToo" and "Pro-#MeToo". Through this discussion I will investigate how this characterisation constructs victims and sexual violence.

Only a handful of memes have been coded as pro-#MeToo. This includes memes which speculate on revenge fantasies about what women ought to do to their abusers. One meme shares Uma Thurman's Instagram post on Thanksgiving, in which she famously shared an image of herself as the assassin in *Kill Bill*, with a specific message for Weinstein and his "wicked conspirators": "I'm glad it's going slowly – you don't deserve a bullet" (Guardian, 2018; Thurman, 2017). Another meme reframes the Weinstein Company logo with the words "Fuck Harvey", followed by "#ROSEARMY", referencing Rose McGowan's movement following

#MeToo, in which she encourages her followers to mobilise against people who enabled and covered up Weinstein's abuse (Dixon-Smith, 2017; McGowan, n.d.).

Apart from these few exceptions, the rest of the memes do not show support or sympathy for #MeToo but rather characterise the moment as overwhelming and having gone too far. Within this characterisation, women are described in two ways: as hysterical and as attention seekers.

Many of the memes which discuss the #MeToo phenomenon, rather than the specific men accused of sexual violence, express a feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the stories and of the spread of the hashtag on social media. Examples of this can be seen in Figures 7.13, 7.14 and 7.15 below. Figure 7.13 utilises the meme "Homer Simpson in a Lesbian Bar", featuring Homer sat alone in a bar surrounded by lesbians, with a look on his face as if he realises something is not right ("Know Your Meme, Homer Simpson in a Lesbian Bar," n.d.). The meme is used to express outsiderness and often references trends on social media. The meme is usually framed so the narrator takes the role of Homer, thus commenting on an issue or trend that they are not part of and feel excluded from. In Figure 7.13 this social media trend is #MeToo, which is everywhere on "social media right now", but Homer – and thus the narrator – is not taking part. In other words, sexual violence – as represented by #MeToo – is positioned as something that is not experienced by users of 9gag – because they are assumed to be male. Women, as well as victims of sexual abuse, are thus discursively excluded from the humorous and male sociality.

Figure 7.13: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 23-10-2017.

Figure 7.14: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

Figure 7.15: Kevin Spacey data set from 9gag. 11-11-2017.

Figure 7.14 features the meme "So Hot Right Now" from the film *Zoolander* (2001) in which Will Ferrell's character Mugatu, when seeing the male model Hansel (Owen Wilson), says "That Hansel – so hot right now". The meme usually comments on a current media, popular cultural or online trend – sometimes to ridicule the trend, other times simply as a comment on the popularity of the trend. In Figure 7.14 the meme suggests that it has become popular to accuse people of sexual

harassment – thus implying that #MeToo might be just a trend. The meme in Figure 7.15 utilises the image macro "Oprah's 'You Get a Car'" referencing an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which she gives away a free car to every single member of the audience ("Know Your Meme, Oprah's 'You Get a Car,'" n.d.). The image macro features Winfrey screaming and pointing at the audience with a text utilising the format "You get an X! You get an X! Everyone gets an X!" In Figure 7.15 the meme suggests that #MeToo has spread beyond reason, mimicking the absurdity and insanity of Winfrey's screaming facial expression.

Figures 7.13, 7.14 and 7.15 express a sentiment of being overwhelmed by the number of accusations against famous men, as well as the number of people posting #MeToo on social media. It could be read as a complaint that #MeToo is taking up too much space on social media and that users are confronted with stories that they are not interested in and do not wish to be confronted with. The memes thus express a sense of fatigue with #MeToo, which is a sentiment that runs through much of the data set on #MeToo and will be apparent throughout the rest of this chapter. The memes could imply that #MeToo is simply a passing trend, and that accusations, as well as personal stories shared on social media, could be an expression of a desire to get attention, rather than pointing to a culture of sexual violence. The notion that especially Hollywood actresses only come forward in order to get attention and further their career is considered at lengths in Chapter 5, so for now I turn to memes that focus on "ordinary women" and #MeToo more generally.

A large group of memes have been coded as expressing the sentiment that #MeToo has "gone too far". Figures 7.16, 7.17 and 7.18 are examples of this as, they make absurdist comments on #MeToo. Figure 7.16 features a cartoon of a woman literally bending over backwards in order to get a man to "look at her butt". All her efforts are in vain as he does not once take his eyes off his phone. We learn that she only did this in order to be able to post her own #MeToo story via her phone on social media. Himpathy (Manne, 2018a) is at the forefront of this meme as it positions men as innocent and women as desperate for attention. Furthermore, the sexual violence that women point to by sharing their #MeToo stories is erased completely. If there is no assault, there can be no victim and through painting the woman as deceptive and manipulative, the meme casts doubt on women's experiences as well as #MeToo in general.

Figure 7.16: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 22-10-2017.

Figure 7.17 features a cartoon of a Santa Claus, presumably in a shopping centre where children can line up for a chance to sit on his lap – however, no one is lining up, because an attorney needs to be present. The title frames the situation as a consequence of #MeToo. The meme implies that something so seemingly innocent might as well be subject to suspicion in the #MeToo era. Furthermore, the notion of a post-#MeToo world as stripped of all fun portrays feminists responsible for such activism as killjoys (Ahmed, 2010c). By pointing out systemic sexual violence against women and suggesting structural change, #MeToo – and thus feminists – are portrayed as destroying what is constructed as harmless fun. The discursive comparison between innocent and harmless fun and sexual violence, contextualises sexual violence as harmless and himpathy is prevalent. As discussed previously, what MRA discourses often suggest is a zero-sum logic: when feminists point to inequalities and suggest changes to the status quo, this is constructed as taking away power from men. Men have been injured by feminists and are thus in the right to take back what they consider rightfully theirs (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Braithwaite, 2014; T. Shepherd et al., 2015). In this meme, #MeToo is constructed as "political correctness gone mad". The feminist killjoys have taken away moments of harmless fun, personified by something so innocent as children sitting on Santa's lap.

Figure 7.17: #MeToo data set from Imgur. 17-12-2017.

Figure 7.18 draws the focus of #MeToo back to a Hollywood-specific context, by framing the situation in the meme as the actions of a Hollywood actress. The meme utilises the image macro series "Inhaling Seagull", featuring a sequence of images of a screaming seagull. The meme suggests that the seagull is trying to get attention, before finally inhaling deeply to be able to scream out its message ("Know Your Meme, Inhaling Seagull," n.d.). Traditionally captioned with verbose or loud song lyrics, the meme is more recently recontextualised to indicate a desperate attempt to gain attention or being unreasonably loud. Figure 7.18 suggests that Hollywood actresses accuse men of rape purely in order to get attention. #MeToo in this meme is framed as an unreasonable social media event, where loud women scream their experiences of rape from the proverbial roof tops. The comparison of rape victims/survivors to squeaky seagulls mirrors the stereotypical representation of women's voices as shrill and unpleasant.[33]

[33] Notably, Hillary Clinton was systematically criticised for her "high-pitched" voice during the 2016 presidential election (Bohanan, 2016) leading to her seeking advice from a voice coach (Lambert, 2016) – something Margaret Thatcher also famously practised in order to deepen her voice (Lambert, 2016). As discussed by feminist journalists and scholars alike, the gender bias is apparent: women are generally told to sound more like men as men's voices are considered more authoritative (Johnson, 2018; Sherwin, 2014).

Figure 7.18: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 18-10-2017.

Figures 7.16 and 7.18 both exemplify how women who choose to share their experiences of sexual abuse online are considered "attention seekers". Because these women do not adapt the personification of the traumatised rape victim, who is so ashamed that she keeps her experiences private, they are considered suspicious. Refusing to keep quiet is deemed suspicious and as a consequence, these women are considered less credible, as they do not conform to normative notions of what constitutes a "legitimate victim" (see Chapter 5 for a thorough discussion of this concept). Finally, figures 7.16, 7.17 and 7.18 illustrate a sense of fatigue with #MeToo, in which feminists are killjoys who exhaust men who simply want to maintain the status quo and enjoy the privileges to which they feel entitled.

Figure 7.19 reproduces a discourse of women as "hysterical" when they claim space and speak up against injustices. This is explicitly stated in another meme, which characterises #MeToo as "hysteria". Furthermore, a number of memes characterise #MeToo as a witch hunt, which I will explore in the following. Utilising the "Unpopular Opinion Puffin" meme (as discussed in Chapter 6), Figure 7.19

shares an opinion expected to be unpopular: that #MeToo is a "modern witch hunt". Invoking "himpathy" by discursively framing the story from the perspective of the accused men through the use of the general "you" ("*You* are found guilty", "*Your* life is destroyed"), the meme privileges the male centrality and assumes innocence of the accused perpetrators.

Figure 7.19: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 04-11-2017.

Interestingly, though the meme uses the word "victim" in the headline, to refer to the women who speak out about the abuse that they endured, the meme frames the men as the "real victims" of #MeToo. The witch hunt then is instigated by Hollywood actresses who target men and destroy their lives. The witch hunt metaphor suggests that the men are innocent, or at least that their actions should not be met with such condemnation. However, at the same time it is suggested that the perpetrators should have been found guilty in a court of law before the women made public accusations. The concern and sympathy lie with the men whose lives are "destroyed". Victims of sexual abuse are ridiculed for jumping on "the victim train" – thus claiming victimisation to their own advantage.

The witch hunt metaphor was used in media and popular discourse during the height of #MeToo, as well as in the aftermath. A long line of famous people from the film industry such as Liam Neeson, Catherine Deneuve and Woody Allen (Chow, 2017; L. Collins, 2018; Deneuve, 2018; Greenfield, 2018; Mumford, 2018; Papenfuss, 2018) have used this metaphor. Naming #MeToo a modern witch hunt has some obvious misogynist traces, as it draws on a tradition of killing women who did not conform with the new capitalist societal norms of womanhood (Siapera, 2019). As Eugenia Siapera (2019) notes, online misogyny functions in similar ways

as the witch hunt did, in that it systematically prevents women from participating in the public debate and building the technological future. Calling #MeToo a witch hunt discursively constructs men as the victims of an unjust mob mentality, fuelled by moral panic and led by aggressive feminists who aim to destroy all men. The memes in my data set, however, indicate a sentiment of fatigue and a critique of #MeToo similar to those expressed by Neeson, Deneuve and Allen even though many of the memes were produced only a few days and weeks after Alyssa Milano's initial tweet on 15th October 2017.

The discursive construction of men as the real victims of #MeToo

As discussed in Chapter 6, the three famous perpetrators are often constructed as the real victims in the Internet memes. Similarly, some memes focus on the consequence of #MeToo for regular men, and in these memes, men are constructed as the real victims of #MeToo. Twenty-two memes have been coded as belonging to the theme "Men are the victims of #MeToo" and the following 3 figures are examples of this.

Figure 7.20 features an image macro positioning the difference between "What girls think guys want" and "What guys really want". This suggests that woman assume that men are only interested in sex and base their relationships solely on physical appearance – as symbolised by the photo of a woman's buttocks in see-through tights and the outline of a thong. Within this juxtaposition, women's assumptions about men are inherently wrong and unfair, whereas the reality – as seen in the bottom two boxes – is that men are "good guys", innocent of women's wrongful assumptions. The meme relies on a notion of gender difference in which men and women are positioned as binary oppositions and eternal adversaries/enemies (Jane, 2016a; Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018). Men and women will never understand each other as they are fundamentally different, and the consequence is that men are wrongfully accused of being sexual predators. While the title contextualises the meme as a consequence of #MeToo, tag number one[34] points out that "men are people too", thus expressing "himpathy". This meme could thus be read as mirroring the hashtag #NotAllMen which is an MRA response to feminist analyses of structural sexism and systemic rape culture, claiming that not all men harass, abuse

[34] The tags in this meme exemplify how some tags seem to be added simply for the sake of having three tags. The third tag in Figure 7.19 has thus been given the simple but apt name "Tag 3". I apply no further meaning to the choice of this name.

and assault women.[35] As such, the meme could be seen as a strategy of distraction, by directing the conversation from structural understandings of sexual violence to pointing out that many men are "loving and caring", with no desire to mistreat women. An affective homosocial bond is created here where a discourse of love (Ahmed, 2004, Chapter 6) sticks heterosexual men together through an othering of women, who are constructed as the opposite of love: sex without emotion where women, as the gate keepers of sex, can control men. This echoes manosphere subgroups (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Nicholas & Agius, 2017) where men share their inabilities to be in "loving and caring relationships" as stated in the meme.

Figure 7.20: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 18-12-2017.

Figure 7.21 frames men as the victims of #MeToo by focusing on how their sexual entitlement has been injured. The meme features an image of Will Smith, as his character Hancock from the 2008 film by the same name, as he kneels down to help a visibly injured woman. His hands are positioned as clearly not touching her and the image text suggests that he is waiting for permission before trying to help her. The headline contextualises this as the situation for men "flirting with girls after #metoo". This then raises an interesting point: if #MeToo has taught men to ask for permission before touching a woman's body, this in turn suggests that men would not previously ask for permission – suggesting that access to women's bodies is a right. The meme positions the notion of asking permission as absurd – as such

[35] For an overview of the #NotAllMen hashtag see Zimmerman (2014) and for feminist scholarly research on the phenomenon see Nicholas & Agius (2017) and Phillips & Milner (2017).

enforcing the male sexual entitlement to women's bodies. Men are thus disadvantaged by #MeToo which has limited their rights to women's bodies.

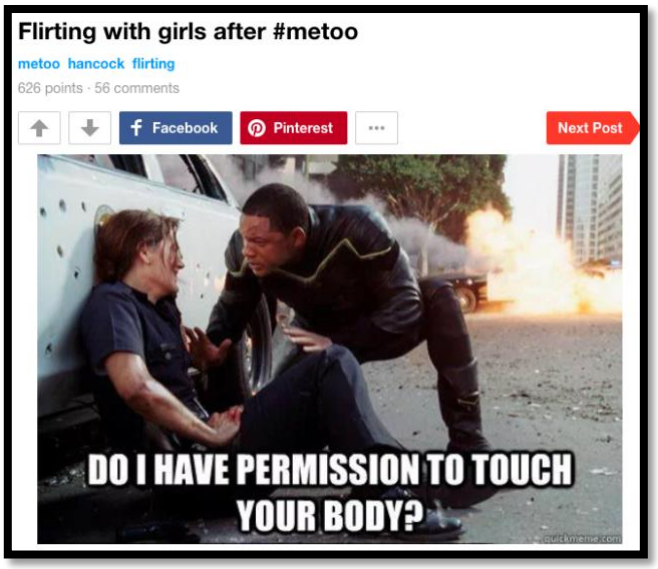


Figure 7.21: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 26-10-2017.

The meme in Figure 7.22 explicitly tells women to "leave all the white males alone". The meme references the viral video "Leave Britney alone", in which YouTuber Chris Crocker tearfully pleads with viewers to leave pop singer Britney Spears alone after she faced criticism for her comeback performance at the 2007 MTV Music Awards ("Know Your Meme, Leave Britney Alone," n.d.). The meme could be read in two ways: either as an ironic plea, making fun of men who claim to be the victims of #MeToo and thus speaking back against the general sentiment in my data set. Or it could be read as a plea for the perpetrators and the white men in particular for feeling that they are targeted specifically by #MeToo and by feminists in particular.

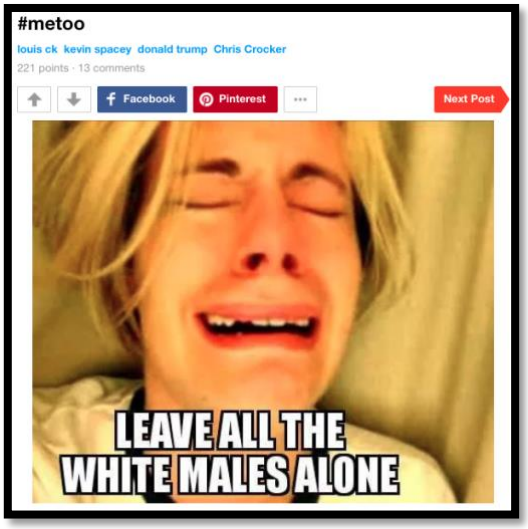


Figure 7.22: Louis C.K. data set from 9gag. 10-11-2017

The memes in Figures 7.20, 7.21 and 7.22 construct #MeToo as a gender war between men and women who are positioned as binary oppositions. Significantly, women are addressed from a male-centred point of view and do not have a voice of their own. Rather, through the humorous function of inclusion and exclusion, heterosexual male experiences are privileged in what seems to be an affective, homosocial bonding exercise. Himpathetic discourse constructs #MeToo as a war against men, who are unjustly accused of being sexually obsessed but who are also positioned as entitled to women's bodies – as seen in Figure 7.20. Men are thus considered the victims of #MeToo which seeks to limit their sexual entitlement and give their rightful power to women.

Targeting feminists

The following memes portray feminists as the symbol of #MeToo. Figure 7.23 argues that "Feminism has become a religion" with an image from what appears to be a march or a rally. The female symbol (or Venus symbol) painted around the woman's eye, and her earnest expression towards the sky, is reminiscent to that of a cult-follower. The notion that feminism has become a religion suggests that feminism is a belief as strong as a religion, with leaders and followers, but also that it is a movement grounded in belief rather than fact. It suggests a level of power which is seen as threatening. The title of the meme suggests that this is not a recent development, though the context of #MeToo would suggest that feminism in turn has become more visible and popular (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminism's criticism of hierarchical power structures is thus seen as threatening. Which leads to the question, whose position does feminism threaten by questioning hegemonic power structures? The answer must be (assuming an intersectional feminism): the straight, white man. Within the context of #MeToo, feminism must thus be considered a threat to male sexual entitlement.

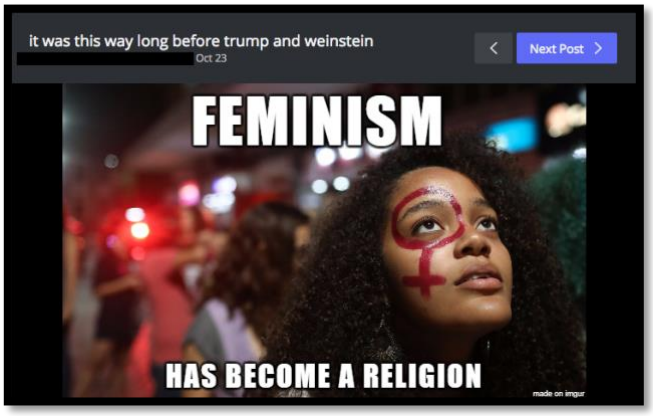


Figure 7.23: Harvey Weinstein data set from Imgur. 23-10-2017.

The meme in Figure 7.24 focus on the allegations against Harvey Weinstein specifically. The meme relies on a classic meme discussing which one of two opposing sides would win in a fight. On one side of the fight, Weinstein is characterised as a "powerful Hollywood boi"[36], thus characterised by his successful career and his position of power. On the other side are a group of women protesting in a what could be an anti-Trump rally – perhaps the 2017 Women's March (because of the "Nasty" sign referencing Trump calling Hillary Clinton a nasty woman during their presidential campaign). The women are characterised as "a couple of broken dishwashers" – suggesting a popular misogynist trope, that a woman's place is in the kitchen. Calling them broken dishwashers suggests that these women, who use their voice and claim visibility in the public sphere, have stepped outside of where they belong – thus failing to live up to their domestic duties and failing to perform womanhood. The contrast between Weinstein being characterised by his career, and the women being characterised by domesticity (dishwashers), reproduces the cultural and historical gender dichotomies of the public and private sphere. The question of which of the two sides would win in a fight is rhetorical and it is also not the point of the meme. Rather, the meme humorously positions women, and particularly feminists, as the butt of the joke, avoiding the issues of Weinstein's abuse altogether. A meta message of the meme could thus be a positioning of men and women on either side, fighting for visibility and power within a public discourse, which is constructed as a zero-sum game within the manosphere: if women gain visibility and a voice, men in turn lose visibility and voice.

[36] A slang term for "boy" used in both popular cultural texts and Internet language.

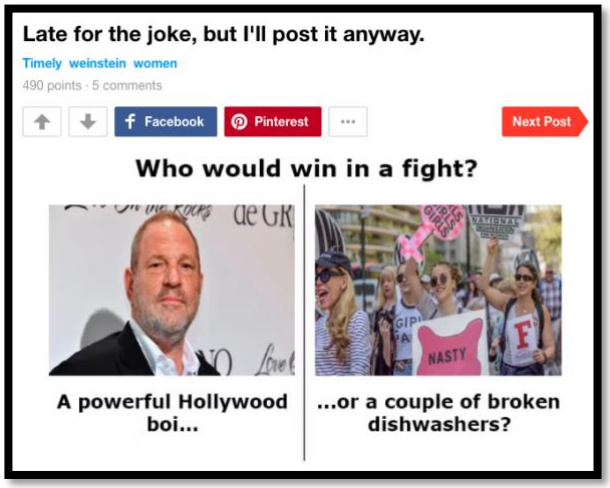


Figure 7.24: Harvey Weinstein data set from 9gag. 01-11-2017.

The meme in Figure 7.25 directs the conversation back to sexual assault. Expanding on the classic "glass half full" vs. "glass half empty" explanation of the difference between optimists and pessimists, the meme adds a third perspective: that of a feminist: "the glass is being raped". The meme implies that feminists have some sort of obsession with rape – to the extent that they will see rape where there is none. In the context of #MeToo, the suggestion is that feminists accuse innocent men of rape – suggesting that feminist critiques of rape culture are taken to mean that feminists think that all men are rapists. The title of the post refers to Black Lives Matter (which is repeated in tag number one "GLM": "Glasses Lives Matter") – a movement highlighting systemic violence against black people in the United States (Blacklivesmatter.com, n.d.). This reference then compares feminists to activists against racism in a combined ridicule of both. Significantly, the meme directs the discussion from men's sexual abuse to framing feminists as the aggressors who cause injury to men.

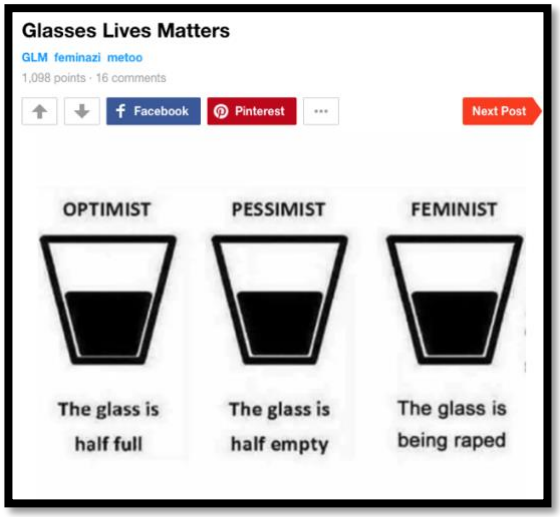


Figure 7.25: #MeToo data set from 9gag. 25-11-2017.

It is important to note how address works to construct feminists as a category of others in these three memes. Feminists are portrayed as women only, as cult-like people, and as people who are obsessed with sexual assault. Similar to the representation of women, feminists do not have a voice in the memes, they are ridiculed for their activism and discursively othered.

It is important to note how #MeToo is characterised in the data set as a moment for women and by women. Men are generally considered the targets and #MeToo becomes the site of a gender war. #MeToo is positioned less as a way for women to share their experiences of sexual violence, and more as a debate between two opposing sides: feminists and men. In this sense #MeToo becomes a story about capacity and injury (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Within discourses of popular misogyny, men are seen as injured by women and feminists: when women gain rights, men lose rights. Within this zero-sum logic, any advances for feminist aims and gender equality are considered men's loss. As such, MRAs aim towards restoring the capacity of men and of certain heteronormative notions of hegemonic masculinity, as well as patriarchy itself (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 35). Following this logic, men are positioned as the victims of #MeToo and #Metoo is positioned as an example of political correctness gone mad and feminism gone too far.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the strategies of distraction in my data set, which shift the focus from sexual violence and victims, to men's injury. My data set revealed three major strategies of distraction: politicising #MeToo, framing #MeToo as a Hollywood-specific problem and finally through a backlash against #MeToo.

The first section discussed memes that politicise #MeToo and target representatives of the US Democratic Party. The memes draw connections between the Democrats and the Hollywood men accused of abuse in order to point out a liberal conspiracy. #MeToo is constructed as a Hollywood-specific problem, as discussed in the second part of the chapter. This conceptualises sexual abuse and perpetrators as existing within a Hollywood vacuum outside of "normal" society. The final section of the chapter turned to the backlash against #MeToo, women and feminists. Here I found that #MeToo was characterised as having gone too far. The

notion that it is a witch hunt against innocent men paints men as the victims and women and feminists as obsessed with sexual violence.

The chapter draws out some significant patterns in how men and women are represented, as well as how this intersects with sex and, ultimately, characterises sexual violence. First of all, male, heterosexual centrality is privileged and assumed. This is evident through affective signalling of homosociality and belonging, as well as himpathetic discourse which excuses men's violence against women and assumes men's innocence. Women, in turn, are either made invisible or antagonised. When failing to perform sexual attractiveness, while simultaneously taking up space in the public sphere (which is considered male domain), their ridicule, exclusion and ultimately violence is justified. The framing of all of these discourses as humorous allows for #MeToo to be characterised as movement of feminist killjoys, and it allows for a perpetuation of rape culture in which sexual violence is reconceptualised as just sex.

The chapter has demonstrated the way in which a significant number of memes in my data set produce discourses of distraction. It is important to focus on this tendency, as it distracts from analyses of sexual violence as a systemic problem and of the structural complications of rape culture. While #MeToo functioned as a networked viral event to create attention to the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence, the backlash on the three platforms indicates that #MeToo is considered a threat to all men. Finally, the strategies of distraction and backlash normalise a rape culture in which sexual violence is trivialised and to some extent legitimised.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis has provided a critical account of the way in which sexual violence is discursively produced in Internet memes uploaded to humorous discursive spaces online. Through the interdisciplinary integration of feminist theory on discourse, affect and humour with the emerging field of online misogyny, the thesis has contributed to understandings of how platforms that are advertised as harmless, fun and entertaining, reproduce rape culture and privilege a male, heterosexual centrality. The thesis builds methodologically on the emerging methods of Internet research and data collection, but provides a close reading of a sample of Internet memes collected using #MeToo as a case study. This provides unique insight into an under-researched area of knowledge. The purpose of the thesis is to challenge the just-a-joke discourse by taking humorous meme production seriously.

This final chapter first discusses in more detail the outcomes and contributions of the research in relation to the overall aims of the thesis. This includes considerations of the ways in which the research contributes to existing theoretical and methodological work on rape culture, humour, Internet memes and the manosphere. Finally, the chapter considers directions and possibilities for future research.

Outcomes and contributions

The first overarching aim of this thesis was to investigate how sexual violence, within a continuum (L. Kelly, 1988), is discursively constructed in the humorous Internet memes in my data set. This aim was discussed throughout all chapters of my analysis, where it resurfaced primarily as a reconceptualization of sexual violence as just sex (Gavey, 2019). The humour running through the data set frames sexual violence through a discourse of trivialisation. My analysis found that sexual violence is constructed in one of four general, overlapping, and mutually constitutive ways: as just sex; as non-existent; as structured around victim blaming discourses; or reframed to highlight male injury.

The thesis has argued how the just sex discourse runs throughout the data set where a variety of experiences of sexual violence is framed as 'normal' within heterosexual sex. Sexual violence in this context might be reframed as sexy. Some memes, for example, invited users to evaluate the sexual attractiveness of victims, as if to consider whether they themselves would be interested in having sex with them. Nicola Gavey's (2019) notion of the male sexual drive discourse proved a useful way to analyse this, as it helped to understand how the construction of men's sexuality as uncontrollable deems sexual violence a logical consequence. The consequence of constructing sexual violence as just sex, I argued, was that it made the experiences of the victims invisible. Sometimes this was explicitly argued in discourses of discrediting and dismissing the stories by claiming that the assaults never happened in the first place. Other times it was expressed in subtle ways by simply referring to assaults and harassment in minimising ways that frame the incidences as consensual, such as "sex" and "touching". The minimisation tactic is emphasised by humorous discourses which trivialise the victims' experiences. Another recurring trope was the myth of the prevalence of false accusations. This is particularly widespread in memes that discuss the Hollywood actresses, who often are presumed to have initiated some sort of sexual relations with Weinstein in order to advance their careers. The victims are then presented as the butt of the joke when the memes reveal their "true" nature.

Victim blaming discourses, as discussed in Chapter 5, are prevalent throughout my data set and point to tendencies to blame victims for men's abuse. This primarily happened through perpetuation of rape myths, such as the prevalence of rape fantasies that reproduce the notion that women are sexually aroused by sexual violence. Victim blaming discourses also reproduce the notion that it is women's responsibility to avoid sexual violence by removing themselves from certain situations and avoiding certain men. As discussed in Chapter 6, the construction of Weinstein as disgusting and monstrous is considered a warning sign, which in turn means that women should have known better than to "put themselves" in situations where Weinstein would unavoidably assault them. As such these memes are examples of rebellious humour with a disciplinary function (Billig, 2005), as they ridicule Weinstein but simultaneously discipline women and police their presence in the public sphere.

The notion that men are injured by women's accusations of sexual violence is a recurring theme. This was evident in the discussions of false accusations in Chapter

5. Here I evidenced how "himpathetic" (Manne, 2018a) discourses cast men as the real victims of #MeToo. Chapter 6 pointed to how fans and culture consumers were framed as the real victims of #MeToo, as their viewing pleasure was disrupted by the damage done to the career of their idols. This was also evident in the discussion of the backlash against #MeToo in Chapter 7, where I evidenced how framing #MeToo as a witch hunt against all men redirects the conversation from sexual violence against women, to how men are injured by no longer having unlimited access to women's bodies. This analysis then evidences how the notion of male sexual entitlement is reproduced on these social media platforms.

These findings resonate with previous research into rape culture and the discursive construction of sexual violence. Recalling Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth's (1993, p. vii) definition of rape culture, as outlined in Chapter 2: "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women", allows for an understanding of heterosexual sexuality as inherently violent and violence as a 'natural' part of heterosexual sex. As discussed above, when sexual violence is reconceptualised as sex and when male sexuality is constructed as uncontrollable with an undeniable entitlement to women's bodies, this is an example of rape culture. This thesis then sits within the feminist discussion of the discursive representation of sexual violence. My thesis evidences how sexual violence is framed as sex rather than violence, while I refer to the scholarship (Boyle, 2019b; Gavey, 2019; L. Kelly, 1988) in arguing in favour of an understanding of sexual violence as existing within a continuum. This takes into account the many different experiences women have of men's violence and allows for an understanding of sexual violence as a structural problem within the normative construction of heterosexual sex.

The second research aim: the portrayal of victims and perpetrators

The second aim builds on the first aim: to identify the way victims and perpetrators are portrayed in the Internet memes. My thesis evidences how sexual violence is characterised in different ways depending on who the victims and the perpetrators are. The figures of the victim and perpetrator are mutually constitutive: victims are portrayed as legitimate when perpetrators are considered legitimate, and vice versa. This is emphasised by pointing to how absurd and unlikely it would be for the "good guys" of Hollywood, Tom Hanks and Keanu Reeves, to commit any kind of sexual harassment or assault – as discussed in Chapter 6. The three perpetrators are, albeit in

very different ways and to very different degrees, broadly characterised as likely perpetrators – whose abuse the public should have been aware of.

Weinstein is characterised as the legitimate perpetrator par excellence: the disgust-inducing monstrous other. He is primarily characterised through affective discourses of disgust. His fat body is constructed as always potentially threatening, destructive and perverted, which in turn is framed as a warning sign for his victims: they should have known better and are responsible for his assaults. The humorous discourse employs the notion of rebellious humour with a disciplinary function as it polices hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously ridiculing women for not keeping clear of his monstrous body.

In contrast to the portrayal of Weinstein, the memes about Spacey are characterised by a sense of ambivalence. While he is celebrated for his iconic roles and idolised by the users, he is also ridiculed for the way he came out and characterised primarily as a homosexual other and a paedophile. His victims in turn are portrayed significantly differently than Weinstein's. Apart from the dismissal of Rapp as a legitimate victim (due to the fact that he is now an adult man and the fact that he is homosexual and thus portrayed as always readily available for sex), child victims are not discredited but rather used as a means to create the most potentially offensive and extreme jokes about child sexual abuse. While Spacey is both ridiculed for his homosexuality, and the way he came out, and antagonised as a perpetrator of child sexual abuse, the memes are primarily characterised by a sense of ambivalence: his fans have been derived of the culture production that Spacey, the actor, was part of.

C.K. is characterised much more unequivocally by fandom and identification. Though his fatness and baldness is presented as sexually unattractive, and as such a failure of masculinity (Harker, 2016), he differs from Weinstein's disgust-inducing monstrosity. Because he embraces his imperfect appearance and uses it for comic effect, he is celebrated rather than ridiculed and is characterised as a much less likely perpetrator. His actions are however framed in similar ways as Weinstein's: as expected and obvious – through his on-stage and on-screen behaviour. His victims, similar to Weinstein's, are blamed for his abuse as they should have known the risks considering his repetitive alluding to his compulsive masturbation. His actions are largely excused, denied and reconceptualised. His victims are largely dismissed, and their experiences are made invisible. His actions are most obviously dismissed through a humorous discourse that focuses on male masturbation and, as such,

exemplifies how the online humour functions as gendered communities of inclusion and exclusion.

I dedicated a large part of Chapter 5 to discuss the portrayal of female victims in detail, as they were held to a different and more complex level of credibility (than child victims and the few male victims), and because this portrayal was particularly gendered. Their credibility is filtered through a male heterosexual perspective dividing legitimate and non-legitimate victims into these categories based on sexual attractiveness and sexual agency. Non-legitimate victims are either old women (like Hillary Clinton) or fat women (like Rebel Wilson), while legitimate victims are exemplified by Emma Watson's white, slim and young body. Watson is furthermore considered a legitimate victim because she embodies the virgin of the virgin-vamp dichotomy. Women who, on the other hand, present as sexually active, taking control of their own sexuality and put their bodies on display, are categorically portrayed as non-legitimate victims. Furthermore, the fact that Watson did not accuse Weinstein of assault, makes her a more convincing victim. In fact, my research shows that victims are only considered credible when incorporating traditional rape victim tropes, such as isolation, shame and trauma. Victims that speak up and appear in public (despite this being a part of their work) are discredited. The consequence of delegitimising certain forms of victimhood, and framing victims as outsiders on the male discursive spaces, is an othering, exclusion and silencing of victims. Consequently, my research shows how being recognisable (Butler, 1990) as a victim of sexual violence means limiting one's presence and voice in the public sphere and the public debate.

These findings resonate with previous research into discursive constructions of victims and perpetrators. The notion of 'Real rape' (Estrich, 1987), conceptualises sexual violence as always violent and committed by strangers, while the 'trauma of rape' discourse (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011) constructs trauma as the only 'right' reaction to sexual violence and delegitimises other ways of 'doing' victim. Finally, the Virgin-vamp dichotomy (Benedict, 1992) was useful for analysing the way in which women's sexual agency was used as an argument against their legitimacy as victims.

The third research aim: the discursive construction of gender and sexuality

This aim enabled me to explore how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed and how this relates to sexual violence. My overall argument is the way

in which the three social media platforms function as male discursive spaces based on the way in which the memes discursively, either explicitly or implicitly, frame a male centrality and perspective as the norm. While Chapter 4 most specifically provides evidence of this, the male centrality is evident and discussed throughout my thesis. Exploring how the male sexual desire is discursively framed and how homosexuality is ridiculed and othered, I then argue that the platforms also produce a heterosexual centrality. Some of the rhetoric (tropes and lingo) resonates with and reproduces the same gendered logic as that of the manosphere (Ging, 2017).

While male experiences and concerns are privileged, women, in turn, are othered. They do not get a voice. They are talked about. And through the practice of humour, they are excluded. Andrea Braithwaite's (2016) words have echoed throughout my thesis, as women have been sexually (or otherwise) objectified, they have been made invisible as their stories have been ignored and invalidated, and they have been made into enemies when considered a threat to masculinity and male spaces.

This was evident in the humorous reproduction of masturbation in C.K. memes. He was celebrated as an anti-hero for his failure to conform to hegemonic masculinity and especially for his framing of perpetual masturbation as a result of rejection from women. Masturbation is framed as a manhood act (Moloney & Love, 2018), which signals homosociality and affective belonging for the users. Furthermore, the memes about C.K. exemplified male sexual entitlement with male ejaculation being at the centre of discourses about his sexual harassment of women.

The thesis has proved how heteronormativity is prevalent in the memes. Sexuality, like gender, is often unspoken, but as I argue, primarily in Chapters 4 and 6, heterosexuality is assumed and implicitly indicated through discursive positioning of heterosexual sexual relationships as the norm. While homosexuality is a large theme and widely commented on throughout the Spacey data set, this is discussed through discourses of othering, where male homosexuality is assumed to only exist outside of these three websites. It is discussed as something from which the users can distance themselves and indicate affective 'likeness'. Male heterosexuality is thus constructed in binary opposition to male homosexuality: while male homosexuality is characterised as perverted, hypersexual and always anal sex, male heterosexuality is portrayed as clean, normative and an indicator of masculinity. The notion that homosexuality is perverted, abnormal and sexually deviant is taken to the extreme in the discursive link drawn between homosexuality and paedophilia. Through the use

of the slide of metonymy, the paedophile and the homosexual man are stuck together in a discourse suggesting a causal relation between the two (Ahmed, 2004). The paedophile is constructed as always homosexual and the homosexual is constructed as always potentially a paedophile.

These findings resonate with the findings on previous research into online misogyny and the manosphere (Ging, 2017; Jane, 2017a; Manne, 2018a). As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature on online misogyny has pointed to how misogyny, often expressed through rape jokes and rape threats, has become the invisible norm (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and the lingua franca (Jane, 2017a) online. The exclusion and othering of women in the memes draws lines to this scholarship and furthermore, the positioning of #MeToo as a feminist moment targeting all men, links to the literature on the manosphere about positioning men and women as binary opposites and eternal enemies (Jane, 2016a; Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018). This also resonates with the humour research pointing to how sexist humour relies on a gender-difference logic (Shifman & Lemish, 2010) and employs a practice of gendered inclusion and exclusion (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). This alludes to the notion of a zero-sum game where gender equality and women gaining rights is framed as logically taking away natural rights from men, thus again speaking to the discourse of men's injury (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Braithwaite, 2014; T. Shepherd et al., 2015).

As my thesis has shown, the heterosexual man is considered the norm on the three platforms and women and homosexual men are discursively othered through humorous practices of inclusion and exclusion. The homosexual and heterosexual man is mutually constructed through the boundary work, which is most prominently expressed through a heteronormative desire directed towards women. Women then primarily function as an indicator and confirmation of heteronormative desire.

The fourth research aim: humour, affect, rape culture and online misogyny

My final research aim was to facilitate a dialogue between studies of humour, affect, rape culture and online misogyny, utilising #MeToo as a case study. In Chapter 2 I reviewed the literature combining those fields and addressed how they enabled me to conduct a feminist analysis into discursive constructions of sexual violence in humorous Internet memes. My major contributions are to the research on rape culture and online humour. While I draw on some feminist research of affect, I mainly use this as a tool to expand on my analysis. I would, however, argue that I

have contributed to the knowledge on rape culture within feminist theory and to the field of feminist digital media studies by identifying the production of rape culture in Internet memes specifically and identifying how humour contributes to this production.

In Chapter 2 I identified a gap in the literature on the manosphere. While research has been conducted separately into sexist humour online, into rape culture online, and into humour in Internet memes, research that combines these areas is non-existent. My specific focus, investigating rape culture in Internet memes on humorous discursive spaces, thus provides a unique contribution to the feminist research into online discourses.

My unique contribution to the field of feminist media studies

On a broader level, my research contributes to different fields of inquiry due to my transdisciplinary approach. My research contributes to the field of gender studies and feminist theory in three ways. Firstly, it contributes to scholarly discussions of the discourse and language of sexual violence (Boyle, 2019b; Gavey, 2019). Secondly, it offers an investigation into the discursive construction of sexual violence on social media and evidences how some of the fundamental aspects of rape culture are still perpetuated online, as discussed by scholars before me (Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Phillips & Milner, 2017; Thrift, 2014) as well as how sexual violence continues to be framed as "just sex" and a part of normative heterosexual sex. Thirdly, it offers new insights into the gendered boundary work on certain social media platforms, which points to how women and homosexual men are discursively excluded through homosocial manhood acts that uphold and reproduce certain forms of hegemonic masculinity.

My research contributes to feminist media studies by providing knowledge into under-researched social media platforms. Most of the feminist research has looked into discourses on Twitter, where most of the research on #MeToo also naturally takes place. The research on the manosphere has focused mainly on sub-cultural platforms such as 4chan and Reddit (Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Phillips, 2015b) as well as MRA-specific platforms (Ging, 2017, 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nicholas & Agius, 2017). While my research has not set out to outline the manosphere, it does evidence how manosphere rhetoric spills into these platforms and shapes some of the discourse.

My research also contributes to research into online humour and specifically the humour in Internet memes. Showing how this new format produces an often disciplinary humour (Billig, 2005) which privileges hegemonic heteronormative masculinity while excluding women and homosexual men, my thesis has proven how online humour and meme-production is anything but harmless. Furthermore, the thesis has shown how this humour is particularly extreme and deliberately offensive in making fun of sexual violence and child sexual abuse. While humour could be a way of challenging the systems in place that enable perpetrators to carry out their abuse, my thesis shows that, apart from a tendency to ridicule the monster par-excellence, Weinstein, the humorous discourse tends to either distract from the actual abuse or make the victims the butt of the joke. My thesis then proves how the "just-a-joke"-discourse frames disciplinary humour as rebellious humour. The just-a-joke discourse also legitimises a rape culture in which male abusers are exonerated and female victims are blamed and held responsible.

Furthermore, my research provides a unique contribution to the emerging but limited work into #MeToo. Using #MeToo as my case study enabled me to conduct in-depth research into how sexual violence is discussed and portrayed on the three platforms specifically. While my thesis makes no claims to map rape discourse on all of the Internet and makes no attempt to trace the spread of individual memes across different platforms, it has provided an in-depth analysis of how sexual violence is discursively constructed on three specific platforms. The specificity of the case-study approach thus allowed for unique insights into this topic within the context of the under-researched scholarship on #MeToo. While the research on Reddit is quite substantial at this point, also from feminist perspectives and with a focus on constructions of gender, the thesis provides unique insights into the discourse on Imgur and 9gag, which is very under-researched. The thesis then makes a case for the case-study approach to research on digital media. This field has often been dominated by big data analysis and network analysis, with less attention to content and discourse produced on specific platforms. Furthermore, the research that has been conducted into content on platforms has been dominated particularly by research on Twitter. My thesis then provides specific insights into humorous content production on male-discursive spaces, which might be representative of the production of rape discourse on social media more widely.

Recommendations for further research

At the time of concluding on this thesis, two years have passed since I logged onto Twitter and saw those first #MeToo tweets. Looking back, it has been clear that it was indeed the watershed moment that it felt like at the time. The scholarship on #MeToo is slowly starting to emerge and apart from the research articles and book chapters that I have discussed in Chapter 2, academic books are now starting to come out, including for example Karen Boyle (2019a), Bianca Fileborn & Rachel Loney-Hayes (2019), and Heather Savigny (2020). This goes along with a number of non-academic books being published at the moment of writing (Helmore, 2019). While the scholarship and the non-academic work investigates cultural, political and popular implications of #MeToo, as well as the media backlash against the moment, no attention has been paid to the humorous backlash – let alone the backlash within the production Internet memes. My thesis has then laid the groundwork into this under-researched area. It would, however, be important to trace the development since #MeToo. I would suggest making inquiries into the discursive construction of sexual violence on 9gag, Reddit and Imgur since 2017 in an effort to trace any potential development and change in relation to both #MeToo as well as the continuum of sexual violence. Similarly, it would be interesting to extend the research to map how attitudes to #MeToo have been negotiated and differed across a variety of platforms, including mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as more subcultural platforms on the manosphere. While my research has made initial inquiries into a small number of social media platforms, research that compares a variety of platforms and traces the spread across both sub-cultural and mainstream platforms could provide useful insights.

As discussed throughout this thesis, while Reddit has been given a lot of scholarly attention, very little research has been conducted into the discursive environments on 9gag and Imgur. As my research suggests, the users on these platforms signal an affective sense of belonging and community, similar to that on Reddit, in which they signal difference and a sense of uniqueness. More research into this would be vital for understanding the significance for platform-specific user identities and affordances for navigation on social media platforms.

One of the questions I have often been posed with when presenting my research at conferences, is whether I have investigated who the users of the platforms are and how they would describe the reasoning and intention of the memes. While I have made an argument for the validity and significance of research into the

discursive reproductions and assumptions, conducting ethnographic research and interviewing the users of the platforms would certainly provide some significant insights to follow up on my thesis. Furthermore, investigations into the communication in the comments sections below all memes would also be of interest to further research, as it could both identify hierarchies within each platform and investigate how the discursive tone emerges, which, as my research suggests, seems to escalate in order to provoke, shock and ultimately secure most likes and up-votes.

While the literature on the manosphere and on online misogyny point to the connection between maleness, heterosexuality and whiteness, I have not particularly focused on race throughout my analysis. As discussed in Chapter 4, people of colour are only present in very few of the memes. While part of this is due to my search terms, and the fact that only white people were among the early accusers, it also suggests that whiteness is assumed on the platforms, the same way that maleness and heterosexuality is. The representation of race on the three platforms, particularly in intersection with gender and sexuality, would however be an important area to investigate for further research. Furthermore, as scholars have evidenced before me (Brigley Thompson, 2018; Ging, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nicholas & Agius, 2017; Phillips, 2015b), alt-right rhetoric plays a significant part in the discursive construction of masculinity on the manosphere, where people of colour and non-western people are antagonised. While my data set only evidences few examples of alt-right rhetoric, an investigation into the three social media platforms more broadly could, however, trace the spread and production of alt-right rhetoric on social media outside of designated alt-right and manosphere spaces.

The intersection of sexual violence and humour in meme-production would also be interesting for further research. I would advise on further research into specific rape-memes, such as the "Pedobear" (which I have discussed in Chapter 6), the "Rape Train" (which appears in two memes in my data set but which I have not been able to include in the discussion) and other memes I have come across in my initial research, such as the "Rape Sloth". An investigation into such rape-memes and, particularly, their spread and development over time, could be a subject for further research.

Since that fateful day in October 2017 when I logged onto Twitter and saw the first #MeToo tweets, I do think things have changed. Despite the problematic aspects that inevitably follow social media moments, such as the lack of Intersectional considerations for differences in experiences of sexual violence across

race, age, nationalities, class and similar, and despite the fact that white, rich Hollywood actresses for the most part have been the faces of the event, #MeToo started a conversation about the systemic nature of men's sexual violence against women. It started conversations across industries, workplaces, media and interpersonal discussions. It started conversations across nations and large parts of the (primarily Western) world. There is, however, a long way from conversation to political action and real change. But change begins with the conversation. I hope my research can be the starting point for similar conversations about the backlash against #MeToo. I believe my research has shed some light on how humour construction online subtly reproduces norms about gender and sexuality. And I particularly believe that my research has evidenced how misogynist humour online still shapes and reinforces rape culture.

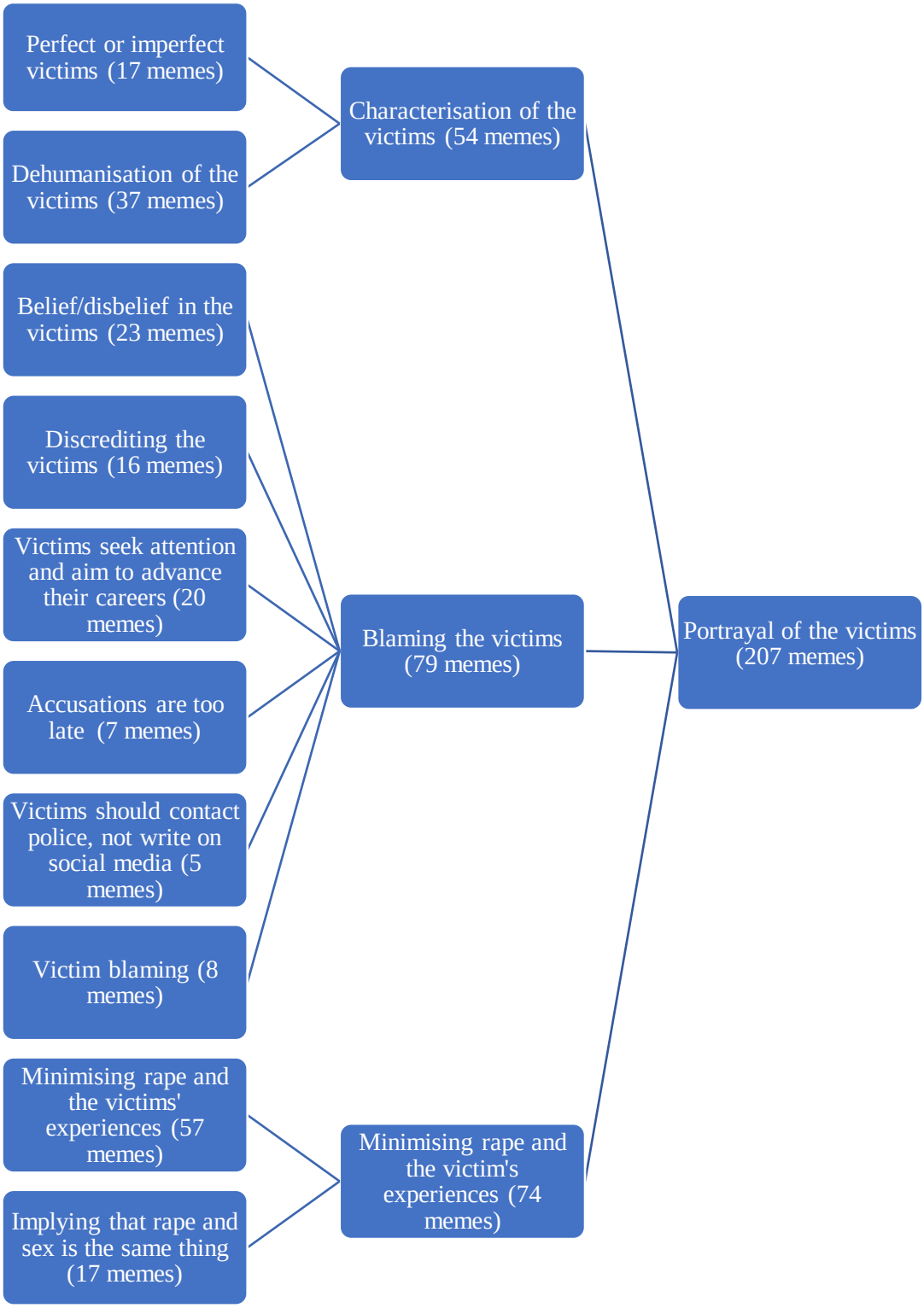
Appendix 1: Coding table: overview of all themes with number of memes

Paedophilia	213
Spacey's coming out	116
Homosexuality	74
Minimizing sexual violence and the victims' experiences	57
Assumed male and heterosexual identity of users	49
Comparing perpetrators to other perpetrators	47
The perpetrators' careers	44
Distancing oneself from the perpetrators	42
Hollywood is the problem	41
Dehumanisation of perpetrators	41
Dehumanisation of victims	37
Politicising the issue	36
Coming out as an excuse for bad behaviour	30
Material which proofs abusive behaviour or mirrors offscreen persona	24
Ridiculing perpetrators	23
Men are the victims of #MeToo	22
OP compares themselves to rapists	21
#MeToo has gone too far	20
The fans and culture consumers are the victims	20
Celebrating the perpetrators	19
Celebration of masturbation	19
Implying that rape and sex is the same thing	17
Perfect or imperfect victims	17
Discrediting the victims	16
Disbelief in victims	15
Assumption that accusations are false	14
The magnitude of #MeToo	14
Women write #MeToo or claim rape to advance their careers	13
The casting couch	13
Disbelief or frustration that the perpetrator is accused	12
The perpetrators are the victims	11
Discrediting #MeToo	9
Targeting women or wives connected to the perpetrators	9
Belief in victims	8
Perfect or imperfect perpetrators	8
Victim blaming	8
Anti-feminist	8
Victims are attention seekers	7
Accusations are too late	7
Pro-#MeToo	7
#MeToo is a witch hunt	5
Double standard within #MeToo	5
Victims should contact police not post on social media	5
Anti-Semitism	4

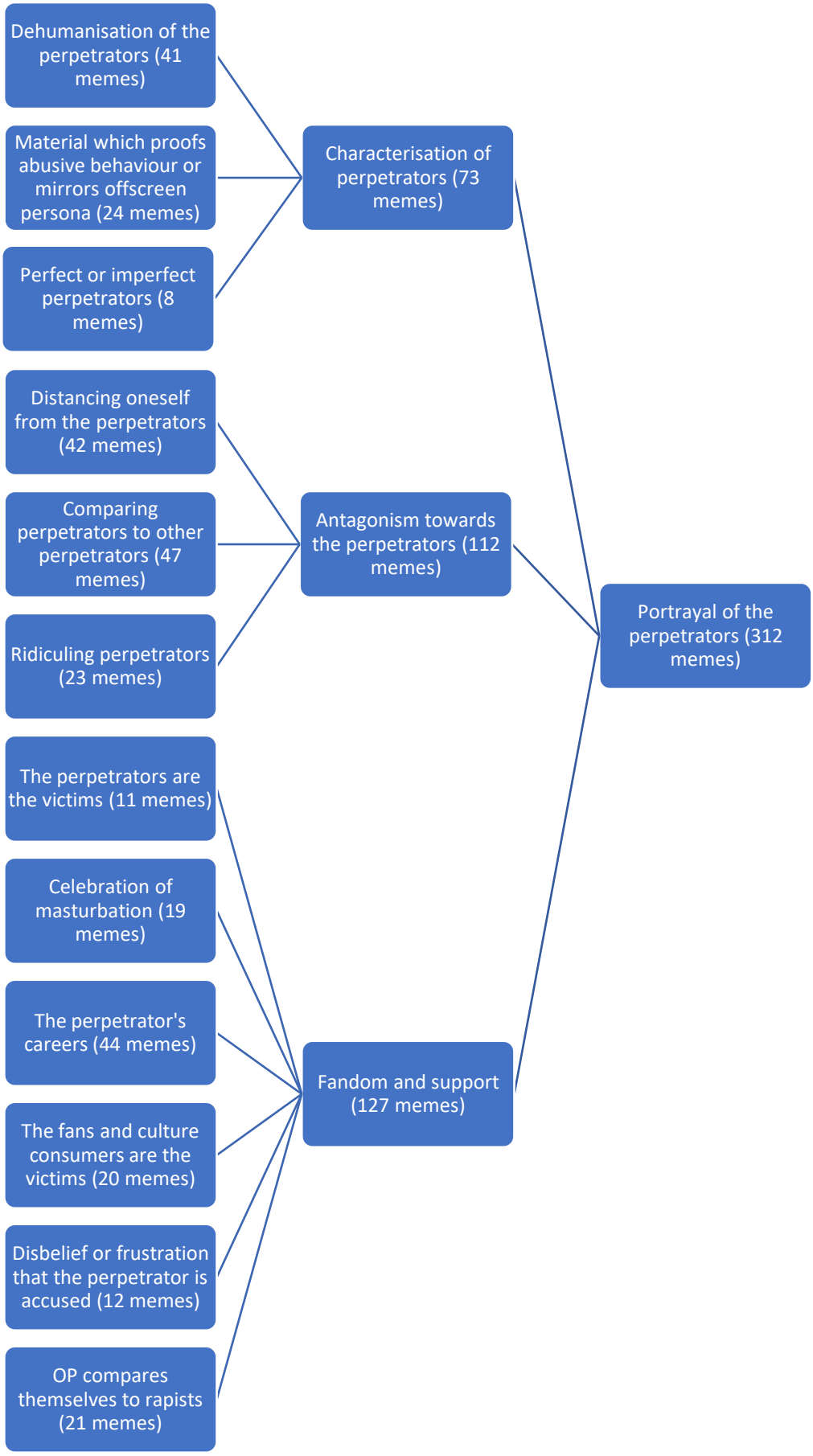
Appendix 2: The grouping of themes in three stages: from major topics to sub-topics to themes

Chapter 4:

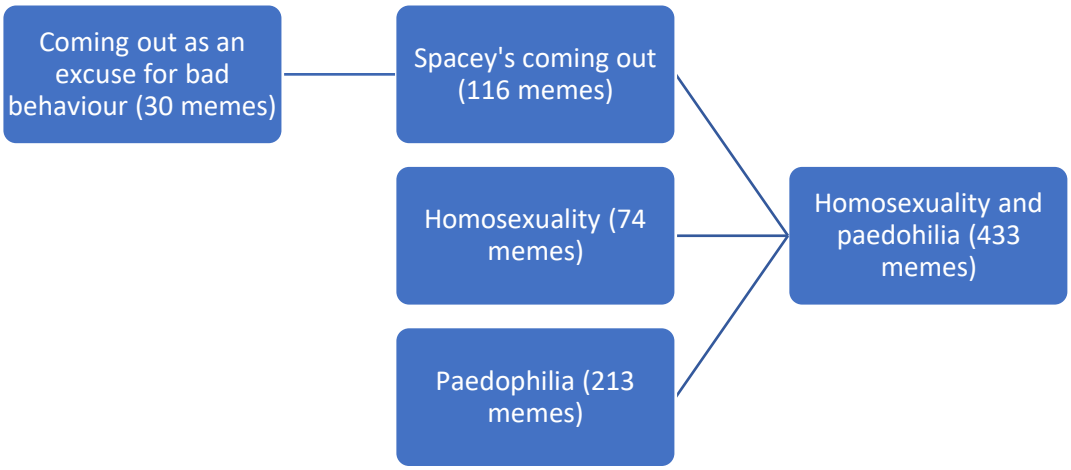
Chapter 5: Portrayal of the victims:



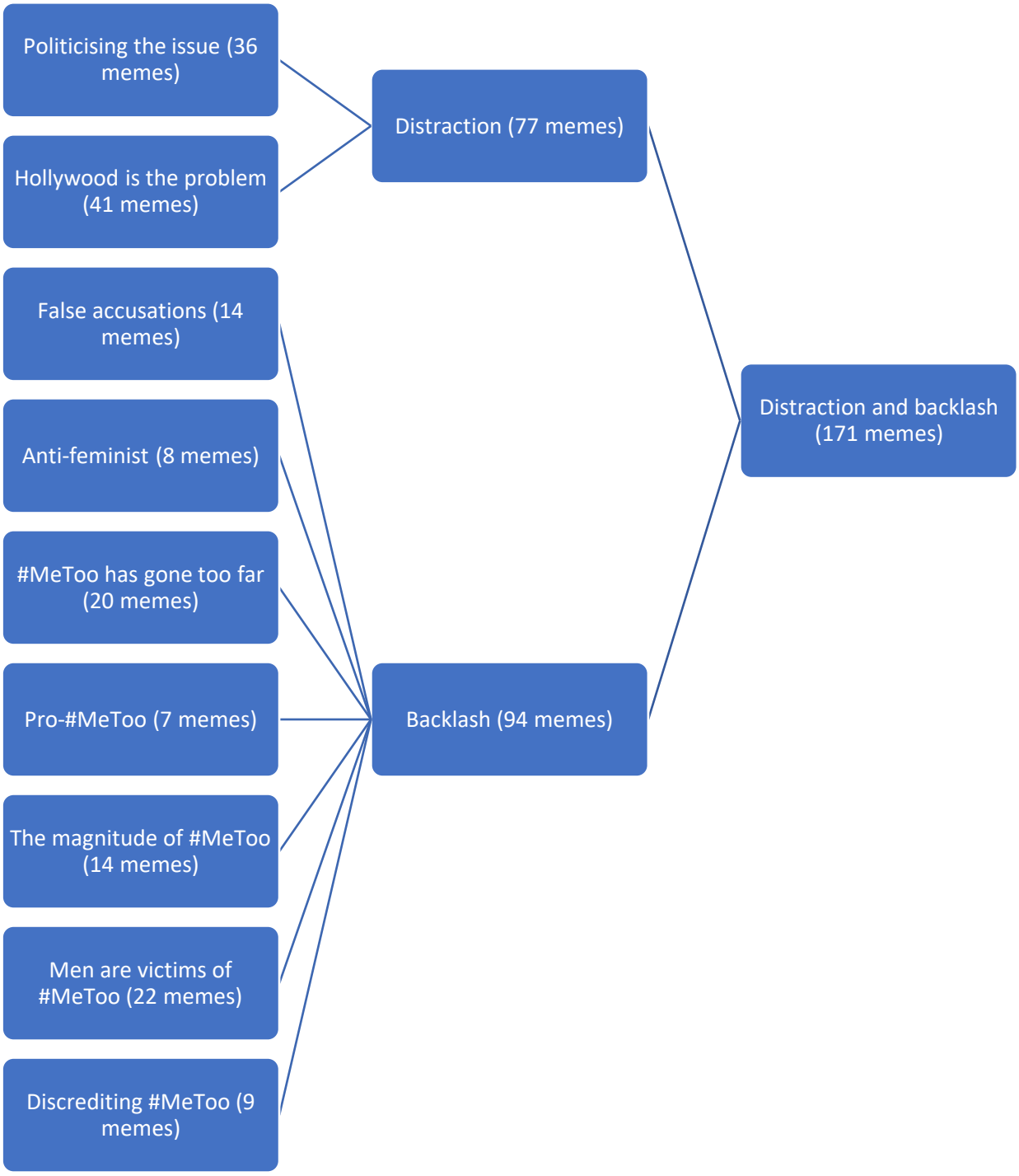
Chapter 6: Portrayal of the perpetrators:



Chapter 6: Homosexuality and paedophilia



Chapter 7: Distraction and backlash



Appendix 3: Overview of discarded themes

Unable to classify	13
Distinction between real assault and minor discretions	4
Meta commentary on platform/users/OP	4
OP shares own experience of abuse or assault	4
The pound symbol	4
Comparing fictional rape to #MeToo	3
Spacey pun	2
Ridiculing people who criticise #MeToo or support perpetrators	1
Confusion about the allegations	1
Men are afraid to seem sexist	1
Misandry	1
Separate the art from the artist	1

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