

SNARKING TO REPAIR: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF R/FUNDIESNARKUNCENSORED

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines how participants in one anonymous online forum, r/FundieSnarkUncensored, reversed a trend of bullying and targeted hate by reinventing their community as one based in storytelling. In this study, I draw on a feminist and cultural rhetorics methodology to advance a more comprehensive understanding of storytelling's role in promoting prosocial online behavior. To do so, I use digital feminist research methods, including participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and computational topic modeling. On a broad scale, my findings indicate potential strategies for more humane communication, even on contentious topics and within online spaces with neutral-to-hostile architectures. Specifically, r/FundieSnarkUncensored's turn to story-based snark precipitated changes in community moderation practices, including a form of quasi-mentorship for new volunteer moderators and an iterative process for developing community rules that both discourage harmful behaviors and incentivize positive behaviors through conversations with non-moderator community members. These changes in moderation style shifted the window of acceptable discursive practices within the subreddit and were amplified by Reddit's sorting algorithms, pushing the forum to continue to create nuanced, relational content. As such, members who joined the forum with a range of orientations towards snark and towards the fundamentalists upon whom the community snarks are engaged in a form of communal education. Overall, members demonstrate the development of a complex form of rhetorical empathy through their engagement in r/FundieSnarkUncensored. This rhetorical empathy reshapes their understanding of what snark can and should do and what it means to be a snarker in this particular online space. With this dissertation, I contribute to understandings of feminist or proto-feminist rhetorical practices in online communities, with specific attention to storytelling's role in de-escalating online aggression. I also contribute to the scope of feminist rhetorical research practices by adopting a cultural rhetorics approach and employing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

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For the storytellers—your courage shows us new paths forward.

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## Chapter 1: An introduction, or These stories began a long time ago

It's already too many hours into a long trip and as you drive down the highway, you fiddle with the radio, searching for something to occupy your mind. The stations flit past, a blur of pop songs and static, until you stumble upon a friendly, earnest voice discussing family dynamics. It's a short segment, less than half an hour long. In it, the host tells a story about his own father and the lessons he learned about how to be a good man and a good husband and father. In his story, he references both scriptures and *old-fashioned values*, painting an image of a harmonious household with clearly delineated hierarchies and responsibilities—what seems to be a simpler time.

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While mindlessly scrolling through Instagram one evening after work, you find yourself engrossed in a profile that seems entirely removed from the 9-to-5 grind. At first glance, it's the epitome of the cottagecore aesthetic: photos of dappled sunlight filtering onto a backyard garden, freshly baked bread cooling on a wooden counter, and a woman in a flowy sundress canning homemade jam. But as you look deeper into the captions and stories, subtle hints begin to emerge. While the captions are benign descriptions of how the creator spends her days at home, advice about taking care of a home, or recipes for better sourdough, the tags veer into new directions: #FeminineNotFeminist, #BiblicalWomanhood, and #TraditionalFamily. Her discussions of domesticity are not just celebrations of nature and simplicity, fraught as these escapist visions already are with issues of labor and colonization, but also of submission and traditional gender roles. The juxtaposition is jarring.

\*

It's the middle of the afternoon, in that hazy lull between lunch and the end of the workday, and you're browsing through Reddit. It's an endless scroll of cat memes, people querying whether they're the asshole in their interpersonal relationships, more cat memes. But then, something new catches your attention. A screenshot of an Instagram post depicting a beautifully staged photo of a mother and her young daughters at an award ceremony floats across your screen, captioned by a quip about God-honoring domestic servitude. The ceremony in the screenshot is for a Keepers at Home chapter, an organization like Girl Scouts but that prepares girls to be "discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:5). In the comments, several people discuss "helpmeets," the effects of patriarchy on female education, and whether these girls will be allowed to go to college or start a career. You fall hard down the rabbit hole into fundie-snarking.

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In the summer of 2020, an online group formed to snark on fundamentalist Christians reached a breaking point. The snark in r/FundieSnark, some thought, had gone too far. Rather than pointed humor at the expense of fundamentalists' oppressive beliefs, the subreddit had begun replicating those very beliefs, namely misogyny expressed through vitriolic commentary on fundamentalist women's postpartum bodies, physical beauty, and lack of sexual agency. This decline into targeted hate was spurred in part by draconian moderation policies that penalized users who offered context or personal stories of their own experiences with fundamentalist beliefs. In response, the subreddit fractured. A significant number of snarkers formed a new subreddit, r/FundieSnarkUncensored, that explicitly invited storytelling as a means to remediate structural, content-based, and discursively-embedded misogyny. The resulting set of rhetorical practices renegotiates snarker identity boundaries and breaks down us-vs-them polarization, allowing for a more fruitful community response to embedded misogyny and making potential cultural-political action possible.

By examining this case study of anti-polarization, this dissertation contributes to understandings of feminist or proto-feminist rhetorical practices in online communities by identifying the rhetorical strategies participants of r/FundieSnarkUncensored used to create and maintain a story-based snark community during the subreddit's first year. To do so, this project bridges cultural and digital rhetorics to identify intensification factors that can drive online communities, like the original r/FundieSnark subreddit, towards toxicity or radicalization—primarily community moderation practices and platform prioritization dynamics—then considers whether and to what extent feminist(ish) storytelling can combat these factors. As such, the storytelling strategies of r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants provide insights into community practices potentially capable of reducing online hostility.

In this introductory chapter, I first overview the dual histories of fundamentalist media and the communities formed to snark upon that media to demonstrate their importance in contemporary conversations about fundamentalist ideologies' sociopolitical impact, particularly within the US, and the corresponding significance of snark upon these ideologies as a form of humor-based critique. Next, I situate this dissertation project within

broader scholarship in rhetoric and communication. Finally, I map the following chapters of this dissertation.

### **Fundie Media Empires: Focus on the Family through #tradwives**

Before discussing the evolution and practices of online fundie-snarking communities such as r/FundieSnarkUncensored, it is important to understand the media upon which snarkers snark. Early media attention, such as several popular TLC reality series including *19 Kids and Counting* (2008-2015) and *Counting On* (2015-2020) about the Duggar family, and some early snark communities treated these fundamentalist media either voyeuristically—as transparent glimpses into otherwise closed lifestyles—or as aberrations from communities otherwise outside the flow of mainstream time, similar to conceptions of Amish or other plain faith communities.<sup>1</sup> However, this approach to snark does not meaningfully recognize the connection between contemporary Christian fundamentalist media, encompassing a spectrum from formal TV appearances to informal social media ministries, to longstanding media strategies used by the Christian Right to recruit new members, maintain ideological compliance among existing members, and build political power. Therefore, voyeuristic approaches to snark risk trivializing both the fundamentalist media upon which snarkers snark and the potential for cultural-political action as a result of snarking.

For outside observers, the external appearance of many Christian fundamentalist groups and their decision to “turn away from the world” may bely their use of strategic, extensive, and sophisticated media networks. While there is an extensive body of research in communication and media studies on the accelerationist or radicalizing effects of digital echo chambers, which may lead fundamentalist believers deeper into cultures of violence,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Plain faith” refers to a grouping of Anabaptist traditions, including Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite and some Quaker communities. While these groups have distinct theological divisions and are not interchangeable, they share an adherence to the 1527 Schleithem Confession of Faith, which entails: adult rather than infant or child baptism, excommunication of unfaithful members, closed communion, separation from the secular world, pacifism, and a refusal to make oaths. Members are also identifiable by their distinct plain, or modest, dress and low-technology lifestyles.

For further information, see Kostlevy, W. (2022). Brethren and Mennonite Traditions. In J. Vickers & J. Tait (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to American Protestantism* pp. 384-401. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108756297.021.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see the following:

and while this is certainly true of some fundamentalist Christian media, the social media of interest in this discussion has a separate function: the normalization and recruitment of new members to fundamentalist beliefs, more akin to the media strategies of the alt-right, yet rooted in longstanding rhetorical strategies among American Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists.<sup>3</sup>

While a full history of fundamentalist Christian media in America is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the phenomenon of contemporary fundamentalist Christian women acting as social media influencers draws on a longstanding rhetorical tradition perhaps best exemplified by the well-known organization Focus on the Family. Despite its sprawling empire of publications, radio programming, and web sites, Focus deliberately maintained a folksy, localized tone in its radio programming and print publications and obscured links between its many websites. As a result, the organization was able to play on the Christian Right's nostalgia for a simpler imagined past and perceived social victimization while simultaneously seeking to build political power.

Listeners who tuned in to Focus on the Family's radio programming or who picked up a book like Dobson's *The Strong-Willed Child* encountered a folksy, down-home

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Anderson, Wendy K. Z. *Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet*. Race, Rhetoric, and Media Series. University Press of Mississippi, 2021.

Clyde Anielath Missier. "Fundamentalism and the Search for Meaning in Digital Media among Gen Y and Gen Z." *Journal for Deradicalization* Winter 2022/23, no. 33 (December 1, 2022): 255–85.

Gunton, Kate. "The Impact of the Internet and Social Media Platforms on Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism." In *Privacy, Security And Forensics in The Internet of Things (IoT)*, edited by Reza Montasari, Fiona Carroll, Ian Mitchell, Sukhvinder Hara, and Rachel Bolton-King, 167–77. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91218-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91218-5_8).

Howard, Robert Glenn. *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet*. New and Alternative Religions Series. New York University Press, 2010.

Törnberg, Petter, and Anton Törnberg. "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber: Why Fringe Digital Spaces Are Polarizing Politics." *New Media & Society*, September 20, 2022, 14614448221122915. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221122915>.

<sup>3</sup> Research on the media strategies of Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists peaked during the mid-1980s during a period of focus on the New Christian Right, which can encompass both evangelicals and fundamentalists. A full theological discussion of the permeable boundaries between these two groups is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For the sake of an abbreviated discussion, this may suffice: American evangelicals and fundamentalists often share many core theological beliefs, such as biblical literalism and inerrancy, and both believe that Christians are to be separated from the secular world (see John 15:19, John 17:14-16, Romans 12:2). However, evangelicals and fundamentalists differ on the extent of separation, with fundamentalists pursuing strong visual markers of difference (e.g. strict gendered dress codes akin to plain dress) and behavioral markers of difference (e.g., abstaining from secular entertainment such as movie theaters, mandated church attendance on multiple days of the week, alternative family unit organization).

personality that invoked old-fashioned wisdom from simpler times. In his radio programming, especially, Dr. Dobson downplayed his academic credentials and his political activities to speak as a father-figure to his audience, most often parents struggling to adapt Christian ideologies to a rapidly changing world. Yet, from its inception, Focus developed strong connections with the Republican Party, explicitly linking its ideologies with the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. The organization aimed not only to shape American politics but also to have its message molded by Republican lawmakers, creating a symbiotic relationship that emphasized the creation of a godly family, community, and nation, a goal shared with the growing the Christian Nationalist movement, although Focus on the Family does not explicitly claim such a connection.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the organization used media platforms to critique and counter mainstream media's portrayal of family and societal norms, emphasizing a Christian worldview. For example, Dobson's first book, *Dare to Discipline* (1970), which emphasized authoritarian parenting and launched his career as a parenting pundit, was a response to pediatrician Benjamin Spock's more child-centered approach in the popular *Baby and Child Care* (1946) guide. Although Spock's guide predated *Dare to Discipline*, Dobson characterized his opposition's views as aberrations from time-honored traditions in which parents ruled over their children using corporal punishment; this re-imagining of the past was a strategy Dobson and Focus on the Family would continue to employ in their endeavors to promote a Christian America. They transformed public policy discussions by offering an alternative narrative that aligned with their conservative Christian viewpoint and painted mainstream proposals as detrimental to American families, such as by buying Super Bowl ad time to mobilize viewers against legal protections for abortion access in 2010 or by creating the Family Policy Alliance in 2004 to lobby and donate towards far-right political causes. Focus's strategic media presence, which extended to online platforms by 2000, was instrumental in creating an echo chamber of conservative Christian values and views. It projected an illusion of consensus by utilizing a variety of contributors and linked organizations that shared a unified perspective on family and societal values.<sup>4</sup> As a

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<sup>4</sup> Susan B. Ridgely, "Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News: An Analysis of Focus on the Family's Multimedia Empire," *Religion and American Culture* 30, no. 1 (2020): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2020.1>.

result, the integrated use of various media channels allowed the organization to reiterate its ideologies, reinforcing Dobson's teachings on traditional Christian values and the family model, a strategy shared with the more recent surge in far right and Christian nationalist content on participatory social media.

This confluence between religious doctrine and politics, marked by the efforts of Dobson and Focus on the Family, illustrates the influential role of religious organizations in shaping political ideologies and public sentiment in the United States. Focus on the Family's closed-media system profoundly influences its followers' interactions with and perceptions of mainstream media. Importantly, this strategy has since been taken up by non-institutional actors in a wider spread of fundamentalist Christian media online. On an individual level, the interplay between fundamentalist ideologies and digital media extends into the complex roles played by fundamentalist Christian women who step into the roles of social media influencers. In her study of women bloggers from the Quiverfull movement, van Geuns explores how the women in this movement, traditionally envisaged as "keepers at home," transcend their prescribed roles by actively participating in public, online communications.<sup>5</sup> They disseminate their ideologies, engage in discussions, and articulate their standpoints in the public sphere primarily through digital platforms like blogs and participatory social media, such as Instagram or Facebook. Despite their adherence to conventional, submissive roles within the domestic sphere, Quiverfull women often form the public face of their movement through their digital presences. Quiverfull women thus exhibit an interesting paradox, navigating their way through technologic modernity while holding on to their traditional convictions. Similarly to the "old time" nostalgia invoked by Focus on the Family broadcasts, Quiverfull bloggers invoke what feminist rhetorician Rebekah Sims characterizes as "collective rhetorics that are taken up by larger conservative communities as part of cultural arguments against egalitarian social policies."<sup>6</sup> While as previously noted, these rhetorical communities do serve internal

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanne van Geuns, "Mothers for a Christian Nation: The Quiverfull Take on the Future of American Christianity," *Exchange* 43, no. 2 (2014): 84–98, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543x-12341317>.

<sup>6</sup> Rebekah Sims, "The Proverbs 31 Virtuous Wife Online: Networked Collective Rhetoric in Quiverfull Women's Weblogs," *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric & Composition* 21, no. 1 (2018): 105.

purposes, such as ensuring participants continue to self-legitimize their ideologies, that can contribute to the radicalization noted in communications scholarship on fundamentalist media, their external purpose is similar to that of both organizations like Focus on the Family and to the recruitment strategies of the contemporary alt-right or “trad wife” movements.

In her analysis, Sims describes the Quiverfull movement’s use of weblogs as a platform for forwarding their ideology, extending Dubriwny’s concept of experiential epistemology to understand how Quiverfull bloggers use of this rhetorical strategy “empowers them to see the world through a pro-natalist lens and cast their domestic choices as actions with spiritual and political implications.”<sup>7</sup> At its core, the Quiverfull movement advocates for total reliance on divine providence for material needs, emphasizing prolific motherhood as a woman’s divine role, regardless of circumstance. The name “Quiverfull” itself references a commitment to natalism in support of Christian cultural dominance, as justified by an interpretation of the biblical passage Psalm 127:3-5:

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one’s youth.

Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,  
But shall speak with their enemies in the gate. [New King James Version]

As a result, Quiverfull women’s weblogs exhibit stories of feminine domesticity, offering a view on womanhood that contrasts starkly with secular and feminist narratives. To do so, bloggers within the Quiverfull movement employ detailed narratives that stress the enactment and dissemination of feminine knowledge. Through their blog posts, they don’t just reflect on their domestic actions but actively guide their readers, aligning their

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<sup>7</sup> Sims, 118.

domestic undertakings with a broader ideological discourse. For Quiverfull women, this shapes their worldview through a pro-natalist lens, embedding spiritual and political implications in their domestic choices. This narrative, while seemingly empowering for participants, can also lead to isolation, with many ex-members often recounting their experiences as being riddled with control and abuse.<sup>8</sup> Further, Sims argues that Quiverfull blogs blur the lines between creator and audience. Both parties aren't just passive participants; they actively mold and partake in the collective narrative. By embarking on their blogging journey, Quiverfull women not only share their ideology but play an integral role in reinforcing a collective identity. Through blog networks, they establish a defined behavior that pits itself against feminist and secular interpretations. That is, bloggers' creation of a cohesive narrative upholds the movement's ideology, framing the past, whether real or imagined, in order to understand and shape the present, including for blog visitors who were not previously enmeshed in Quiverfull households or communities but who may shift towards Quiverfull ideology because of its apparent cohesion, simplicity, and domestic appeal.

Since the publication of Sims' study, blogging as a practice, both Quiverfull and non, has decreased significantly, but the movement's rhetorical strategies have found a new home on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, where Quiverfull and other fundamentalist women continue to share their pro-natalist and patriarchal values in a more visually driven and arguably more accessible format. By embracing the visual language of Instagram, a platform known for its emphasis on aesthetics and lifestyle branding, Quiverfull and fundamentalist women blend their ideological messages with appealing imagery and relatable content, which serves to not only maintain engagement with their existing followers but also attract a wider audience, potentially normalizing their extreme views among individuals who may not initially identify with far right or fundamentalist ideologies. The use of popular hashtags, strategic collaborations with like-minded influencers, and participation in Instagram's algorithm-driven ecosystem allows

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<sup>8</sup> See Vyckie Garrison's blog *No Longer Quivering* (<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nolongerquivering/about/>) for a collection of stories and analysis by ex-Quiverfull women.



these women to extend their reach far beyond the confines of their immediate religious communities, creating unexpected synergies both with non-fundamentalist movements, like cottagecore aesthetics,<sup>9</sup> and with politically far-right but not fundamentalist movements, like the tradwife community.

Similarly to Quiverfull women's blogs about motherhood and domestic life, women enmeshed in far-right politics online, such as the "traditional wife" or tradwife movement, use a friendly, influencer-style persona to accrue viewers and followers who may not self-describe as "far-right" themselves. A scroll through the #BiblicalWomanhood or #FeminineNotFeminist tags on Instagram, for example, displays grids of pastoral domestic images—young white mothers in vintage-inspired floral dresses bake cookies with their toddler children in beautifully decorated kitchens; college-age women speak directly to the camera while applying their makeup to explain why they chose to become stay-at-home wives to husbands their fathers selected for them; neutral and pastel-toned infographics explain topics like God's design for married, heterosexual sexuality. As cultural anthropologist Devin Proctor notes, tradwife influencers take on popular aesthetics, such as those associated with cottagecore, and link them with an idealized version of white nationalism: heterosexist gender roles that emphasize male supremacy, an elevation of the white nuclear family as the pinnacle of culture, and natalism.<sup>10</sup> Some of these tradwife influencers, such as Caitlin Huber (known online as *Mrs. Midwest*) or Kelly Havens Stickle, are also participants in Christian fundamentalist media networks, although they may obscure this link to varying degrees. While the Quiverfull bloggers Sims studied sometimes wrote directly about theology and politics, this directness is downplayed in visual formats like Instagram. Visitors to Kelly Havens' Instagram page will not find references to white supremacist theories like "The Great Replacement," but they will find Norman Rockwell-

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<sup>9</sup> Cottagecore (or cottage-core) is an aesthetic and cultural movement characterized by a romanticized interpretation of rural life and traditional skills. It emphasizes simplicity, sustainability, and harmony with nature, often manifesting in imagery of pastoral landscapes, homemade crafts, and old-fashioned activities. Popular on social media platforms like TikTok and Tumblr, cottagecore has resonated with many participants as an escape from modern urban or suburban stressors and digital overload, offering an idyllic vision of a slower, more intentional way of living.

<sup>10</sup> Devin Proctor, "The #Tradwife Persona and the Rise of Radicalized Domesticity," *Persona Studies* 8, no. 2 (February 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2022vol8no2art1645>.

esque photos of Havens' homesteader life. Further digging will reveal her family's commitments to Christian Nationalism and white supremacy, but the surface narrative idealizes the intended product of the Havens' family politics (a rustic farmhouse situated in a suburban Ohio neighborhood in which Havens photographs herself barefoot in the kitchen, working as a "keeper at home" for her husband and sons). This obfuscation is deliberate. Caitlin Huber's Mrs. Midwest persona similarly encourages a curated and stylized presentation of Christian womanhood, this time in service to Huber's involvement in the "red pill" trad-wife movement. In an interview with self-described anti-feminist and Christian patriarch YogiOabs in 2019, Huber said "My message can be kind of, like, intense for some people, like, the things I believe, I like to pad it with skin care and how I clean my house."<sup>11</sup> By narrating idealized femininity as shaped by fringe religious and/or political ideologies, tradwife influencers co-opt the language of femininity and female empowerment to position themselves as the "real women" in contrast to feminists.<sup>1213</sup> Far from being harmless beauty or aesthetic influencers, digital tradwives, Quiverfull bloggers, and other women engaged in politically right-wing and/or theologically fundamentalist activism online are a significant source of power within their movements and contribute to the normalization of misogynist and white supremacist viewpoints, crafting a visual rhetoric that simultaneously romanticizes and normalizes their strict adherence to traditional gender roles. Through carefully staged photos, inspirational captions, and the selective sharing of personal anecdotes, they construct an image of feminine fulfillment firmly rooted in submission and domesticity. As noted with the examples of Mrs. Midwest and Kelly Havens Stickle, the overlap between the alt-right and Christian fundamentalist social media influencers is significant, as the groups seek complementary political visions of a white and male-dominated, theocratic America.

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<sup>11</sup> The interview was posted to YogiOab's YouTube channel on January 19, 2019. Since its initial publication, the video has since been made private, but its contents, including this quote, are recorded in contemporaneous reaction videos and blog posts, such as a [detailed summary posted to FreeJinger](#).

<sup>12</sup> Megan L. Zahay, "What 'Real' Women Want: Alt-Right Femininity Vlogs as an Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic," *Media and Communication* 10, no. 4 (October 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i4.5726>.

<sup>13</sup> Kisyova Maria-Elena, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby Vanessa, "Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women: How Do Alt-Right Female Influencers Narrate a Far-Right Identity?," *Journal for Deradicalization* Summer 2022, no. 31 (June 1, 2022): 35–72.

In short, the interaction between digital media and fundamentalist ideologies is not a mere transition of traditional beliefs onto new platforms—it is a complex, evolving relationship that highlights and redefines individual choices and communal reinforcements with implications extending beyond the fundamentalist digital communities themselves. While early snark largely focused on superficial aspects of fundamentalist media, later snark communities devoted themselves to critiquing and delegitimizing the harmful underpinning ideologies, using snark to mark fundamentalist ideology as bad-faith and using intrasnark storytelling to remediate the misogyny snarkers experienced as a result of fundamentalists' influence on culture and politics.

### **Into the Snarkiverse**

Snark, or humorous mockery, is an established feature of internet discourse and has spawned dedicated communities on forums like Reddit. Many snark communities develop around “cringe” figures, like YouTube or reality TV stars, and snark communities focused on Christian fundamentalists are no exception. Christian fundamentalism has occupied a peripheral position in US entertainment beginning with TLC's 2006 mini-series *Kids by the Dozen*, which followed the Jeub family, and expanding into the popular series *19 Kids and Counting* and *Counting On*, which both followed the Duggar family and aired from 2008-2015 and 2015-2020, respectively. These shows capitalized on the novelty of fundamentalist families and sparked early online snark communities that maintained a sense of absurdity around fundamentalism—viewers and snarkers could mock fundamentalist lifestyles as oddities that didn't have any real social repercussions. However, as Christian fundamentalism and its attendant far-right politics occupy increasing space in the public eye, the tenor of some snark has shifted as well, from fan-based interactions with love-to-hate “trashy” TV shows or a voyeuristic curiosity about extreme lifestyles to more serious considerations of the societal consequences of fundamentalist rhetoric, still expressed through snark.

Snark, whether on religious fundamentalists, reality TV stars, or YouTube personalities, relies on a sense of distance between the snarker and the subject, or object, of snark. We don't snark on values that we share, but we might use snark to reify our own values or self-identity or to communicate our values to others. However, snark itself is ethically complicated. Like many other snark communities, fundie snarkers react to public-

facing media posted by the subjects of snark, who are now, in this more serious strain, primarily fundamentalist women running “influencer” style Facebook and Instagram accounts. These accounts often display extreme levels of internalized misogyny intertwined with Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and anti-LGBTQ politics. While snarkers intend to mock the misogyny and associated politics propagated by these accounts, they have often found themselves unintentionally employing sexist language and standards themselves (e.g. through invasive speculation on the postpartum bodies of women who have had many children), as discussed further in the following chapter. In part, this problem was driven by community moderation practices that punished participants for sharing their own experiences, contextualizing (not justifying) fundamentalist cultural practices, or remarking positively on non-harmful actions taken by the fundamentalists and thus incentivized increasingly vitriolic snark. At what point, some snarkers have asked, does snark on fundamentalist women simply become hate? The answer is unclear, but this question has been driving a schism in the fundie snarking community on Reddit, a popular, forum-based internet community home to a wide variety of snark.

As a result of this tension, a popular subreddit, r/FundieSnark, experienced an ethical schism in early 2020 leading to the creation of a new subreddit, r/FundieSnarkUncensored, that explicitly welcomed storytelling as a means to temper the escalating intensity of snarker discourse and foster more complicated discussions about the effects of fundamentalism on everyone, even snarkers who have never been fundamentalists themselves. This new community forms the subject of this project. While many, or quite possibly most, snarkers have no personal ties to Christian fundamentalist communities, the increasing political hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities and infringement on reproductive autonomy, partially grounded in fundamentalist Christian theology and Christian Nationalism, demonstrate that issues of religious extremism affect all of us. Therefore, it is also incumbent upon us, collectively, to think through our responses to religiously-motivated misogyny. While responding to the entirety of contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-choice legislation and social issues is far beyond the scope of this dissertation, r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s discursive practices form a microcosm to explore these topics.

## Snark Rhetorics

While snark practices themselves are underrepresented in rhetorical scholarship, rhetoricians have become increasingly concerned with the role of digital platforms, like Reddit, in enabling or constraining online hostility. Recent articles have focused on amplification and agonism<sup>14</sup>; broader research has engaged issues of digital aggression, community moderation, and the rhetoricity of digital identity formation, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Further, scholars in digital rhetorical feminisms and technofeminism have been concerned with gender, power, and online communication since the early days of the Internet and form a foundation for this area of research in snark and misogyny, particularly given the subject matter to which snarkers respond. Accordingly, this dissertation builds on this foundation to further contribute to understandings of feminist or proto-feminist rhetorical practices in online communities.<sup>15</sup> By employing a feminist and cultural rhetorics framework, I highlight the role of storytelling as one means to remediate misogyny, following digital cultural rhetorics' aim to "recognize and make explicit the plurality of embodied, technological, and rhetorical negotiations" enacted in digital spaces.<sup>16</sup> Attention to embodied, particular, relationally enacted knowledges within both the digital research site and the process of research can further understandings of not only person-to-person exchanges in digital spaces, but also person-to-machine and machine-to-machine exchanges that fundamentally underpin our person-to-person online communication, turning us away from what might seem like inevitable atomization and

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob D. Richter, "Writing With Reddiquette: Networked Agonism and Structured Deliberation in Networked Communities," *Computers and Composition* 59 (March 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2021.102627>; Ryan P. Shepherd, "Gaming Reddit's Algorithm: R/The\_donald, Amplification, and the Rhetoric of Sorting," *Computers and Composition* 56 (June 1, 2020): 102572, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2020.102572>.

<sup>15</sup> Carleigh J. Davis, "Feminist Rhetorical Practices in Digital Spaces," *Computers and Composition* 52 (June 1, 2019): 132–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2019.01.004>; Bryan Dosono and Bryan Semaan, "Moderation Practices as Emotional Labor in Sustaining Online Communities: The Case of AAPI Identity Work on Reddit," in *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI '19 (New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2019), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300372>; Brandee Easter, "'Feminist\_brevity\_in\_light\_of\_masculine\_long-Windedness': Code, Space, and Online Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (July 4, 2018): 675–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447335>; Bonnie Washick, "Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 3 (March 1, 2020): 555–80, <https://doi.org/10.1086/706469>.

<sup>16</sup> Angela M. Haas, "Toward a Digital Cultural Rhetoric," in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2018), 412.

extractive disembodiment and towards interrelation among our on- and offline selves and the communities that support us.<sup>17</sup> Thus, this dissertation's focus on storytelling extends through its methodology to generates findings regarding r/FundieSnarkUncensored's use of feminist storytelling as a case study of anti-polarization and to constellates what feminist and cultural rhetorics can do with a range of data-driven tools, including how these tools might pull on, add to, or otherwise shift our discipline's storying practices as a whole.

## Chapter Overviews

In Chapter 2, I continue building on the theoretical foundation begun in this chapter by interweaving cultural and digital feminist rhetorics with Internet studies scholarship on storytelling to demonstrate how stories or storytelling function as a method within and beyond academic research. Across disciplines, scholar-activists and the communities with whom we research use storytelling to move beyond totalizing or disembodied frames of inquiry and towards contextualized, situated, and interrelated knowledge-making. Academics and snarkers both use storytelling to restore connections that have been severed. This theoretical foundation forms the basis for an exploration of how r/FundieSnarkUncensored's community self-governance and interactions shifted after embracing an explicitly story-based ethos. In Chapter 3, I argue that because Reddit's functionality drives communities towards intensification of their discursive norms, feminist participants in this values-based subreddit must employ a variety of affirmative and prohibitive strategies to maintain an equilibrium between overly permissive discursive norms (which devolve into the toxic norms of the overall site) or overly restrictive norms (which compress snark discourse into targeted hate). In r/FundieSnarkUncensored, this responsibility and power to control the discourse is distributed among volunteer moderators who set and enforce formal community rules, a concentrated group of users

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<sup>17</sup> Casie Cobos et al., "Interfacing Cultural Rhetorics: A History and a Call," *Rhetoric Review* 37, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 139–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2018.1424470>; Dustin W. Edwards, "Critical Infrastructure Literacies and/as Ways of Relating in Big Data Ecologies," *Computers and Composition*, Rhetorics of Data: Collection, Consent, & Critical Digital Literacies, 61 (September 1, 2021): 102653, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2021.102653>; Haas, "Toward a Digital Cultural Rhetoric"; Malea Powell et al., "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics," *Enculturation*, 2014, <http://enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here>; Andrea Riley Mukavetz, "Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making Research Matter With Multi-Generational Women from the Little Traverse Bay Band," *Journal of Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization* 5, no. 1 (June 24, 2021), <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/rpcg/vol5/iss1/6>.

who generate the majority of the content within the community, and lurkers who tacitly approve or reject the community norms created by moderators and active users.

To further understand how participants navigate emotionally and politically charged conversations within the subreddit, I employ Latent Dirichlet Allocation to surface themes within the text-based posts and comments generated across r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year (August 2020 - August 2021). As detailed in Chapter 4, this analysis reveals that r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants are concerned with five key themes: 1) Boundary-setting, 2) Meta discussions of storytelling, 3) Gender, power, and relationships, 4) Sexual and reproductive autonomy, and 5) Responses to abuse and trauma. The topic modeling results suggest that r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants value storytelling as the foundation for their community, and that snarkers are practicing a form of feminist rhetoric grounded in complex empathy. Snarkers frequently respond to restrictions upon or violations of fundamentalist women's sexual and reproductive autonomy with stories of their own experiences and demonstrate worry, anger, and hope for healing on these women's behalf, despite snarkers' strong opposition to the ideologies these women espouse. Finally, in Chapter 6, I synthesize the findings from Chapters 3 through 5 and resituate them in the historical and theoretical foundations developed here and in Chapter 2. In short, although the founding members of r/FundieSnarkUncensored developed a story-based snark community for the purpose of reshaping snarkers' interactions with each other, this shift had cascading effects on their community self-governance, community norms and practices, and snarkers' self-conceptualizations of what it means to snark. As a result of their story-based practice, snarkers have begun to use personal stories as a lens to understand and reshape the cultural narratives surrounding fundamentalism and around snark itself.

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## Chapter 2: Storytelling, or How to talk across the distance

Storytelling is at the core of this dissertation, and in this chapter, I investigate how it serves as a crucial strategy for both scholar-activists and snarkers to move beyond abstract theories and engage with real, lived experiences. Focusing on feminist and cultural rhetorics scholarship, I discuss how storytelling offers a path towards a more nuanced and relational understanding of knowledge, one that acknowledges the importance of where we come from and how we connect with others. Accordingly, I first examine how feminist and cultural rhetorics have understood stories and storytelling as forms of situated, relational meaning-making, then share the story of my engagement with r/FundieSnarkUncensored as the community itself turned towards storytelling as a way to repair relationships among snarkers.

### Storytelling as meaning-making

Feminist scholars have contended that most academic research is constructed by a limited class of people operating primarily from positivist, Enlightenment understandings of knowledge-production. Across disciplines, *academic theory*, in this understanding, although itself always changing and evolving, is invested in the disembodied eye of objectivity that produces what feminist philosopher Donna Haraway names “god tricks:” objectivity as the view from the void, which cannot be held accountable.<sup>18</sup> Of course, as feminist scholars across disciplines have noted, knowledge is produced by specific people, operating through specific, historicized paradigms and from specific sociocultural identities. Feminist theory thus challenges this primacy of disembodied knowledge by privileging specific, often subjugated knowledges.

As one of the earliest contributions to academic feminist theories and methodologies, standpoint theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the limitations of mainstream social science, which was seen as excluding the experiences and perspectives of women and other marginalized groups, and argues that knowledge is shaped by social location and that the experiences of those at the margins of society can provide valuable insights into how power and oppression operate. Early proponents of standpoint theory, such as philosopher Nancy Hartsock and sociologist Dorothy Smith,

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<sup>18</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

emphasized the importance of recognizing the situatedness of knowledge and the need to center the experiences of women in social analysis. In formative texts like *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, scholars across the sciences and humanities argued that women's experiences of oppression and marginalization gave them a unique perspective on the world, which could be used to challenge dominant forms of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s, academic feminist standpoint theory underwent further development, with the emergence of intersectionality theory, which highlighted the interlocking nature of different forms of oppression based on factors such as race, class, and sexuality. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argued that Black feminist thought provided a distinctive standpoint on the world, which offered important insights into the ways in which different forms of oppression, like racism and sexism, intersected.<sup>20</sup>

As a counter to false objectivity, feminist standpoint theorists, like Sandra Harding, emphasized the importance of reflexivity in knowledge production. Parallel to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality,<sup>21</sup> Harding argued that researchers must be aware of their own social location, and the ways in which this shapes their questions, methods, and interpretations. By acknowledging their own situatedness, researchers can be more attentive to the perspectives of marginalized groups and can work to challenge dominant forms of knowledge that reproduce systems of inequality. As feminists, to see from somewhere is to name our own location, to the best of our (admittedly limited) self-knowledge, and to invite connections or crossed paths with others. Myths of objectivity, in this sense, are replaced with feminist accountability and responsibility for the things we see and how we see them. While practices for incorporating positionality and responsibility in academic research vary by discipline, recognizing storytelling as an epistemic activity, both in the subject matter of our research and in our research practices themselves, has allowed feminist writers in the social sciences and humanities to fracture the "view from nowhere" in favor of a specificity and relationality similar to that practiced in feminist and cultural rhetorics scholarship.

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<sup>19</sup> Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

<sup>20</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

<sup>21</sup> Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

## Feminist Rhetorics

Within the nascent tradition of feminist rhetorics, scholars were making similar contributions to rhetorical history and theory. In addition to recovering works of historic women rhetors such as Aspasia and Sappho, previously ignored in the rhetorical canon, and reconsidering existing rhetorical theory through feminist lenses, early feminist rhetoricians began creating rhetorical criticism and theory from a feminist foundation. As Krista Ratcliffe notes in her contribution to *The Present State of Scholarship in the History of Rhetoric*, these early publications, primarily from the 1980s and 1990s, drew on feminist theory in fields like philosophy (including the philosophy of science), Black feminisms, Chicana studies, and cultural studies but transitioned into scholarship firmly grounded in rhetoric and composition studies, itself a newly-articulated academic discipline.<sup>22</sup> Within this born-feminist rhetorical theory, scholars began to envision alternative understandings of “rhetoric” that took a wider lens, allowing feminist scholars to recognize and describe a wider range of activities as “rhetorical.”

In their germinal piece, “Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric,” Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin describe a new understanding of rhetoric that moves beyond agonism or persuasion to offer “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than seeing the persuasion of the audience to the rhetor’s views as the goal of rhetoric, invitational rhetoric seeks shared understanding, both of the topic of discussion and of the participants themselves. Foss and Griffin characterize this stance as an openness between rhetors and audiences that is expressed through two primary forms, offering perspectives and creating atmospheres of respect and equality,<sup>24</sup> which are mutually reinforcing. Of note here is the potential overlap between *offering perspectives* and uses of narrative. Foss and Griffin differentiate *offering perspectives* from the uses of narrative more familiar to traditional theories of rhetoric by emphasizing that when an invitational rhetor shares her perspective, often through the form of a story or narrative, she is not leveraging that story

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<sup>22</sup> Gaillet and Horner, *The Present State of Scholarship in the History of Rhetoric*.

<sup>23</sup> “Beyond Persuasion,” 5.

<sup>24</sup> 7.

in an attempt to persuade the audience to her point of view. Instead, “[t]he offering of a personal narrative is, itself, the goal; the means and the ends are the same in offering. ... In this mode, then, a story is not told as a means of supporting or achieving some other end but as an end in itself—simply offering the perspective that the story represents.”<sup>25</sup> Since the publication of “Beyond persuasion,” invitational rhetoric has become a touchstone in feminist rhetorical theories and methodologies, informing concepts like Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening, Cheryl Glenn’s theory of rhetorical hope, and embodied rhetorics more broadly. Throughout feminist rhetorical scholarship, storytelling is theorized and practiced as a means to center gendered, situated knowledges, even when storytelling itself is not the subject of research.

### **Cultural Rhetorics**

Within rhetorical study, feminist rhetoricians were not the only scholars considering the interplay of embodiment, sociocultural location, and academic scholarship. Coming alongside the feminist rhetorical tradition in the 2010s, cultural rhetorics scholars were similarly articulating a relational ethic of academic knowledge-making. Perhaps the best place to begin describing cultural rhetorics is with the narrative-article “Our Story Begins Here,” a piece that both theorizes and models practices central to cultural rhetorics: storying, constellating, relationality, and decoloniality. These practices are interlocking and mutually supportive. As Miami and Eastern Shawnee rhetorical theorist Malea Powell says in Act I, by “constellating stories in order to visibilize a web of relations,” cultural rhetorics practices can “can help us intervene in the discipline by acknowledging our location within a set of dominant institutions within which we are complicit with colonialism.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as Daisy Levy says in Act II, “the combination of these four components is central to doing cultural rhetorics scholarship. Embracing just one or two of these elements is not enough. A cultural rhetorics orientation requires an investment in a methodological frame that values the relation among history, practice, and knowledge.” While these four practices identified here and in additional cultural rhetorics scholarship cannot be separated and it would be counterproductive to attempt to place them in a hierarchy of

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<sup>25</sup> Foss and Griffin, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Powell et al., “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” n.p.

importance, I would like to suggest that storying is often the vehicle through which relations are constellated and decoloniality enacted. This practice is, of course, not limited to cultural rhetorics, which itself draws on many histories or traditions, and provides a useful bridge between cultural rhetorics orientations and those of related, overlapping frames of engagement.<sup>27</sup> That said, what makes cultural rhetorics storying practices unique is their potential to engage relational ways of creating, recognizing or validating, and delivering knowledges as a foundation rather than as a modification. Rather than being a way to organize existing information in order to make meaning, stories *are* the information, in an expanded definition, and its meaning as understood by the storytellers and their audiences. For these reasons, I discuss storytelling and relationality together: storytelling is a practice that provides support for and access to relationality. While there have been recent critiques that cultural rhetorics reliance on storying as a methodology can veer into solipsism (see Cushman et al., 2021), such critiques perhaps misassess these stories as simple narrative ploys or a self-referential practice that places narrative outside the realm of scholarly evaluation, but in doing so, may miss cultural rhetorics' roots in Indigenous rhetorical theory and a commitment to storytelling as ontology.

In order to talk about storytelling as ontology, I first draw on Opaskwayak Cree theorist Shawn Wilson's *Research Is Ceremony*.<sup>28</sup> While Wilson does not position himself as a cultural rhetorician, instead working within Indigenous philosophy and research design, his articulation of a research cycle (ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology) grounded in relationality resonates with the foundational tenets of cultural rhetorics put forth by the writer-speakers of "Our Story Begins Here." A relational onto-epistemology and ethic is incompatible with colonial, Western research paradigms that attempt to theorize the self as an isolated, autonomous being, split into mind and body, who acts unilaterally upon their subject of study. It is, however, compatible with approaches put forth by feminist and womanist researchers (some of whom draw from Indigenous traditions and some of whom draw from other genealogies) that prioritize relational autonomy, ethics of care, and deep attention to contextual and contested knowledge. When

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<sup>27</sup> Cobos et al., "Interfacing Cultural Rhetorics."

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

"reality is not an object but a process of relationships"<sup>29</sup> and "rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold and are part of,"<sup>30</sup> research practices become ways of sustaining and honoring those connections—as Wilson's title indicates, research becomes ceremony.

Similarly, in *Oratory: Coming to Theory*, Stó:lō poet and critic Lee Maracle begins by writing that "The point of hearing (and now reading) story is to study it in and of itself, to examine the context in which it is told, to understand the obstacles to being it presents, and then to see ourselves through the story, that is, transform ourselves in accordance with our agreement with and understanding of the story."<sup>31</sup> The purpose of storytelling, then, is not to ascertain the author's intent or to know the consciousness of another but to know and govern oneself in relationship to the story and storytellers. In the first section "Stó:lō Study Methodology," she maps the rounds of Salish storytelling from the beginning, establishing an object of study/storying, through the sharing of perspectives and imagining of potential pathways, to the creation of a new idea and way of understanding and a new story. The end goal, Maracle writes, is that "From a Salish perspective, study ought to move us beyond the relentless reproduction of our cultural bias and remove the filters blinding our ability to see beyond this bias. In relinquishing the obstacles to new paths, we invite ourselves to this open field of fire we could be."<sup>32</sup> Oratory and storying are ways to map new futures for the self and community using both written and oral texts.

From this ground, storytelling enables cultural rhetoricians to practice relational, constellated scholarship in the service of decolonial goals. When storytelling is understood as a form of ontology, it becomes possible to position relationships as the fundamental fabric of scholarship. This understanding manifests on several levels. First, it prioritizes embodied, particular knowledges, in contrast to author-evacuated or disembodied scholarship that makes claims to objectivity without contextualizing the circumstances, collaborations, and relationships that have shaped those claims and the evidence supporting them. This resonates with feminist analyses of gender, embodiment, and

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<sup>29</sup> Wilson, 73.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Maracle, *Oratory Coming to Theory*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Maracle, 70.

positionality in the creation of knowledge. Within both cultural and feminist rhetorics, the foundational premise is that ideas are grown through people, creating fruitful areas of overlap between these two scholarly genealogies. Karma Chávez and Cindy Griffin, for example, bring together intersectional feminist theory and communication scholarship in their introduction to *Standing in the Intersection* to demonstrate the power of a non-essentialized, dynamic understanding of identity and power in feminist communication; such a concept of identity is fundamentally situated and relational, drawing on robust feminist traditions as diverse as interlocking oppressions (Combahee River Collective), theory in the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldúa), avoidance of pop-bead metaphysics (Spelman), curdling versus separation (Lugones), and coalitional subjectivity and differential belonging (Carrillo Rowe), to theorize identity as a multifaceted experience that is constructed through our interactions with ourselves, our environments, and our relationships with others.<sup>33</sup> In each of these theoretical branches, storytelling remains a key method to invite readers into shared experiences, to acknowledge and contextualize the people and places that contribute to academic knowledge, and to counter extractive or disembodied methodologies.

### **Storying Snark**

In keeping with these traditions, the scholarship in this dissertation is partial, contextual, and informed by my triple-faceted experiences with the community of fundie snarkers. Let me explain: Before I was a graduate student writing a dissertation about the rhetorical possibilities of online storytelling, I was a snarker. While I can't remember exactly how I first encountered fundie-snarking, I know when I downloaded Reddit, I wasn't looking for serious content. Instead, I read people's stories in forums like r/AmITheAsshole or commiserated with my then-coworkers in r/Starbucks. In all probability, I found one of the major fundamentalist snark subreddits, r/FundieSnark, through someone's comment on an unrelated post or some other trivial interaction that I've since forgotten. At first, I was a lurker, reading through the accumulated posts and having a good chuckle at the more absurd elements of fundie life—the mismatched

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<sup>33</sup> Chavez, *Standing in the Intersection*.



modesty panels worn beneath regular shirts and dresses, the ubiquitous “season of life” musings over the most banal of daily events, the reading of the supernatural into every small detail of the day. While snark on fundamentalism has clear, serious undertones—fundamentalism, after all, perpetuates significant violence against women and children within the community and leverages political violence against non-believers outside the community—it is also self-contradictory, at times earnest to the point of cringiness, and often unpredictable, leading to a great potential for dark humor. At first, this is why I subscribed and began participating in the snark. As the community developed, however, I found myself drawn into an ethical schism over the limits and purpose of snarking that has challenged my understanding of these communities’ importance.

Snarking on fundamentalist Christians is not new or confined to Reddit. As a recent *VICE* article mentions, fundie-snarking is a popular activity across multiple platforms from Facebook groups to Tumblr blogs to dedicated pages like FreeJinger and the Fundamentalist Wiki.<sup>34</sup> Many of these groups repurpose the tools of fandom to aggregate and critique content produced by fundamentalists and the snarkers who love to hate them. Snarkers participate like fans in many ways. They follow the posts and updates of fundamentalists, create fanfiction in the form of satirical narratives, and speculate about upcoming “plot points” by meticulously tracking data and creating uncannily accurate predictions of the next fundamentalist courtship, marriage, or birth announcement. The difference between fans and snarkers, however, lies in their orientation towards their subject. While fans may critique their “problematic faves,” there is a general appreciation for the media, or at least some aspect of the media, with which they engage. Snarkers, on the other hand, define themselves in contrast to their subjects, using snark to reify the divides between fundamentalism and their own identities even as some snarkers are ex- or post-fundamentalists. The fundie snarking community on Reddit is relatively new to the snark-o-sphere. The earliest fundie-snarking subreddit, *r/DuggarsSnark*, formed in 2018 to snark on the Arkansas family famous for their TLC show, *19 Kids and Counting*. As the subreddit rapidly grew in popularity, users who wanted to snark on a wider range of fundamentalist families formed *r/FundieSnark* in the same year. Like *r/DuggarsSnark*,

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<sup>34</sup> White, “Inside the Weird Online World of People Who Love to Hate the Duggars.”

r/FundieSnark ballooned in popularity, reaching 75,000 subscribers by 2020. That rapid growth, however, became the community's downfall.

As r/FundieSnark grew in popularity, the tenor of the snark became increasingly vitriolic. There are roughly three levels of snark operating at once in the fundie-snark-o-sphere: theoretical, hypocrisy, and base snark. Theoretical snark is labor-intensive critique of fundamentalist theology or philosophy drawing on source texts and careful proofing. Hypocrisy snark is mid-level snark that identifies inconsistencies between fundie beliefs and fundie practices (e.g. a fundamentalist may publish a book with extensive lists of modest and immodest garments, then themselves wear “immodest” garments). Base snark mocks a fundamentalist's physical appearance (not clothing choices), health, class status, or other unchangeable or difficult to change aspects of their identity. The r/FundieSnark subreddit rules prevented thread drift (off-topic conversations) and “leg-humping” (fawning comments about the fundamentalists) as determined by the volunteer moderator team. These rules were intended to prevent the subreddit from spinning into a catch-all discussion of anything related to fundamentalist, evangelical, or conservative Christianity, and users found breaking the rules would be temporarily banned from the forum. In practice, moderators enforced these policies harshly. Positive or neutral comments of any kind, including comments about infants and children, were removed and the users who posted them were issued temporary bans. The moderators appeared to target participants sharing relevant information that identified them as mothers—the removed comments were often accompanied by a moderator's quip to “save it for your mommy blog.” The result was a body of snark that continued to find the lowest bar, mocking women's postpartum bodies, struggles with infertility, and the appearances of infants and children.

The irony of snarking on misogynist beliefs with more misogyny was not lost on some snarkers. In response to the concentrated misogyny (and to a lesser degree, ableism, classism, and more recently recognized racism) in r/FundieSnark, a cohort of members broke off to create r/FundieSnarkUncensored in August 2020. The “Uncensored” in the name is not an invitation to no-holds-barred snark. Instead, it's a tongue in cheek reference to the moderation practices of the parent sub, r/FundieSnark. The founders and moderators of r/FundieSnarkUncensored would no longer “censor” participants for organic conversations or storytelling, including comments on positive or neutral behaviors

displayed by the fundamentalists. This move was not without controversy, and a third subreddit, r/FundieSnarkieSnark, was created to snark on the moderators of both r/FundieSnark and the newly-formed r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Ultimately, after members of r/FundieSnarkieSnark and r/FundieSnark brigaded<sup>35</sup> each other's subreddits, the moderators of r/FundieSnark issued an automatic ban for any redditor who posts in r/FundieSnarkieSnark and took the subreddit private, permanently.

As a scholar and an active snarker, this pivot to story-based snark was deeply fascinating. As this dissertation argues, snarkers appeared to be using feminist rhetorical strategies, like storytelling, invitational rhetoric, and rhetorical empathy, to build a new kind of snark forum. In down-thread comments of snark posts, participants began to share their own stories about fundamentalism and its far-reaching cultural effects. Rather than being dismissed or banned, snarkers' stories became throughlines in the comments of most snark posts. As participants shared their own experiences with fundamentalism, whether as former fundamentalists themselves or based on experiences with the cultural and legal effects of fundamentalism, these stories were taken up as new lenses to examine and snark upon fundamentalist media for its theoretical and hypocritical elements, rather than engaging in base snark that harms snarkers and snarkees alike. This brings us to the third facet that shapes my interest in this community and its rhetorics. Before I was a graduate student working on this dissertation or a snarker, I was deconstructing from my own fundamentalist upbringing. While the fundamentalist media reposted to the subreddit was often all too familiar to the rhetoric of my childhood, it was the stories shared in the comments that most resonated with me. Snark can, at times, verge into something akin to fanfiction; as a parasocial relationship grows between a public figure and the anonymous internet users who snark upon them, fictions, misconceptions, and exaggerations can easily take root and become recirculated as fact. While many, and possibly most, snarkers in the forum had not necessarily experienced fundamentalism firsthand, the networks of stories that began to span conversations across the subreddit were taken up, validated, and used

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<sup>35</sup> Brigading is a form of hostile behavior in which members of one community disruptively interact, en masse, with another targeted community. This can include posting spam or offensive posts, downvoting or reporting the target community's posts, or other negative actions.

to sharpen snark on the harmful beliefs and practices of fundamentalism while simultaneously seeking to protect individuals and communities made vulnerable by them.

In short, I engage this research from overlapping insider-outsider perspectives. As a researcher, I leverage my academic training in rhetoric and gender studies to look through theory to understand the mechanisms by which this community functions. As a snarker, I draw on my own navigation of this community to contextualize the information shared with me by participants in this dissertation research and the information gleaned from large-scale analysis of their communication. As a survivor of fundamentalism, I remember my experiences of learning and unlearning and use them both to speak out against the dangers of fundamentalist ideology, as a snarker, and, as a researcher, to safeguard the privacy of others who have also been made collateral damage to other people's fear and pursuit of power. As I seek to understand how r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants use storytelling to combat pressures towards intensification and community toxicity, instead turning towards feminist or proto-feminist rhetorical strategies, I hold each of these perspectives in tandem, "tacking in" and "tacking out" to tell the stories of this community in their partiality, their specificity, and their confluence.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> I borrow these methodological terms from Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*.

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### **Chapter 3: Power centers, or How norms are negotiated**

In the previous chapter, I examined feminist and cultural rhetorics theories of storytelling as a method for constructing relationality. Because storytelling as an activity is shaped by the medium through which stories are told (in this case, a subreddit), it is worthwhile to understand how Reddit's functionality as a platform shapes the way people communicate through it. Accordingly, this chapter briefly discusses how scholars have understood the Internet and social medias' roles in digital communication, then turns to analyze how the functionalities and structure of Reddit, specifically, may influence community formation and the kinds of storytelling practices that are possible within a particular online space.

#### **Not a public or a community, but a secret third thing**

In their 2009 chapter summarizing the state of digital rhetoric research on online discourse, Gurak and Antonijevic assert that "We have now reached a time when the phrase 'digital rhetoric' is redundant" because the digital has thoroughly permeated and transformed the communication modes of most people.<sup>37</sup> In the wake of this transformation, they ask, how should rhetoric scholars engage with computer-mediated communication (CMC)? The authors identify two shifts in CMC studies that set up our present moment: 1) as Internet access became ubiquitous in American life, online behavior continued to diversify and adapt to new niche spaces and is no longer generalizable, and 2) no one discipline has the tools and theoretical frameworks to fully understand CMC, leading to the development of Internet studies as a cross-disciplinary field of interest and to the consistent reconceptualization of key disciplinary terms within a multidisciplinary context. For Gurak and Antonijevic, digital technologies "act as a catalyst whereby humans reexperience what were thought of, prior to the technology, as constant, fixed aspects of living."<sup>38</sup> To make sense of the increasing prevalence of online interactions that has transformed the ways people communicate and form communities, researchers have employed various approaches, often considering online interactions as constituting a public or as a community.

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<sup>37</sup> Gurak and Antonijevic, "Digital Rhetoric and Public Discourse," 1.

<sup>38</sup> Gurak and Antonijevic, 9.

The *digital public* approach to social media research emphasizes the role of social media platforms as spaces for civic engagement, political discourse, and the formation of public opinion, building from earlier scholarship, such as Habermas's pivotal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, that focuses on the formation and functioning of public spheres as spaces where citizens come together to discuss and debate matters of common concern, often in the context of democratic societies. While the internet and social media communities lack the spatial boundaries of an analog public, scholars like danah boyd have adapted and extended the concept of *publics* into *networked publics* to better consider how digital technologies have transformed the ways in which people communicate, connect, and engage with each other. boyd describes networked publics as being composed of bits rather than atoms, a move to distinguish them from the more traditional publics discussed in civic and cultural & media studies literatures. For boyd, "networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people."<sup>39</sup> Bit architecture within these publics is compressible, reproducible, and transmittable in more flexible ways than the atom-based architecture of non-networked publics, leading boyd to identify four key affordances of networked publics: persistence rather than ephemerality, replicability, scalability (increased potential visibility), and searchability.<sup>40</sup> These in turn lead to three key dynamics of networked publics: invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and blurred boundaries between public and private spaces.<sup>41</sup> These affordances and dynamics complicate the boundaries of publics as they are conventionally understood, including notions of authenticity and the means by which people belong or contribute to publics across space and time. As a result, boyd argues, researchers must continually take into account the architecture of networked publics when seeking to understand how and why people interact through them.

Further research on networked publics, primarily within the fields of communication and human-computer interaction, has sought to understand how the internet and social media platforms have influenced the formation and functioning of public spaces, as well as their implications for democratic processes, civic engagement, and

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<sup>39</sup> boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics and Implications," 41.

<sup>40</sup> boyd, 46.

<sup>41</sup> boyd, 49.



social relationships. This line of inquiry explores various aspects of networked publics, such as the role of algorithms in shaping online discourse, the emergence of online communities and identity formation, the influence of online platforms on political participation, and the ethical and legal issues surrounding online privacy and surveillance. Often, these approaches are concerned with platform-level governance and the interfaces between social media networks and civic infrastructures.

The *community* approach, on the other hand, centers on the social aspects of online interactions, examining how individuals form communities based on shared interests, values, or goals. Baym posits that online communities foster unique communication patterns and social norms that affect the ways people interact with one another.<sup>42</sup> Researchers have adopted this paradigm to investigate specific online communities, such as Washick's study of feminist moderation practices within Usenet groups, highlighting how moderation practices and comment policies are utilized to cultivate more hospitable discursive spaces in a communication- rather than tech-centric way.<sup>43</sup> This approach allows researchers to understand the dynamics of online communities and explore how social norms, identity formation, and power relations influence the ways people interact with one another. Because of its emphasis on users over infrastructure, while still addressing both factors, a community approach may seem better suited to digital rhetorical research. However, this approach is complicated by questions of boundaries. That is, participants in online spaces may not see themselves as members of discrete communities, the boundaries between various online communities or between online and offline communities may be permeable, and the concept of *community* itself may not be generalizable across different online spaces.

To sidestep the established camps of communities versus networks in ethnographic social media research, digital ethnographers Postill and Pink turn to routines, mobilities, and socialities, based on their research on social media and free culture activist movements in Barcelona. In social media ethnographic research, these framing concepts allow researchers to engage more aspects of what Postill and Pink dub "the messy web" as it

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<sup>42</sup> Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*.

<sup>43</sup> Washick, "Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation."

develops through in-person and online engagements. First, departing from a focus on communities in existing literature on social media research, the authors argue that *community* is "better interrogated in terms of its local meanings for research participants than as representing an empirical social unit that is open to analysis" and propose *socialities* as an alternative framework that prioritizes the qualities of social relationships (on- and off-line) rather than attempting to delineate their boundaries.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, socialities can accommodate both relatively-stable and relatively-transient social media interactions. To engage with these socialities, the social media researcher engages *routines* and *mobilities*. Routines are the practices by which social media users generally and social media users engaging in ethnographic research (social media is both the subject and tool of inquiry, here) create ethnographic places: by catching up on what has been posted, creating and sharing new content, interacting with other users, and archiving media, among others. These routines create a dense network of relationships that comprise the social media fieldsite. As part of these relationships and routines, social media users and the information they generate frequently cross between platforms and/or engage in related offline relationships, further contributing to the "messy web" and often requiring mobilities beyond engagement with any one particular media platform. Thus, the original concept of socialities may be best suited to understanding the dense and evolving network of relationships created or developed through social media, and ethnographic social media research requires a continuous reevaluation of researchers' frameworks for understanding these relationships.

This concept of socialities resonates with digital cultural rhetoric scholars' aims to encompass the "digital negotiation of information—and its historical, social, economic, and political contexts and influences—to affect change" and commitments to situated, embodied, and relational ways of knowing, from which Haas offers a theorization of digital cultural rhetorics as a practice to "recognize and make explicit the plurality of embodied, technological, and rhetorical negotiations within specific cultural contexts and asymmetrical power relations."<sup>45</sup> Like technofeminists, digital cultural rhetoricians

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<sup>44</sup> Postill and Pink, "Social Media Ethnography," 127.

<sup>45</sup> Haas, "Toward a Digital Cultural Rhetoric," 412.

challenge myths of objectivity, neutrality, and disembodiment within digital spaces and scholarship on digital technologies, but they may employ cultural theories in addition to feminism and ground their work in relationships with communities who may not self-describe as primarily feminist. Digital cultural rhetoricians employ a variety of methodologies in their work, including critical historiography to challenge monolithic and exclusionary narratives about technological development; remix of old and new technologies to create new relationships; (auto)ethnographies, testimonios, and other forms of narrative life-writing to understand how "digital bodies, identities, rhetorics, literacies, and ecologies are always already informed by all our relations"<sup>46</sup> and the development of new infrastructures to support *transformational access*<sup>47</sup> to digital tools and communal spaces. At its core, digital cultural rhetorics foregrounds embodied knowledges to form new relational rhetorics and imagine new ways of coming together in digital spaces.

Because the focus of this research remains on the discursive practices participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored used to create and maintain a story-based snark community during the subreddit's first year, I prioritize a framework most similar to Postill and Pink's socialities, read through a feminist and cultural rhetorics framework. Although there is much to be said about the role of platform governance, algorithmic community moderation, and the ethical and legal dimensions of online speech, I engage questions of community formation and moderation as a foundation to better understand how participants characterize their community and their participation within it. Accordingly, the following sections discuss how Reddit's functionality incentivizes some kinds of behaviors over others and how community moderation practices intervene in the formation and maintenance of social norms to regulate these behaviors.

### **What is Reddit known for?**

Reddit is a pseudonymous online platform created in 2006 that brands itself as the "front page of the internet." It hosts a variety of subreddits, or forum-based communities, dedicated to everything from political issues to lifestyle communities to niche media or

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<sup>46</sup> Haas, 418.

<sup>47</sup> Banks, *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*.

hobby interests, that aggregate content from across the Web. Users create a username but supply no other biographical information, in contrast to identity-based sites like Facebook and its subsidiaries or networking sites like Twitter or LinkedIn, which makes collecting demographic information difficult. Anecdotally, however, the majority of users are U.S.-based and the site caters to a “geek” male sensibility. As a partial result of its anonymity and user population, the site has gained notoriety as a homebase of “the manosphere,” or a collection of websites hosting and proliferating alt-right, incel, or violently misogynist content. In 2017, following significant negative press regarding several Reddit communities, site administrators updated its lax hate speech policies, resulting in the quarantine or deletion of subreddits found to be propagating dangerous or strongly offensive content, such as r/JailBait, r/Incels, and r/FatPeopleHate. In the updated content policy, administrators ban “communities and users that incite violence or that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability” alongside prohibitions against posting illegal content, spam, or unauthorized personal information about another person (e.g. doxing).<sup>48</sup> Users or communities found in violation of these policies are subjected to a series of escalating interventions, ranging from an informal warning to the banning of entire subreddit communities. In practice, however, a majority of these sanctions, up until subreddit-level interventions such as the quarantining or deletion of a community, are left to the discretion of volunteer subreddit moderators, who may employ them unevenly. As long as a subreddit community remains below the notice of site administrators, it may continue to break these site policies with impunity. As a result, Reddit remains a hub for both prosocial and antisocial discourse.

### **Why is it surprising (and not) to find a snark community here?**

Because of Reddit’s libertarian approach to content moderation, its pseudonymity, and its topical organizational structure, it has unsurprisingly become host to a network of snark subreddits, of which subreddits dedicated to snarking on Christian fundamentalists comprise only a small niche. These fundie-snarking subreddits primarily center around fundamentalist families who have appeared on reality television, such as r/DuggarsSnark,

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<sup>48</sup> “Content Policy - Reddit.”

but participants in these subreddits frequently interact with other, non-fundamentalist snark communities. According to SubredditStats, a big data project that generates network visualizations and analyzes commenter overlaps between subreddits, participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored also participate in other communities discussing religion but more commonly participate in communities centered around reality television; beauty, wedding, and fashion snark; and body or illness-based snark (see Table 1).

Subreddit	Probability Multiplier	Subreddit	Probability Multiplier
r/DuggarsSnark	187.19	r/VanderpumpRules	16.47
r/MunchSnark	79.58	r/90DayFiance	16.06
r/TLCSisterWives	72.55	r/IncelTear	14.48
r/IllnessFakers	69.57	r/FatLogic	14.03
r/TeenMomOGandTeenMom2	43.20	r/FakeDisorderCringe	13.76
r/BlogSnark	30.57	r/BravoRealHousewives	13.54
r/AntiMLM	28.32	r/MarriedAtFirstSight	13.38
r/WeddingShaming	26.92	r/WeddingPlanning	12.49
r/NameNerds	26.77	r/GreysAnatomy	12.49
r/BreakingMom	22.22	r/TrueCrime	12.41
r/ExChristian	20.45	r/ReligiousFruitcake	11.75
r/UnresolvedMysteries	17.35	r/BotchedSurgeries	11.66
r/TheBachelor	17.30	r/AmItheAngel	11.20
r/BeautyGuruChatter	17.05	r/InstagramReality	10.54
r/90DayFianceUncensored	16.66	r/BeyondTheBump	10.43
<p><b>Key:</b> Television general; television snark; faith or ex-faith general; faith or ex-faith snark; body, beauty, or wellness general; body, beauty, or wellness snark; relationships general; relationship snark; other</p>			

**Table 1.** Probability Multipliers for Subreddits Related to r/FundieSnarkUncensored, provided by SubredditStats. *The probability multiplier describes how likely participants in*

**Table 1. (cont'd)**

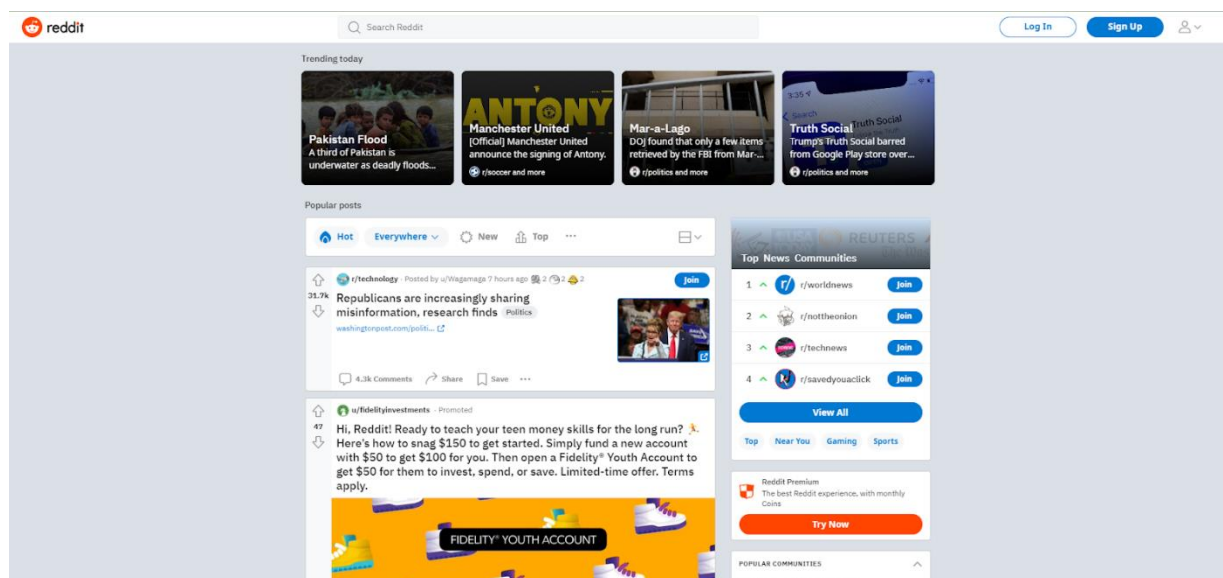
*r/FundieSnarkUncensored* are to post or comment in the related subreddit compared to the average Reddit user. For example, *r/FundieSnarkUncensored* participants are 187.19 times more likely to post in *r/DuggarsSnark* than the average Reddit user.

Many of these related subreddits, such as *r/MunchSnark* and *r/FakeDisorderCringe*, have flirted with subreddit quarantines and site bans because of the nature and tone of their contents. Others, like *r/FatLogic*, are functionally reincarnations of previously banned communities—in this case, *r/FatPeopleHate*—that skirt Reddit content policies around the recreation of banned subreddits by taking over an existing topically-related but unbanned subreddit. The strong overlap between these subreddits and participants in *r/FundieSnarkUncensored* points to two considerations: 1) Reddit clearly provides a hospitable ecosystem for ethically-dubious or offensive snark, and yet 2) despite the crossover between *r/FundieSnarkUncensored* and more hateful subreddits, *r/FundieSnarkUncensored* managed to implement and largely maintain community norms that fostered nuance, relationality, and introspection among its participants, despite large influxes of new members at two points during its first year. To better understand how moderators and participants in *r/FundieSnarkUncensored* approached this task, we must first understand how Reddit's mechanisms incentivize and disincentivize various forms of interaction.

**What are Reddits' mechanisms?**

Visitors to Reddit.com are presented with a set of trending topics, subreddits, and posts, interspersed with ads for Reddit Premium (an ad-free version of the site) and various promoted products or services (see Figure 1). The trending topics at the top of the page are displayed similarly to trending topics on Twitter, and each topic is linked to one or more subreddits that contribute to its discussion. In the sidebar on the right side of the page, visitors can see a short list of top news communities and popular topics. The default interests suggested for new users include gaming, sports, TV, travel, and fashion. In the center of the page, visitors are shown a series of Reddit posts; by default, these posts are sorted by "Hot," a ranking algorithm that weights upvotes logarithmically, and are generated from "Everywhere." Visitors have the option to also sort posts by "New," "Top" (the most popular posts within a day, week, month, or year), "Controversial" (posts with

similar numbers of upvotes or downvotes), or “Rising,” which gathers the most popular posts from the hour. Additionally, visitors can select posts from various countries to highlight regional interests.



**Figure 1.** Reddit’s homepage on August 30, 2022.

To interact with these posts in any way, however, visitors will need to create an account, which requires the provision of a username and password but no other information. Once logged into their account, users can upvote and downvote posts, create posts, and comment on posts, within community limits. To prevent users and bots from spamming their subreddits, many moderators implement protective restrictions. Users may be prohibited from commenting or posting within a subreddit until their account reaches a minimum age, which may or may not be disclosed, or achieves a certain threshold of karma, which also may or may not be disclosed. When a user’s post or comment is upvoted by another user, the original user gains karma. If their post or comment is downvoted by other users, the original user loses karma. In practice, upvoting and downvoting, indicated by the arrows next to featured posts in Figure 1, are meant to promote posts that fit a given subreddit’s purpose and discourage posts that are off-topic. In practice, though, upvoting and downvoting more often function as a popularity rating.

As users peruse the site, they may choose to join, or subscribe to, various subreddits. They will then have access to two homepages: on their personal homepage, users will see trending posts from the subreddits they have joined. Early users would also

see posts from a list of default subreddits to which every new account was subscribed, but this practice was discontinued in 2017. Additionally, users can still see posts from subreddits across the site by visiting r/Popular, formerly r/All. Prior to 2017, r/All was the default homepage for site visitors and users who were logged out of their own accounts, and it featured a mix of the default subreddits, such as r/AskReddit and r/Technology, alongside rising posts from more niche communities. However, the now-banned subreddit r/The\_Donald, a politically volatile fanbase for former US President Donald Trump, began gaming the site's algorithms by using "stickied" posts, a category of posts pinned by subreddit moderators to the top of their subreddit's homepage, to take over the Hot and Rising algorithms. Because stickied posts were weighted more heavily than non-stickied posts, r/The\_Donald. The rise and fall of r/The\_Donald points to vulnerabilities in the algorithmic architecture of Reddit and to the ways various communities can game the system to enact behaviors ranging from nuisance to active harm.

Accordingly, sorting algorithms function as one intensification factor within online communities like Reddit. While users are unable to directly affect the site's sorting algorithms, because these algorithms channel posts that receive particular types of interaction (upvotes and downvotes) within a set timeframe, communities can game them to heavily promote some speech over other kinds of speech. As previously noted, members of the r/The\_Donald manipulated the "sticky" feature to overwhelm users of Reddit with pro-Trump posts in what was functionally a form of sitewide brigading. Because of its visibility as a clear instance of nuisance or harmful behavior, r/The\_Donald has formed a prime example for scholars interested in the effects of moderation practices on volatile communities. As Trujillo and Cresci found in their study of community moderation practices, top-down moderation tools, like visibility restrictions and community quarantines, were able to strongly curtail the reach of r/The\_Donald's disruptive behavior, but they intensified the toxicity of individual's behavior within the subreddit as users posted increasingly polarized and counterfactual content.<sup>49</sup> This finding regarding the mixed effectiveness of top-down moderation practices is echoed in Gillett and Suzor's study

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<sup>49</sup> Trujillo and Cresci, "Make Reddit Great Again."



of incel forums on Reddit—while the site’s administrators can employ punitive pressure to enforce the Terms of Service and prevent communities from gaming the algorithm to disrupt other communities, the internal practices of toxic or volatile forums remain either unchanged or become more harmful as users continue to justify their behavior in the face of perceived persecution.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, further strategies are needed to not only combat antisocial behavior but to promote prosocial behavior.

### **How have these mechanisms been used in the past?**

While the activities of the fundie-snarking subreddits fall within Reddit’s Terms of Service and Content Policy and have, thus, not yet attracted the attention of site administrators, patterns of hostility and digital aggression persist within these spaces, culminating in a splintering pattern of subreddits and the ethical schism that precipitated the formation of r/FundieSnarkUncensored in August 2020. Before diving into the saga of this ethical schism, however, it is worthwhile to further consider hostile community practices that fall below bannable offenses.

While some research on antisocial online behavior focuses on harm-mitigation through improved content moderation, Reyman and Sparby promote a more holistic, relational *ethic of responsibility* that "calls for more engagement rather than less, for value in designing for protection against digital harassment rather than after-the-fact cleanup, for accountability and tactical response rather than civility within digital contexts" in their recent edited collection.<sup>51</sup> This dissociation from calls for civility is a key feature of the collection's pivot to a communal ethical responsibility. As the editors discuss in their introduction, admonishments like "don't feed the trolls" that advocate disengagement with digital aggressors functionally push racialized and non-male participants out of online spaces: if speaking up incites further digital aggression, possibly even from other community members who perceive complaints from targets of digital aggression as "feeding the trolls," the targeted users can no longer participate in the space, something Gelms discusses in more detail in her chapter. While much of the labor of creating safer digital spaces falls on platform designers and developers, community leaders, moderators,

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<sup>50</sup> Gillett and Suzor, "Incels on Reddit."

<sup>51</sup> Reyman and Sparby, *Digital Ethics*, 7.

and community members also have roles to play in establishing and upholding digital social contracts. Accordingly, in their chapters to the same collection, Trice, Potts, & Small and London, Crundwell, Eastley, Santiago, & Jenkins consider the ways platform infrastructures incentivize or disincentivize harmful behavior and investigate how rules-versus values-based moderation practices and active versus passive moderation responses to targeted hate, respectively, create social norms in different online spaces. Their collective findings indicate that changes in platform affordances and/or human moderator interventions can shift communities towards or away from becoming what Trice, Potts, & Small name "communities of harm."<sup>52</sup>

These findings resonate with Richter's study of subreddit Rules documents as structure deliberations that orient participants towards a community's shared goals and values.<sup>53</sup> Richter argues that the process of generating and modifying these documents, which are subject to Reddit's ToS and Content Policy but are otherwise unique to each subreddit, "attune [participants] to decorum, metadiscourse, and telos within particular social environments" in ways that support more ethical networked agonism.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, as writers become rhetorically attuned to these shared goals and values expressed through community rules, these documents can spur invention within the community, a positive benefit beyond simply more civil discourse. As they do so, they develop sociality-based media practices that both uphold moderation standards within a given community and may contribute to the development of a particular community ideal. These resulting habitual practices interplay with the actions of official community moderators, algorithmic governance, and central site regulation.

### **Community moderation**

Within scholarship on community formation and moderation, the emergence of algorithmic moderation tools, such as Reddit's AutoMod bot, has raised questions about the role of human moderators in online communities. In their study of volunteer moderators across three platforms (Facebook, Reddit, and Twitch), Seering et al. emphasize the

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<sup>52</sup> Trice, Potts, and Small, "Values versus Rules in Social Media Communities: How Platforms Generate Amorality on Reddit and Facebook."

<sup>53</sup> Richter, "Writing With Reddiquette."

<sup>54</sup> Richter, 13.

importance of human moderators in shaping online communities, arguing that human moderators play a critical role even as algorithmic moderation becomes more prevalent.<sup>55</sup> They contend that human moderators bring a level of nuance and understanding that algorithms may not be able to replicate, especially when dealing with context-sensitive issues. Likewise, Gibson explored the relationship between free speech and safe spaces, examining how moderation policies shape online discussion spaces.<sup>56</sup> The study demonstrated that moderation policies can influence the quality of discourse and help strike a balance between free speech and safety, but persistent concerns about over-moderation and censorship remain. Further, as Yang's study of a single moderator's coup of a previously-benign subreddit demonstrates, individual moderators often hold authority to unilaterally shape a community's discourse by suppressing others' speech while over-promoting their own.<sup>57</sup> At a broader level, Trujillo and Cresci further assessed the community effects of moderation interventions on r/The\_Donald, indicating that moderation interventions can significantly impact the dynamics and behaviors within an online community.<sup>58</sup> While platform moderation interventions, such as the quarantine and eventual deletion of the problematic communities like r/The\_Donald, effectively curtail the ability of bad actors to interfere with other users' experiences on social media sites, the toxicity of individual users within these spaces may increase after such actions. Trujillo and Cresci's findings indicate that while large-scale actions can be useful tools for community moderation because they can constrain behavior, human moderators may be more effective in actually changing users' behaviors for the positive.

That said, human moderators face unique challenges depending on the context, and understanding these challenges is essential for effective moderation. While algorithmic moderation tools, like AutoMod, can be useful tools or supplements to human moderators to help remove obviously negative contributions to a community, like spam links or posts containing specific banned words, users are adaptive, and some harmful behaviors fall below easily-recognized thresholds of hate speech, doxing, or bullying. This is particularly

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<sup>55</sup> Seering et al., "Moderator Engagement and Community Development in the Age of Algorithms."

<sup>56</sup> Gibson, "Free Speech and Safe Spaces."

<sup>57</sup> Yang, "When Power Goes Wild Online."

<sup>58</sup> Trujillo and Cresci, "Make Reddit Great Again."

true for emotion or humor-based behaviors. For example, Matamoros-Fernández et al. argue that humor can be used as a tool to propagate hate speech and misinformation, making it difficult for moderation algorithms to detect problematic content.<sup>59</sup> It is much easier to filter out posts or comments that contain an ethnic slur, for example, than it is to recognize and remove a racist meme. Wollebæk et al. further emphasize the role of emotions, such as anger and fear, in shaping individuals' actions and interactions within online communities.<sup>60</sup> Their findings indicate that in communities where outright hate speech is efficiently removed, users may turn to fear-based strategies, like conspiratorial logics, to harm minoritized groups. These findings resonate with feminist research about online interactions that recognizes online harassment disproportionately affects women and gender non-conforming individuals,<sup>61</sup> that gendered harassment exerts a chilling effect on women and gender-nonconforming people's participation online,<sup>62</sup> and that gendered harassment towards racialized women and gender-nonconforming people frequently contains overlapping racial and gendered abuse.<sup>63</sup> This recognition is essential for developing moderation practices that specifically address the gendered nature of online harassment and abuse, including behaviors that fall below the threshold of platform Terms of Service.

To do so, scholars advocate for a range of human moderation practices, spanning from explicit ethical considerations to the incorporation of empathy-based counterspeech. Potts and Trice analyzed digital community moderation values within politics, news, and hot beverage communities on Reddit to highlight the need for guiding codes of ethics. They found that communities used rules to restrict negative behaviors but less frequently promoted positive behaviors.<sup>64</sup> This strategy could help promote pro-social discourse to supplant the kinds of non-bannable but still harmful behaviors noted above. Further, Cullen and Kairam focused on community moderation as reflective practice, examining how in the

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<sup>59</sup> Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, Louisa Bartolo, and Luke Troynar, "Humour as an Online Safety Issue."

<sup>60</sup> Wollebæk et al., "Anger, Fear, and Echo Chambers."

<sup>61</sup> Chadha et al., "Women's Responses to Online Harassment."

<sup>62</sup> Ortiz, "'If Something Ever Happened, I'd Have No One to Tell.'"

<sup>63</sup> Francisco and Felmler, "What Did You Call Me?"

<sup>64</sup> Potts and Trice, "Digital Community Moderation Values."

absence of formal training or onboarding, volunteer moderators learn from their experiences and develop expertise.<sup>65</sup> Their findings suggest that because volunteer moderating bears similarities to an apprenticeship process, fostering a culture of reflection and learning is essential for moderators to navigate the complexities of online community moderation, a finding that resonates with feminist scholarship on reflexivity more broadly. When moderators employ ethics-based, reflective moderating practices, they may be able to employ feminist-influenced strategies like empathy-based counterspeech to reshape or positively influence user behavior, in addition to removing or disincentivizing harmful behavior. In a study of three response types to inappropriate behavior (warnings, humor, or empathy that reiterated the humanity of targeted individuals or groups), Hangartner et al. found that empathy-based counterspeech most significantly reduced racist hate speech on social media platforms.<sup>66</sup> While their findings addressed explicit hate speech and did not account for humor or fear-based discourse that may not be obvious as hate speech, their results resonate with in-practice results within r/FundieSnarkUncensored.

### **Re-viewed: The Schism and its Factors**

As described in the preceding chapter, the impetus for r/FundieSnarkUncensored's creation stemmed from a series of decisions made by the volunteer moderator team. As curators of the community, moderators are often charged with discouraging or removing posts that fall outside the subreddit's topical focus or that are perceived as low-value by users. Typically, this manifests in the form of community rules prohibiting certain kinds of posts, such as memes or self-promotion, or relegation of these kinds of posts to particular times, like Meme Mondays. In r/FundieSnark, however, the moderators took an increasingly aggressive approach to content moderation. The subreddit had prohibited "leg humping," or fawning behavior over the fundamentalists, because this behavior was at odds with the goal of maintaining a snark subreddit, rather than a fanpage. However, moderators continued to narrow the definition of "leg humping" far beyond community understandings of the behavior, leading to conflict between participants and moderators. While snarkers perceived their contributions as helpful and on-topic because they

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<sup>65</sup> Cullen and Kairam, "Practicing Moderation."

<sup>66</sup> Hangartner et al., "Empathy-Based Counterspeech Can Reduce Racist Hate Speech in a Social Media Field Experiment."

provided context for future snark, moderators consistently removed any posts or comments that did not include increasingly pointed jabs at fundamentalists. This discrepancy over the boundaries of leg-humping behaviors points to a larger conflict over the conceptualization of snark. In early “Vent” threads posted to the newly-formed r/FundieSnarkUncensored, snarkers complain about a range of removed comments, such as comments that challenged the use of misogynistic terms referring to women’s postpartum anatomy by sharing snarkers’ own experiences of birth and recovery. To add insult to injury, moderators employed condescension when informing participants that their post or comment had violated subreddit rules, directing users to save their content for their mommy blogs.

While these behaviors eventually led to an exodus from r/FundieSnark and the creation of r/FundieSnarkUncensored, they first exacerbated hostile speech within the parent subreddit. Because neutral and positive comments were speedily removed, the window of acceptable discourse continued to shift into hostile speech. Accordingly, provocatively hostile or shocking posts and comments received “upvotes” and thus promotion within the subreddit. In order to participate in the subreddit as active snarkers, users were required to take on these practices themselves, folding them into their understanding of what it means to be a “snarker.” Effectively, this confluence of pressures created a funnel in which snark could only ever become more aggressive, aggressive or hateful posts received more attention, and the snarkers must internalize and enact these traits in order to remain participants in the space. By creating r/FundieSnarkUncensored, early participants sought to intervene in this funnel effect by changing the most accessible intensification factor: moderation style.

### **The fall-out: Changes in moderation**

In interviews, participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored often describe the subreddit as a confederation of smaller communities united in a common purpose, which is disparately described as entertainment (watching internet drama like some people watch soap operas) or educational (learning more about an unfamiliar culture that is beginning to impact their lives politically). They describe selectively interacting with posts based on flair and preferred topics/subjects of snark and characterize different flairs as having somewhat different tones or values. However, an analysis of posts and comments shows that while

many casual users may interact with only some flairs, there is a core group of users that generate both the highest number of posts/comments in each flair and who are consistently the most popular users (measured in total score for posts/comments) in each flair. This correlates with Panek et al.'s description of a "creator/audience" dynamic.<sup>67</sup> They argue that as a group increases in size, participation concentrates in a smaller number of members and turnover decreases: there is a lower burden of participation for "audience" members, and "creators" experience essentially a smaller community-within-community. Simultaneously, they argue, as time passes, participation becomes more dispersed and turnover increases; that is, a "crowd" dynamic takes over in which more participants may engage, but they do not stay in the community.

This interplay between a creator/audience dynamic and a crowd dynamic has the potential to alter the structures of community governance within a medium-sized community like r/FundieSnarkUncensored. There is still an established hierarchy of authority, in that site administrators have the power to quarantine, restrict, or ban any subreddit found in violation of Reddit's Terms of Service; volunteer moderators cannot be removed by users, only by other moderators, and retain the power to act unilaterally, as seen in the devolution of r/FundieSnark. However, in contrast to Seering et al.'s findings that community moderators see themselves as protectors and caretakers of their communities yet rarely solicit direct feedback from the communities they moderate, instead making decisions internally among the moderator team, volunteer moderators within r/FundieSnarkUncensored engage in more distributed power sharing by creating "meta" threads to discuss potential changes to the community norms, as discussed further in Chapter 4. Furthermore, because some core users are posting so frequently and their posts are consistently upvoted by other users, they dominate the content of the subreddit. In response, I argue that although moderators have the formal power to set and enforce community boundaries, because r/FundieSnarkUncensored has shifted towards a community governance model, this group of users has a large influence on what is characterized as appropriate discourse, alongside outliers who post infrequently and are

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<sup>67</sup> Panek, Harrison, and Hou, "Change by Default."

unpopular. This smaller subset of users function as a foil, setting the negative limits of the subreddit, or what is unacceptable.

In short, the moderation changes that were the initial catalyst for r/FundieSnarkUncensored's divergence from r/FundieSnark do appear to exert significant effects on the tone and quality of the subreddit's discourse, but these attributes are also significantly mediated by the contributions of a core user base that persists even through marked gains in the number of participants. Further, there is a potential interaction between core users and moderators, as the moderator team seeks to diversify their membership by explicitly recruiting members of marginalized groups to address harmful trends within the community's snark. In the next chapter, I use computational topic modeling to surface themes within r/FundieSnarkUncensored's content that reveal persistent interests within the group, including meta conversations about the role of snark, the role of moderation, and expectations of community interactions.



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## **Chapter 4: In practice, or, How storytelling evolves over time**

In the previous chapters, I established the significance of fundamentalist media networks and the communities that snark upon them, described how feminist and cultural rhetoricians understand storytelling as a form of relational knowledge-making, and situated r/FundieSnarkUncensored's storytelling endeavors within the particular media ecosystem of Reddit. Now, I turn my attention to the actual discourse of the subreddit itself. Specifically, I identify the persistent topics that occupy r/FundieSnarkUncensored and trace how storytelling manifests differently across them. To this end, I used computational topic modeling to identify trends in the subreddit's text posts and comments over its first year. In this chapter, I introduce the topic modeling method, discuss each of the five themes that surfaced in my results using example texts from the subreddit, then conclude by situating snarkers' storytelling practices within the framework of rhetorical empathy.

### **Introducing topic modeling**

I chose to use computational topic modeling in this research for several reasons. First, I wanted as close to a comprehensive view of r/FundieSnarkUncensored's storytelling practices as possible, but the scale of the project (The forum published approximately 700,000 posts and comments during its first year.) made it infeasible to manually code each text using established qualitative methods. Relatedly, because the stories shared within the subreddit concern often-personal and sometimes-distressing content, taking a computational approach allowed me to have a level of protective distance from the material. Because the topics generated through this approach are presented as an aggregate of words that contributed to each topic, no individual user's post history is spotlighted unnecessarily. Additionally, for me as a researcher, this method limited the emotional labor of reading extensive numbers of difficult stories, instead allowing me to focus my attention on a smaller subset of stories that form good examples of each theme.

For the topic modeling, I used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a probabilistic topic modeling method, to identify "topics," or groups of related words, within these texts. It works like this: Let's say you have a stack of papers (a corpus of documents) about various topics, and you want to know what kinds of things are discussed in these papers, but you don't have time to read them all. Latent Dirichlet Allocation takes that stack of documents and breaks them down into words (tokens), then looks for patterns. We can safely assume

that every document is about some topic or topics, and that those topics can be associated with particular groups of words. For example, if a paper is talking about theater, it might use words like "stage," "Shakespeare," "actor," or "play." If a paper is talking about sports, it might use words like "football," "score," "time," and "play." In a real-world scenario, each paper might be about multiple topics, and some words can be assigned to multiple topics, like the word "play" in this example, so the best strategy is to use probability to make an educated guess about groups of words within the set of documents. The researcher can then view the resulting "topics," or groups of words, and then must evaluate the coherence of each of these topics and make adjustments to the model as needed. Because LDA, like many other topic models, found its original uses in software engineering as a pre-processing step for machine learning,<sup>68</sup> standards for its use in humanistic research are still evolving. Currently, its use in rhetoric and composition is limited, but it is more widely used in rhetoric's sister fields of communication studies and media and information studies. Because LDA, and computational topic modeling generally, are so new to rhetoric, I draw on standards and best practices generated by communication scholars to attune and evaluate this model.

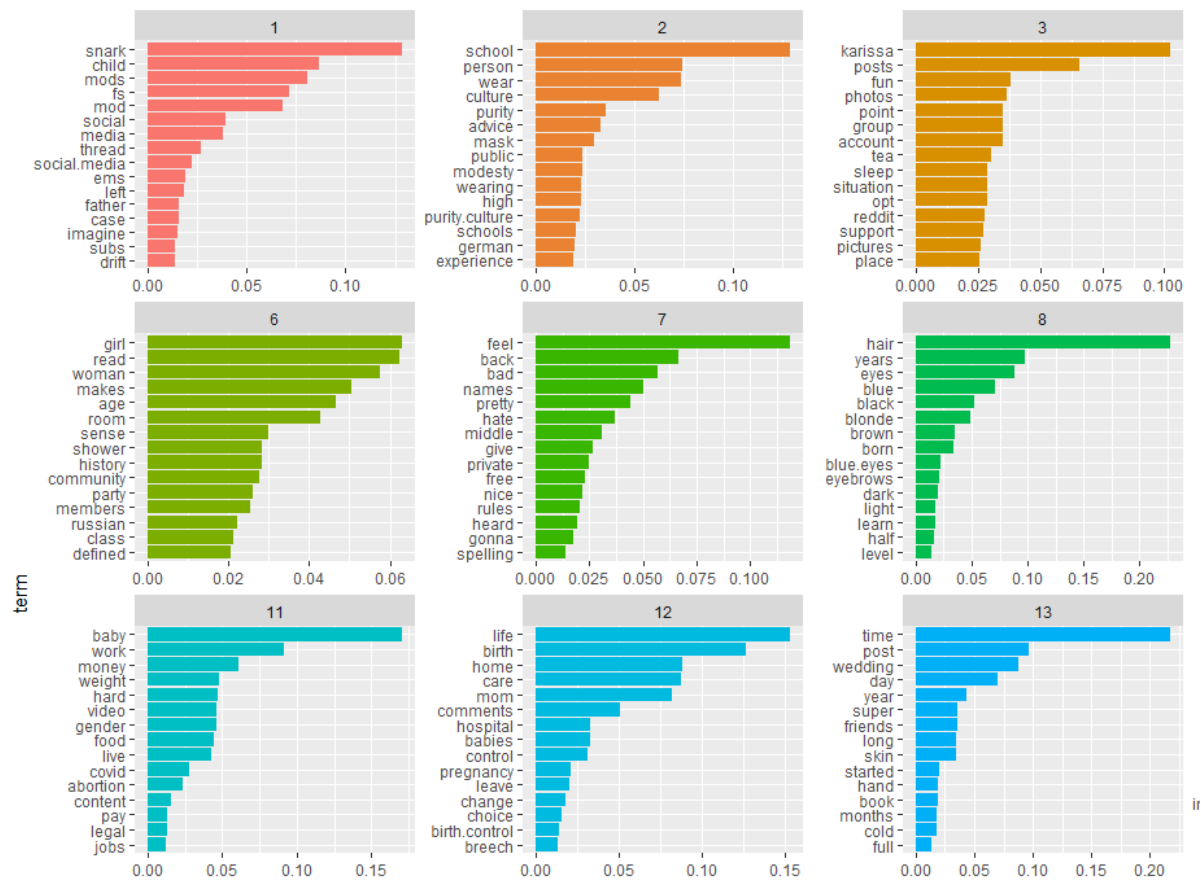
Like other topic models, LDA has both benefits and limitations. As a benefit, it is an efficient form of understanding the potential contents of a large set of texts, such as an entire subreddit, in a relatively short amount of time. It also allows for the discovery of trends and themes that may not be immediately apparent to a human reader. However, the results of the models may still be incomplete and often rely on human interpretations: models that score well on statistical measures of coherence and perplexity may produce topics that are incomprehensible to a human reader. The model may also produce "noisy" results when studying short, user-generated texts, such as Reddit posts. These challenges can be mitigated by following best practices when building and testing the model.<sup>69</sup> As a

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<sup>68</sup> Joshua Charles Campbell, Abram Hindle, and Eleni Stroulia, "Chapter 6 - Latent Dirichlet Allocation: Extracting Topics from Software Engineering Data," in *The Art and Science of Analyzing Software Data*, ed. Christian Bird, Tim Menzies, and Thomas Zimmermann (Boston: Morgan Kaufmann, 2015), 139–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-411519-4.00006-9>.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Maier et al., "Applying LDA Topic Modeling in Communication Research: Toward a Valid and Reliable Methodology," *Communication Methods & Measures* 12, no. 2/3 (April 2018): 93–118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2018.1430754>.

humanistic researcher, many of these potential weaknesses can be re-imagined as strengths. In this research, I used LDA to generate topics for each set of text posts and comments posted to r/FundieSnarkUncensored each month. Because the subreddit was founded in mid-August of 2020, August and September were combined due to the lower number of posts and comments. Then, I took each list of topics, which were represented by words that most strongly contributed to the topic and assigned a label to each topic. Finally, I grouped these labels into themes to understand whether and how topics persist over time.



**Figure 2.** Example topics generated from January 2021’s text posts and comments.

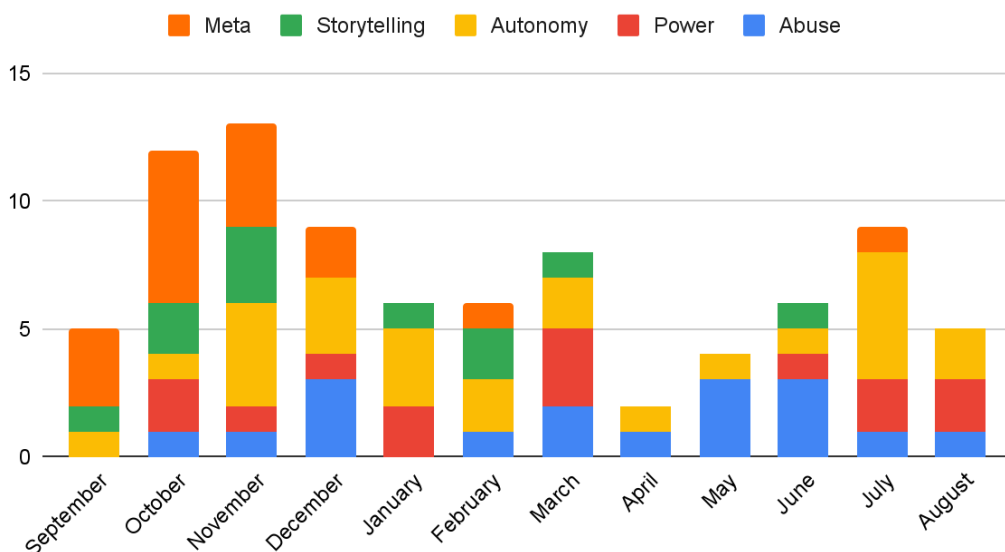
As an example, Figure 2 depicts topics generated from January 2021’s text posts and comments. Each numbered block represents a topic. The words on the left are the top 16 words that contributed to that topic, ranked by their corresponding beta value, or strength of contribution, which is displayed on the x axis. In this example, Topic 1 was assigned a label of “snark boundaries (children).” This label was then grouped into the theme “meta

discussions about snark and community boundaries.” A detailed reader will note that some words are repeated in some topics, such as “social,” “media,” and “social.media” in Topic 1. Many researchers employ stemming (reducing each word to a base root without syntactic knowledge) or lemmatizing (reducing a word to its most meaningful base root with use of a dictionary) as part of their pre-processing. Stemming is both computationally less demanding than lemmatizing and less accurate, but both would reduce the repetition of duplicate words. However, because r/FundieSnarkUncensored is a snark community that depends on clever wordplay, I omitted these steps from my data processing, as I weighed occasionally overlapping terms a lesser loss than the potential omission of important language play. When the meaning of a particular topic seemed unclear, I relied on documents that strongly contributed to the topic and a contextual reading of the month’s top posts and comments to inform my label for that topic. The full code for this process can be found in Appendix A.

In this chapter, I instead discuss the themes that emerged across r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s first year as a means to understand the scope of snarkers’ conversations, their recurring interests, and their use of storytelling strategies. The themes surfaced in this longitudinal approach demonstrate the foundational interests of r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s participants and provide some information about how snarkers typically approach these interests. By introducing these persistent themes, I demonstrate that r/FundieSnarkUncensored enacts its commitment to storytelling through a range of strategies, each adapted to fit a particular element of fundamentalist discourse.

Viewing r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s conversations across time shows that participants are concerned with five themes: meta discussions about snark and community boundaries; storytelling; gender, power, and relationships; sexual and reproductive autonomy; and responses to abuse and trauma. Of these themes, meta discussions about the purposes of snark, community boundaries, and the role of storytelling are clustered early in the first year as snarkers debated how to set up their new community in ways that avoided the pitfalls of the original r/FundieSnark and concurrent issues with r/DuggarsSnark. Discussions of the latter three themes persist across the full year in relatively consistent levels, indicating that these are themes to which snarkers gravitate in their actual practices of snarking.

## Theme Distribution by Month



**Figure 3.** Theme distribution by month.

### **Meta discussions about snark and community boundaries**

Most discussions of norms, boundaries, and moderation occurred in the first three months of r/FundieSnarkUncensored's development. In these months, participants were concerned with setting boundaries around who could be snarked upon (only adult Christian fundamentalists with public-facing social media accounts), which topics were appropriate for snark (mockery of fundamentalists' bodies or speculation about their sexualities were prohibited), and how snarkers should engage sensitive topics, like illness or pregnancy loss. Further discussion of appropriate snark behavior occurs sporadically in later months, but these discussions are centered more tightly around specific events in the fundie-verse rather than general practices.

Overall, these discussions around snark behaviors coincide with the most frequent use of storytelling and suggest that participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored approach snark somewhat more relationally than participants in other fundie-snarking spaces; by placing their own experiences in conjunction with topics discussed by fundamentalists and setting clear boundaries around inappropriate or harmful snark behaviors, this community seeks to create a space that balances community support with critique of toxic ideologies.



Accordingly, I discuss examples of this theme alongside examples of storytelling in the next subsection.

### **Storytelling**

This theme encompasses times when snarkers gathered to share personal stories about topics related to snark themes, like pregnancy experiences, or about snark practices themselves. Storytelling topics are most prominent early in r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year and seem to serve as guides for the development of community boundaries. These early storytelling episodes frame r/FundieSnarkUncensored in contrast to more stringently moderated communities and reflect how snarkers themselves are affected by participating in this community. Frequently, this theme is represented in "Vent" posts, or megathreads in which participants expressed anger, grief, and outrage at the practices of the parent subreddit. Sometimes, snarkers share stories about their own experiences with common snark themes, like pregnancy and purity culture, putting their own memories and feelings in relation to those expressed by fundamentalist women in the media r/FundieSnarkUncensored snarks upon. At other times, snarkers tell stories about how the snark itself affects their lives, such as sharing how body-based snark targeted at fundamentalism hurts snarkers who share similar physical traits.

For example, in an early "Vent" thread, a snarker shared their story of being banned from r/FundieSnark for expressing concern about a fundamentalist woman involved in a high-risk marital situation.<sup>70</sup> In the downthread comments, other snarkers responded with comments mirroring the original poster's outrage at the unfair ban, concern and disgust for the rapidly degrading standards of the original subreddit, and stories of being banned for similar "offenses" of concern, inquiry, or sharing related personal anecdotes. Much of the conversation centers on questions of empathy, with some users writing that the point of fundie-snarking seems to have shifted to villainizing or outright mischaracterizing fundamentalists to the point that their humanity is forgotten. By preventing snarkers from showing concern or compassion including the sharing of relevant personal stories, thread

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<sup>70</sup> lightningprincezu, "Not Wanting Someone to Be Abused by Their Spouse Is Now Leghumping," Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, October 21, 2020, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/jf3xu4/not\\_wanting\\_someone\\_to\\_be\\_abused\\_by\\_their\\_spouse/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/jf3xu4/not_wanting_someone_to_be_abused_by_their_spouse/).

participants write, r/FundieSnark consistently pushes the dialogue towards targeted hate, including what some users perceive to be endorsements of abuse when a fundamentalist woman “warrants” it.

Particularly, early participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored were concerned about the potential that their new subreddit would mimic the snark practices of the old subreddit that had driven them away in the first place, such as bodyshaming or “mean things [that] are said just for edginess.”<sup>71</sup> In October 2020, the original subreddit, r/FundieSnark, went private, meaning that it no longer appeared in search results for new subscribers and existing members needed to message the moderation team to be manually added back to the subreddit. As a result, r/FundieSnarkUncensored received an influx of followers with varying levels of knowledge about the new subreddit’s goals and ethos. In a subsequent post about the subreddit’s direction, moderators noted an increase in reported posts as founding participants complained about new subscriber’s cruel or inappropriate posts and as new subscribers attempted to report founding participants’ posts and comments as “leg humping,” a term frequently used in snark spaces to denote fannish or kiss-up behavior, typically towards an idolized figure.<sup>72</sup> This moderator update was positively received, and in the comments, snarkers shared stories of being banned from r/FundieSnark for offenses ranging from objecting to a moderator’s insistence on reminding snarkers that a particular fundamentalist baby was ugly to critiquing snark that crossed into fanfiction territory by creating elaborate, entirely fictional scenarios to enable further mean comments about fundamentalists.

The primary intersection of meta discussions about appropriate snark with storytelling, however, centers around discussions of bodyshaming, its potential impacts on fundamentalists, and its effects on snarkers. In a sequence of early posts, snarkers drew direct lines between the original subreddit’s habit of snarking on fundamentalists’ postpartum bodies, negative effects on themselves and other snarkers, and the potential of snark to become simple online bullying. In one post, the original author shared:

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<sup>71</sup> SeagullMom, “Sub Direction, Meangirling, Leghumping,” Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/ls40jk/sub\\_direction\\_meangirling\\_leghumping/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/ls40jk/sub_direction_meangirling_leghumping/).

<sup>72</sup> SeagullMom.

I realise a ton of FS people only just joined and might not know, but here in FSU one of our big complaints abt the main sub was how much bodyshaming went on, especially towards Bethy! There's lots to snark about without resorting to talking about how much weight she's gained etc. Not even so much out of concern for her, there's more than a few of us who'll hear that as a criticism of ourselves and our own worth as much as hers. Thank u guys<sup>73</sup>

In the comments, snarkers expanded on the original poster's message, asking community members to reconsider bodyshaming language, such as derogatory references to the sexual anatomy of fundamentalist women who experienced complications during birth, as misogynist. In nested comments, snarkers chimed in with their own stories of experiencing difficult, sometimes traumatic births, then reading comments on r/FundieSnark about how disgusting their bodies must now be. Other snarkers responded with reassurance, encouraging comments to snarkers who shared their fears or worries about current or future pregnancies, and congratulations to new parents.

Likewise, in a similar post made within the same month, a writer urged fellow snarkers to consider the ramifications of their comments, noting that appearance-based snark overshadowed the ugly beliefs held by fundamentalists and instead could harm snarkers who share their physical attributes.<sup>74</sup> Similarly to the previous post, commenters received the message favorably, identifying a range of experiences in the original subreddit that they had found personally harmful. These experiences ranged from weight-based snark to snark shaming particular nose shapes to snark on banal fashion choices shared by many low- to middle-income snarkers. One commenter writes, "Im so glad Im not the only one thinking this. I went to fundiesnark to laugh about ridiculous christian culture- not to suddenly become extremely self conscious about every aspect of myself that they would tear apart if I happened to be fundie."<sup>75</sup> This sentiment recurs throughout the commenter

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<sup>73</sup> Tonightmatthew1, "Can We Not Bring Body Shaming into This Sub," Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 4, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lce1pw/can\\_we\\_not\\_bring\\_body\\_shaming\\_into\\_this\\_sub/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lce1pw/can_we_not_bring_body_shaming_into_this_sub/).

<sup>74</sup> dradonia, "Banned Permanently from FundieSnark for Saying Body Shaming Is Wrong," Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, January 15, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/kxzb08/banned\\_permanently\\_from\\_fundiesnark\\_for\\_saying/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/kxzb08/banned_permanently_from_fundiesnark_for_saying/).

<sup>75</sup> mnhaverland, "Im so Glad Im Not Th...," Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, January 15, 2021,

stories—r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants consistently note that these forms of snark not only obscure the beliefs and behaviors that ostensibly drive fundie-snarking as a practice but that they routinely reify the same misogynistic norms that shape fundamentalist culture. While moderators do not typically respond to each post in the subreddit, instead engaging when they are tagged by a user or a post violates subreddit rules, the recurring posts and robust discussions in the comments led moderators to adjust the subreddit rules to prohibit bodyshaming, with a promise that this would not result in over-moderation:

This will become a clear rule in the updated rules, which we will release today or the day after. Don't be afraid this sub is going to be moderated as heavily as the OG, but none of us like bodyshaming and we want everyone to feel comfortable here.<sup>76</sup>

Taken together with meta discussions about how a snark subreddit should be run, these storytelling topics gesture towards a growing sense of empathy towards fundamentalist women and their children, even as snarkers continue to critique their harmful beliefs. Participants in these threads object to reification of misogynist expectations of women's and girls' bodies, political and religious beliefs notwithstanding. Even more frequently, participants in these threads engage in reassurance and validation of each other's experiences within and outside the snark subreddits. As a result, these storytelling practices centered around affirmation, care for oneself and others, and mindfulness about the potential ramifications of snark became the foundation of some of r/FundieSnarkUncensored's core values.

### **Gender, power, and relationships**

While the previous two themes encompassed primarily internal discussions about the purpose of the subreddit and users' experiences within it, the remaining themes are more closely related to the community's topics of snark. Accordingly, this theme encompasses discussion of gendered power dynamics within both marital and filial

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[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/kxzb08/banned\\_permanently\\_from\\_fundiesnark\\_for\\_saying/gjd9fqt/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/kxzb08/banned_permanently_from_fundiesnark_for_saying/gjd9fqt/).

<sup>76</sup> Aracytacia, "This Will Become a C...", Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 4, 2021,

[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lce1pw/can\\_we\\_not\\_bring\\_body\\_shaming\\_into\\_this\\_sub/glzkn7t/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lce1pw/can_we_not_bring_body_shaming_into_this_sub/glzkn7t/).

relationships. Although this theme is closely related to the following theme about sexual and reproductive autonomy, this theme focuses primarily on social requirements rather than more intimate bodily experiences. Broadly, these topics find snarkers grappling with cultural and subcultural gendered expectations, the ways those expectations shape agency and behavior, and sometimes speculating about fundamentalists' personal lives through the lenses of snarkers' own concerns about gender and developing understandings of fundamentalist beliefs. Nevertheless, the conversations represented by this theme continue to incorporate the storytelling dynamics more explicitly represented by the previous theme, allowing snarkers to productively engage disagreement and discuss multiple potential perspectives on problematic relationship dynamics displayed in fundamentalists' social media posts.

To explore these rhetorical negotiations further, I turn to a February post discussing the wedding of fundamentalist couple Paul and Morgan Olliges.<sup>77</sup> The r/FundieSnarkUncensored post includes a copy of a video from the Olliges' wedding posted by Paul and Morgan to their YouTube channel. In the video, the couple is exchanging their wedding vows when Morgan experiences a bout of nausea, vomits, and runs off the altar. Paul appears to be annoyed by this interruption to his vows and does not comfort or follow Morgan. Morgan returns after a brief interlude, and the ceremony resumes without further disruption. In their YouTube videos, the Olliges present this event as a humorous moment, but snarkers characterize the video as “genuinely quite shocking,”<sup>78</sup> “[i]ncredibly sad,”<sup>79</sup> and “distressing to watch.”<sup>80</sup> In addition to expressing shock and distress that the couple

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<sup>77</sup> snarkiesnarker, “In Case You Haven’t Seen: Morgan Puking at the Altar, the Minister Trying to Save It with Scripture, and Them Sitting for the Rest of the Ceremony Because She Was Too Weak to Stand. I’m Not Superstitious...(but I Am a Little Stitious),” Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/).

<sup>78</sup> kulern, “This Is Genuinely Qu...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/goq5laz/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/goq5laz/).

<sup>79</sup> TheDustOfMen, “Incredibly Sad as We...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/goqdt62/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/goqdt62/).

<sup>80</sup> Original\_Rent7677, “She Looks so Distres...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021,

would post the video, snarkers focus on describing the “red flags” identified in Paul’s expressions, then connecting patterns in the couple’s on-screen interactions in this and subsequent videos. These responses are a mix of observation, speculation, and interpolations of snarkers’ own experiences in abusive relationships. In replies to the top-rated comment, snarkers note that Paul’s vows, which were disrupted by Morgan’s nausea, focused on his own desires and benefits in the relationship rather than addressing Morgan as a person, and that, further, he does not comfort or assist Morgan in any way when she becomes unwell. As a result, comments characterize him as appearing “pissed that she ruined his narcissistic vows”<sup>81</sup> and exhibiting body language that “screamed annoyance.”<sup>82</sup> What snark exists in the replies to this post targets Paul’s response to Morgan, not Morgan’s illness or decision to enter the marriage anyways.

Instead, throughout following comment threads, snarkers reflect on their own aversion to vomit, then discuss how they have responded to similar situations in their own relationships. These stories diverge along two lines. Some snarkers share how they or their partners have responded with care to gross bodily functions, even while experiencing strong negative reactions. Many of these responses express incredulity that Morgan went through with the marriage, including sentiments like “I can’t imagine marrying somebody who looked at me being sick like ‘okay well good luck with that.’”<sup>83</sup> In counter, however, other commenters speculate that Morgan’s wedding-vow illness was a manifestation of a gut feeling about the dynamics of the marriage she was entering, but that she may have felt unable to call off the wedding. In these comments, snarkers identify vulnerabilities they

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[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/goqtxbp/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/goqtxbp/).

<sup>81</sup> PeterNinkimpoop, “He Looked Pissed Tha...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021,

[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/goqf682/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/goqf682/).

<sup>82</sup> TheDreamingMyriad, “I Thought This Too. ...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021,

[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/gorl32m/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/gorl32m/).

<sup>83</sup> ceeceesmartypants, “Yeaaaaah, Once in De...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021,

[www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/gor03fw/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/gor03fw/).

shared with Morgan that led them to commit to marriages that they regretted: fear of a controlling partner, worries about disappointing family members, pregnancy and societal expectations. Frequently, these commenters also share the physiological reactions to stress—hives, temporary loss of vision, nightmares, nausea—that they wished they had heeded as warnings before entering their abusive marriages. Some commenters share that, perhaps similar to Morgan, they internalized these bodily responses as a failure on their part, questioning whether they were overreacting to their partners behaviors. By incorporating visceral reactions and personal stories in their comments on this video, snarkers create room for an expansive dialogue on the patriarchal pressures that force women, like Morgan, into ill-fated marriages and advocate for greater autonomy and respect for those intuitions about unbalanced power dynamics.<sup>84</sup> These conversations extend beyond this post and intersect significantly with the following two themes: sexual and reproductive autonomy, and responses to abuse and trauma.

### **Sexual and reproductive autonomy**

While similar to the preceding theme about gender and power in relationships, this theme more specifically encompasses discussion of sexual and reproductive autonomy, both for fundamentalists and snarkers. Discussions of sexual and reproductive autonomy are distributed relatively evenly throughout the first year of r/FundieSnarkUncensored, like discussions of gender and power, indicating that these interrelated issues are foundational to the subreddit's discourse. At first glance, it would appear that very little *snark* happens in these conversations. Most topics are serious in tone and express anger, concern, and sometimes shame about the dehumanizing treatment of women. These are heavy issues, and ones that resonate with the experiences and fears of many U.S.-based snarkers. Discussions of abortion access, the right to refuse sex within a marriage, and refusals of shame-based purity teachings draw heavily upon snarkers' own lives, which may contribute to their serious treatment.

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<sup>84</sup> pibabaaaa, "As an Educator, This..." Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, February 25, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in\\_case\\_you\\_havent\\_seen\\_morgan\\_puking\\_at\\_the/goqbqbf/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lsbhg6/in_case_you_havent_seen_morgan_puking_at_the/goqbqbf/).

This theme is perhaps best encapsulated by a pair of posts discussing the effects of purity culture on formerly-fundamentalist, fundamentalist-adjacent, and non-fundamentalist snarkers. A March post asks snarkers “How has purity culture harmed you?” The writer contextualizes this question within the parameters of a snark subreddit by sharing:

Since there are a lot of us former fundie-lites on this page I was curious what personal experiences other people had with purity culture. Some of the fundies lurk here and maybe it could help provide some insight to others who weren't raised in purity culture on why we snark and criticize Christianity and purity culture.<sup>85</sup>

In the text of the original post and subsequent replies, snarkers share their stories of inadequate or inaccurate sex education resulting in shame over their sexuality, vulnerability to abuse, development of vaginismus and other painful responses to sex, and disrupted relationships. Many of these replies developed into lengthy, conversational comment threads, particularly around topics about which snarkers expressed guilt or shame. Top-level comments initiate threads about consensual non-consent fantasies as a means to side-step the shame about experiencing desire, about feeling unprepared to engage in “permitted” sexual activity once married, and about self-harm and eating disorders developed in response to loss of autonomy. One commenter sums up the general descriptions of purity culture, writing:

Purity culture taught me that my body wasn't my own. It belonged to the men who had authority over me and any expression of sexuality beyond a chaste kiss was a sin. I was taught that the only thing worse than sexual sin (sex outside of marriage, “homosexual relations,” viewing or reading pornography, etc) was murder. Literally. That is literally something that I was told on multiple occasions.<sup>86</sup>

This emphasis on purity culture as a means to control primarily women's sexuality echoes themes from an earlier post, created in November, that contains more cross-cultural

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<sup>85</sup> Rattashootie, “How Has Purity Culture Harmed You?,” Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, March 3, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lwwgqo/how\\_has\\_purity\\_culture\\_harmed\\_you/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lwwgqo/how_has_purity_culture_harmed_you/).

<sup>86</sup> snugglemoose, “Purity Culture Taugh...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, March 3, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lwwgqo/how\\_has\\_purity\\_culture\\_harmed\\_you/gpkclxp/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/lwwgqo/how_has_purity_culture_harmed_you/gpkclxp/).



comparisons between fundamentalist and non-fundamentalist approaches to sexual autonomy.<sup>87</sup> Snarkers who grew up in fundamentalist or high-control Christian denomination shared similar stories about the extensive control and loss of autonomy they experienced as a result of purity culture, while snarkers from more liberal Christian denominations or non-religious but culturally Christian backgrounds traced the subtler but far-ranging effects even in their own lives. While these conversations are not directly related to any particular fundamentalist and are primarily comprised of snarkers' shared stories, these posts and responses provide a foundational knowledge of the ways fundamentalist beliefs and practices shape not only the behavior of the fundamentalists snarked upon in other posts, but the experiences snarkers may not have realized they shared with fundamentalist women.

There are, however, experiences that are not widely shared and in which the tone of conversation differs. Discussions of specific reproductive practices—like eschewal of birth control, unassisted home births, and a desire to have many children in order to further one's religion—have prompted heated debate, as evidenced by their inclusion in early discussions about community boundaries. Questions of sexual and reproductive agency become more complicated when the enactment of that agency conflicts with shared social values. Overall, the topics within this theme interweave personal narratives with analyses of purity culture, patriarchal theology, and vulnerability in the lives of fundamentalist women and children, creating a close connection between not only the discussions of gender and power evidenced in the previous theme, but to discussions of explicit abuse and healing from trauma that make up the next theme. Accordingly, I discuss further examples of these themes together at the end of the next section.

### **Responses to abuse and trauma**

This theme encompasses discussion of physical or sexual abuse, child neglect, trauma, and healing. These discussions run throughout r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year and can be characterized by concern for women made vulnerable by early marriage

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<sup>87</sup> duttondavis, "Purity Culture and You (and Jesus)," Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, November 21, 2020, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/jyeb6a/purity\\_culture\\_and\\_you\\_and\\_jesus/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/jyeb6a/purity_culture_and_you_and_jesus/).

and pregnancy, concern and anger about suspected child neglect or abusive parenting techniques, and shock, anger, and grief over a high-profile sex crimes case involving a prominent fundamentalist. In the latter months of the year, topics within this theme pivot towards education and healing as snarkers discuss the kinds of support victim-survivors of fundamentalist abuse will need to move forward with their lives. When discussing abuse or trauma involving adults, snarkers frequently employ storytelling as a method to aid their analyses of gender and bodily autonomy and express empathy towards the victim-survivors. Situations involving children are more frequently characterized by anger, as snarkers express anger at parents for abusing or failing to protect their children and question why the state has not intervened through Child Protective Services.

Further, these situations involving children involve a mix of different kinds of storytelling. Responses to abusive situations involving adults, such as cases of marital rape or controlling relationships, prompt snarkers to share their own experiences or experiences of loved ones in similar situations. Fundamentalist posts containing dynamics of child abuse or neglect also elicit stories of similar experiences, usually from snarkers' own childhoods, in which commenters use their religious or secular upbringings to examine the facets of abusive homes, in addition to a sort of fantastical storytelling in which snarkers step into the role of caring mother, a foil to fundamentalists mothers who are construed as unable or unwilling to love their children. In these stories, snarkers write about their daydreams of being able to take specific children home and care for them, ironically envisioning themselves fulfilling the very expectations of fundamentalist womanhood that they critique in other posts as "keepers at home." These posts and comments contain a mix of grief and anger, both for current victim-survivors within fundamentalist families and for snarkers themselves. Towards the end of the year, topics in this theme begin to turn towards the family dynamics that enable abuse to continue, indicating that, similar to other themes, snark conversations about abuse, neglect, and trauma are expanding into a more reflexive tone as r/FundieSnarkUncensored participants begin to use snark on specific fundamentalists as quasi-case studies for larger systemic problems.

To exemplify the interrelated conversations held within the themes of *sexual and reproductive autonomy* and *responses to abuse and trauma*, both of which in turn are closely

related to *gender, power, and relationships*, I turn to a series of posts I turn to a series of posts responding to issues of wifely submission, childhood vulnerability, and victimization versus complicity in the case of Josh and Anna Duggar, following Josh Duggar's indictment and subsequent conviction for possession of childhood sexual abuse materials. Please note that these posts and comments referenced in this section do not contain explicit details of the case, but they may nevertheless be distressing. To skip to a summary of this section, please proceed to [page 70](#).

As noted in the introduction, the Duggar family of Tontitown, Arkansas, was many snarkers' introduction to Christian fundamentalism through their TLC shows *19 Kids and Counting* (2008-2015) and *Counting On* (2015-2020). *19 Kids and Counting* followed parents Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar as they raised an increasingly large family and focused on household management, parenting strategies, and the family's religious beliefs. The show was canceled in 2015 after eldest son, Josh Duggar, admitted to a series of sexual offenses, including a high-profile cheating scandal and previous molestations committed when he was a teenager. TLC then launched *Counting On*, which focused on the eldest Duggar children and their own new families, including Josh, his wife Anna, and their seven young children. This spinoff show was likewise canceled after Josh Duggar was indicted on charges of receiving and possessing child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) in April 2021<sup>88</sup>. Because the Duggar family occupies a high-profile niche in US media depictions of Christian fundamentalism, this indictment prompted waves of responses across the fundie-snarking community, including r/FundieSnarkUncensored.

While the initial responses to the news were perhaps best characterized as shock, these were quickly followed by outrage, anger, and at times, speculation about the extent of Josh's crimes, given his history of hands-on offenses and access to many young children within his immediate and extended family. The salaciousness of a CSAM case attracted a

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<sup>88</sup> While these materials are commonly referred to as "child pornography," I follow the lead of RAINN and other advocacy groups by instead naming them "child sexual abuse material." While feminist responses to pornography are complex and beyond the scope of this dissertation, it remains true that some pornography depicts adults who consented to create and share their materials. Children, in contrast, cannot consent to sex with adults, much less to the dissemination of any related media. Thus, using the term "child sexual abuse material" foregrounds that these are evidences of criminal abuse, not consensually-produced adult content.

spike in new subreddit members from r/DuggarsSnark and true-crime subreddits, and r/FundieSnarkUncensored moderators were quick to curtail posts speculating about the potential abuse Josh might have perpetrated on his own children, since no evidence suggested he had done so. As a result, discussions began to pivot around his wife, Anna Duggar, and her potential victimhood, complicity, and responsibility to her children. Responses were split. In a post made just after the indictment, as details of the situation were still emerging, a snarker urged the subreddit to “stop shitting on Anna Duggar.”<sup>89</sup> The post contends that although some Redditors have snarked on Anna or berated her for marrying Josh Duggar, quoting snarkers as saying “she’s so dumb for having more kids with him,” “she could have just left when she had the chance!,” or “she’s so stupid and she’s definitely complicit,” the reality of the situation is more complicated. The writer references well-known fundamentalist texts like Michael and Debbi Pearl’s *Created to be His Help Meet* that instruct wives to obey their husbands in all things. Particularly, the writer notes, these texts instruct wives to accept their own abuse unflinchingly, and to report husbands to the police only in cases of child sexual abuse. However, in such a case, wives are commanded to stay with their husbands, to visit them in jail, and to welcome them home upon release. The writer additionally points out that even if Anna could defy these cultural expectations—which, importantly, link her subservience to her husband to her subservience to God and thus to her eternal salvation—she has very few material resources available to her, should she try to leave the marriage.

Responses to this post were mixed. Many commenters expressed some sympathy with the original poster’s argument framing Anna primarily as another victim of Josh Duggar, specifically, and extreme patriarchy, more generally, but also pushed back on the potential elision of her responsibility to her children. In contrast to the earlier posts discussing purity culture, there is a palpable undertone of anger towards Anna Duggar despite her entanglement with the very same systems of repression, shame, and

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<sup>89</sup> knittininthemitten, “Can We Please Stop Shitting on Anna Duggar?,” Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, April 30, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can\\_we\\_please\\_stop\\_shitting\\_on\\_anna\\_duggar/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can_we_please_stop_shitting_on_anna_duggar/).

exploitation that snarkers previously discussed with grief and care. Most comments disagreeing with the original poster position Anna's responsibility as a mother paramount to her experiences as an abused woman. One such commenter writes:

If she stands by him now, I cannot find any sympathy left for her. Yes, she has been brainwashed, and I absolutely believe JB/Meech manipulated the hell out of her to get her to stay the first time. With that said, there is no more denying that her children would be in danger if left alone with their father. The M kids need to come first and I am much more concerned about them. At this point, she is enacting the exact same harm upon seven innocent lives as her parents and in-laws have done to her if she chooses to stay with him.<sup>90</sup>

Further comments likewise express limited sympathy for Anna based on her perceived failure to protect her children:

I disagree. You can have some empathy and acknowledgement for her circumstances, but at the end of the day she needs to protect her children first and foremost and I will blame her for that.<sup>91</sup>

Within a few days, this conditional empathy for Anna and mix of anger and concern for her children became the dominant sentiment in Duggar-related posts. In a post titled "The Anna Question: A New Theory" created one week after the previous post, the author speculates about the role of fundamentalist patriarchy to present a theory about why Anna might choose to stay with her husband despite the severity of his at-that-time alleged crimes.<sup>92</sup> While the comments on the previous post centered on Anna's obligation to her children, backed by snarkers' experiences as children in homes where they were abused and yet an adult chose not to intervene, the comments on this post begin to shift back toward the societal analysis enabled in the discussion of Paul and Morgan Olliges' wedding video and in the paired posts about purity culture. Commenters note that Anna may not have received the same information available to the public, since the Duggar family

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<sup>90</sup> AhsokaBolena, "If She Stands by Him...", Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, April 30, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can\\_we\\_please\\_stop\\_shitting\\_on\\_anna\\_duggar/gwg27gj/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can_we_please_stop_shitting_on_anna_duggar/gwg27gj/).

<sup>91</sup> annslisaemily, "I Disagree. You Can ...", Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, April 30, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can\\_we\\_please\\_stop\\_shitting\\_on\\_anna\\_duggar/gwg6ia9/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n1xhj1/can_we_please_stop_shitting_on_anna_duggar/gwg6ia9/).

<sup>92</sup> nosuchthingasa\_, "The Anna Question: A New Theory," Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, May 5, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n5n8b2/the\\_anna\\_question\\_a\\_new\\_theory/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n5n8b2/the_anna_question_a_new_theory/).

downplayed Josh’s previous sex offenses to her before they were married, and that blaming women for failing to leave their abusers does not account for the danger they face in doing so.

By the end of the second week post-indictment, discourse within r/FundieSnarkUncensored had swung from entirely blaming Anna for not protecting her children, to absolving her of any culpability for abuse that might have happened in the home,<sup>93</sup> to an uneasy grappling with the inadequacy of a victim:abuser binary. In the comments on a post that both agreed “Anna is a brainwashed victim” and also “just as bad as sexpest” if she would not leave her husband,<sup>94</sup> writers struggled between acknowledging Anna’s choices, constrained as they were, to both marry and then remain with Josh and a growing uneasiness with the number of posts speculating on her complicity compared to the relatively few posts about how the Duggar family and their local community protected and enabled Josh. In a down-thread exchange, one commenter points out the potential deflection happening when snarkers focus on Anna rather than Josh, writing:

Honestly I resent the “she’s just as bad as he is” thing going around. Only one of them has collected and masturbated to thousands of images of [description of CSAM]. Women are not responsible for the actions of men.<sup>95</sup>

Another commenter responded:

Agree to a degree, but think about it like this, pest is a monster. Anna is not a monster, but is willingly opening the door to her home to let a monster inside where her innocent children live. She is obviously not the monster, but she is inviting the monster to her children's lives. That deserves some criticism.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> It is important to remember that at this time, no evidence had indicated that Josh had sexually abused his own children or family members’ children and no such evidence materialized during the subsequent trial and conviction. This was entirely speculation on the part of snarkers.

<sup>94</sup> fibralarevolucion, “Not Another Anna Discourse Thread™,” Reddit Post, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, May 7, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not\\_another\\_anna\\_discourse\\_thread/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not_another_anna_discourse_thread/).

<sup>95</sup> “Honestly I Resent Th...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, May 8, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not\\_another\\_anna\\_discourse\\_thread/gxcrrgx/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not_another_anna_discourse_thread/gxcrrgx/).

<sup>96</sup> batsofburden, “Agree to a Degree, B...,” Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, May 8, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not\\_another\\_anna\\_discourse\\_thread/gxdl3wr/](http://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not_another_anna_discourse_thread/gxdl3wr/).

In response, the original commenter pointed to the issue of misogyny when snarkers scapegoat Anna for her husband's actions:

Some criticism is not the same as saying "she is as bad as he is" and making every thread about her. Naively trusting the people who have wielded authority over you since you were born is nowhere near the level of evil it takes to masturbate to videos of [child sexual abuse]. All I'm saying is that the misogyny is jumping out in these threads and it's ironic that it's just another form of the beliefs that lead to and enable his behavior.<sup>97</sup>

In these posts and comments from the early days of the Duggar indictment and trial, Anna Duggar stands in as a figure through which snarkers negotiate their previously-expressed values around gendered power dynamics, bodily autonomy, and women's role within the family. While previous topics, such as the Olliges' wedding and purity culture, elicited primarily empathetic responses grounded in snarkers' own experiences with similar situations or expectations, the Duggar case touched a nerve and exposed conflict in r/FundieSnarkUncensored's discursive values. These tensions demonstrate that although storytelling does function to counter the intensification factors identified in the previous chapter in favor of more relational interactions, these storytelling practices are differentiated and at times limited by snarkers' position vis-a-vis the subject-objects of their snark.

### **Rhetorical empathy, parasociality, and reflexivity**

Across themes, from meta conversations to actual snarking, participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored build a dense web of interrelationships that can be characterized through what Lisa Blankenship names "rhetorical empathy." Building from Krista Ratcliffe's concept of "rhetorical listening,"<sup>98</sup> Blankenship continues the feminist extension of rhetoric beyond agonistic models centered on persuading or "winning over" others to recenter rhetoric as a process of mutual understanding, compromise, and

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<sup>97</sup> "Some Criticism Is No...", Reddit Comment, *R/FundieSnarkUncensored*, May 8, 2021, [www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not\\_another\\_anna\\_discourse\\_thread/gxeht08/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FundieSnarkUncensored/comments/n7b9ki/not_another_anna_discourse_thread/gxeht08/). Content referencing explicit details of the CSAM has been redacted here.

<sup>98</sup> Krista Ratcliffe, "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct,'" *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 2 (1999): 195–224, <https://doi.org/10.2307/359039>; Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb09325.0001.001>.

reflexive change. In this context, Blankenship describes the project of rhetorical empathy as “coming alongside or feeling with the experiences of an Other rather than feeling for or displacing an Other, which is usually associated with pity or sympathy.”<sup>99</sup> To do so, she traces four feminist rhetorical strategies that underpin rhetorical empathy: “[y]ielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories, [c]onsidering motives behind speech acts and actions, [e]ngaging in reflection and self-critique, [and] [a]ddressing difference, power, and embodiment.”<sup>100</sup>

The first strategy, sharing and listening to personal stories, is quite clearly present in r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s discourse. From the early vent posts with their strings of stories in the comments to later, more obviously “snark” posts directly commenting on fundamentalist media, r/FundieSnarkUncensored is ripe with stories. The more interesting questions become whether, and to what extent, these storytellers engage in the following strategies of considering motives, engaging in self-reflection and critique, and addressing differences in power and embodiment that might shape their storytelling engagement. Some of these strategies must be necessarily modified in the context of snarking. While Blankenship’s theory of rhetorical empathy relies primarily on examples of two-way communication, such as a gay evangelical’s open letter to his community and their subsequent replies, snark is exclusively unidirectional. Due to both the platform’s terms of service and ethical norms around snarking, snarkers do not, or should not, contact the fundamentalists about whom they snark. By necessity, this relationship between snarkers and snarkees is parasocial, a one-sided relationship sustained in some way by imagination and mediated encounters. Although snarkers do base the majority of their snark in personal media shared by fundamentalists, such as Facebook or Instagram posts, snarkers both only see what fundamentalists choose to post, which is likely not representative of their full lives, and rely on interpretations of those posts, since they cannot engage in dialogue or ask for clarification. As a result, the element of “considering motives,” in particular, becomes sticky, as seen in the distorted stories told in response to real or perceived child abuse or neglect.

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<sup>99</sup> Lisa Blankenship, *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*, 1st edition (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019), 7–8.

<sup>100</sup> Blankenship, *Changing the Subject*.



To balance this question of “considering motives” and parasociality, snarkers must pay particular attention to the final two elements of rhetorical empathy: self-reflection and critique, and attention to difference. As cultural theorist Sara Ahmed writes, emotions, including empathy, are a form of cultural politics: as emotions “stick,” accrue, or circulate among/through/around people and bodies of people, these objects of emotion become “sites of personal and social tension.”<sup>101</sup> Accordingly, emotions become forms of orientation towards the Other, and these individual orientations are mediated through larger cultural emotions surrounding the idealized subject: in this case, citizen, woman, mother. While snarkers may not consider themselves to be engaging in rhetorical empathy or in a cultural politics of emotion, these frameworks can still be seen within the discursive trends of r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Although snarkers use storytelling ostensibly as a way to better understand the fundamentalists—as evidenced by early concerns about (de)humanization of fundamentalists in r/FundieSnark—the true use of storytelling in this community may actually be closer to self-reflection. That is, by telling personal stories in the down-thread comments of posts snarking on fundamentalist media, participants are reshaping the overarching narratives about fundamentalists but also reconstructing their (again, parasocial) relationship to those fundamentalists in ways that foster intracommunity relationality. When snarkers share stories about difficult pregnancies or navigating controlling romantic relationships in their own lives, for example, they begin to interact with Blankenship’s idea of self-reflection and critique as well as a feminist or proto-feminist politicization of pain. These personal stories are not about fundamentalists or fundamentalism, per se, but they position the experiences of snarkers and snarkees in the same context of misogynist social structures, allowing snarkers to potentially use their storytelling to understand themselves as part of a class of persons whose bodies are disproportionately controlled. In these storytelling instances, rhetorical empathy elucidates the accrual of cultural emotions and values onto specific classes of reproductive bodies, allowing snarkers to productively redefine their relationship to fundamentalist women and to other snarkers while maintaining a “snark” identity.

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<sup>101</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2 edition (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

Of course, as demonstrated in the conflicted responses to the Duggar trial, storytelling is a complex activity that depends largely on the ways snarkers see themselves in relation to their subject-objects of snark and the cultural scripts through which they must navigate to enact rhetorical empathy. Each of the five themes that persisted across r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year depends on a sense of relationality, sometimes among snarkers themselves and sometimes between snarkers and fundamentalists. The effects of this growing sense of relationality have reshaped how participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored understand the purpose of snark, their role as snarkers, and their relationship to the fundamentalists upon whom they snark. In the next chapter, I discuss how storytelling has produced affective changes in snarkers' self-identification and empathetic practices.

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## Chapter 5: Complex empathy, or Feeling our way through

Within r/FundieSnarkUncensored, participants consistently use storytelling strategies, forms of invitational rhetoric, and rhetorical empathy to facilitate the maintenance of their community norms, but these strategies are likewise bounded and reinforced by cultural narratives and affective structures within the subreddit community and primarily US-based cultural norms. Participants feel their way through identification with fundamentalist figures, reshaping their identity as snarkers and their relationships with other participants. This affective process shapes the ways they use storytelling, discursively, but it also shapes how they interact with the infrastructure of the subreddit itself. By prioritizing storytelling and shifting towards community governance, r/FundieSnarkUncensored created a different kind of emotional space within the forum that allows participants to use storytelling on multiple levels (cultural, topical, intrapersonal) and that in turn supports more pro-social discourse.

### Structuring Affects

One way of understanding the emotional architecture of r/FundieSnarkUncensored is through the concept of "affective publics" as theorized by both Ahmed and Berlant, who highlight the role of shared emotional experiences in shaping social collectives and their cultural dynamics. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed uses the metaphor of "stickiness" to illustrate how emotions can transfer between people, spaces, and objects, much like a sticky substance can transfer between physical objects.<sup>102</sup> This "stickiness" is not inherent to the emotion itself, but rather it emerges through interactions and associations. That is, as emotions circulate, they become attached to particular subjects and objects, creating boundaries and hierarchies within social and cultural contexts. For example, Ahmed discusses the emotion of "fear" in relation to racial and cultural others, arguing that fear becomes "sticky" when repeatedly associated with certain bodies or social groups. This process of emotional circulation and accrual not only maintains existing power structures but also perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces social exclusion. Thus, she argues that emotions are not simply personal or individual experiences, internal to the body, but rather social and cultural phenomena with material consequences.

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<sup>102</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2 edition (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Similarly, in *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant examines the role of emotions in shaping the cultural narratives and experiences of women in the United States through a study of the affective dimensions of popular media genres, like melodramas and romance novels.<sup>103</sup> Through their engagement with these genres, she argues, women may forge new forms of sociality and political agency based on the common affective ground they share. As a result, these genres offer a theoretical window to understand how women navigate and negotiate their identities and social positions within a patriarchal society. Berlant's theorization of emotion centers around the concepts of "sentimentality," which she defines as a mode of emotional expression that seeks to create or sustain attachments and connections among people, and "affective publics," which she defines as social collectives that are shaped and sustained by shared emotional experiences. These affective publics, according to Berlant, have the potential to generate new and potentially-resistant forms of sociality and political agency, but like Ahmed's sticky emotions, they can also perpetuate existing power structures and inequalities, especially as sentimentality can often reproduce normative gender roles and expectations, limiting the transformative potential of these shared emotional spaces.

Accordingly, as it becomes clear that affective publics play a complex and sometimes contradictory role in shaping social relations, identity, and power dynamics, these dimensions have likewise been taken up in scholarship on online community formation and interactions. While neither Ahmed and Berlant explicitly engage in discussion of online emotional interactions and their work is infrequently cited in internet studies, technical communication, or related fields, their theorization of the "stickiness" of emotions and their role in forming affective publics is nonetheless a useful guide to the growing body of research focused on the roles of emotion in online community formation and interactions.

One significant theme emerging from this research area is the role of emotions in escalating and sustaining conflicts in online environments. In line with Ahmed's concept of "sticky" emotions, Abdel-Fadil highlights the strategic use of affective language to instigate

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<sup>103</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008).



and maintain religious and identity conflicts on social media.<sup>104</sup> Her study found that emotions can be used as a tool for manipulation and control, as users strategically employ affective language to provoke, sustain, or escalate conflicts. She argues that specific affective states, such as anger, fear, and moral outrage, can serve as catalysts for the polarization of online communities, further entrenching divisions between opposing groups. These findings resonate with Starr's examination of the Men's Rights subreddit, where emotions such as anger and indignation function to mobilize the community and reinforce its collective identity. On the feminist side of the Internet, Kanai and Coffey analyzed affective dissonance and defensiveness as significant factors generating conflict within online feminist cultures, suggesting that community members may need to recalibrate their affective orientations in order to avoid splintering over negative interactions.<sup>105</sup> Likewise, McDuffie and Ames investigate the role of emotional expressions in generating engagement and fostering connections among participants in the Women's March on Washington.<sup>106</sup> As a foil to Abdel-Fadil's study of negatively valenced emotions as escalation forces, McDuffie and Ames found that emotional expressions, such as anger, hope, and solidarity, played a significant role in generating engagement and fostering connections among participants. Additionally, they argue that affective expressions on social media can function as a form of activism in and of themselves, as they contribute to the creation of collective memory and the archiving of political events. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of understanding how emotions accumulate and transfer between subjects, objects, and ideas in online conflicts, as theorized by Ahmed, in order to understand whether and how communities use affect to establish a sense of internal cohesion.

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<sup>104</sup> Mona Abdel-Fadil, "The Politics of Affect: The Glue of Religious and Identity Conflicts in Social Media," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 8, no. 1 (March 20, 2019): 11–34, <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-00801002>.

<sup>105</sup> Akane Kanai and Julia Coffey, "Dissonance and Defensiveness: Orienting Affects in Online Feminist Cultures," *Cultural Studies*, March 7, 2023, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2183971>.

<sup>106</sup> Kristi McDuffie and Melissa Ames, "Archiving Affect and Activism: Hashtag Feminism and Structures of Feeling in Women's March Tweets," *First Monday* 26, no. 2 (February 2021): 1–1, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.10317>.

The role of affective cultivation and circulation also highlights the significance of affective labor and affective resistance in maintaining cohesion within online communities and fostering supportive spaces. Similar to Berlant's theorization of affective publics, Coffey and Kanai focus on the affective strategies employed by feminist activists to manage conflict, such as empathy, validation of personal experiences, and self-care, and connect the success of these affective strategies to the intentional labor of feminist digital activists.<sup>107</sup> Schoettler further explores the tactics of feminist resistance on social media, emphasizing the sharing of personal stories, engaging in critical discussions, and creating empowering content.<sup>108</sup> She argues that these tactics not only contribute to the formation of supportive and empowering online spaces but also challenge and disrupt mainstream narratives that perpetuate sexism and inequality. Understood through Berlant's argument that affective publics can generate new forms of sociality, these studies reveal the critical role of affective labor and resistance in challenging and disrupting dominant narratives and fostering inclusive online spaces.

In short, affect plays a complex role in the formation, mobilization, and persistence of online communities. While internet studies research has primarily focused on the circulation of emotions within specific online communities, Ahmed and Berlant's scholarship, in tandem with Blankenship's rhetorical empathy as introduced in the previous chapter, prompt us to also consider how these communal circulations and deployments of emotions are suffused within larger cultural affective economies. To understand how participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored engage complex empathy and reflexivity within the forum, I turn to snarkers' own narratives to understand how they perceive the purpose of snark and storytelling within snark, their role as snarkers, and the effects of story-based snark on themselves and others.

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<sup>107</sup> Julia Coffey and Akane Kanai, "Feminist Fire: Embodiment and Affect in Managing Conflict in Digital Feminist Spaces," *Feminist Media Studies*, October 17, 2021, 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1986095>.

<sup>108</sup> Megan Schoettler, "'Make Your Feed Work for You': Tactics of Feminist Affective Resistance on Social Media," *Computers & Composition* 67 (March 2023): N.PAG-N.PAG, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2023.102762>.

## **Feeling Through**

As noted in Chapter 3, participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored engage a range of engagement strategies within the subreddit. All forums on Reddit are created by a single founding member, who then typically recruits additional members to form a moderation team. The founding and recruited moderators are responsible for setting and enforcing the subreddit's rules. Like most subreddits, r/FundieSnarkUncensored has a core group of active users who generate the majority of the posted content and also make most of the comments. However, there are also many participants who browse the subreddit without making original posts or comments but who do influence the shape of the community through voting posts and comments up or down, thus changing the arrangement of content for other users. Each of these groups contributes to the rhetorical practices of the forum. Thus, to better understand how participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored navigate the community, I invited snarkers who had participated in the subreddit in any way during its first year to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews were open to anyone who had participated in the subreddit during its first year, with participation ranging from intense activity, such as moderating the subreddit, to minor interactions, like upvoting or downvoting posts and comments made by other users. Interviews were conducted over Discord to protect participant privacy, and participants are named with a pseudonym of their choice. The interview questions can be found in Appendix B. Across interviews, their responses demonstrate that although participants were initially drawn to r/FundieSnarkUncensored for many different reasons, the emotional resonance of sharing and reading personal stories remains a key component in their continued participation.

### ***Crystal***

As a member of the volunteer moderator team, Crystal has a direct role in shaping r/FundieSnarkUncensored's allowable content and interactions. Unlike other members of the community who joined the subreddit because of their interests in snarking on fundamentalist Christians, specifically, Crystal became a member of the original subreddit, r/FundieSnark, and a moderator of the new subreddit, r/FundieSnarkUncensored, somewhat serendipitously. Prior to joining the fundie-snarking communities, she was a member of several other snark-adjacent subreddits that speciously recreate other communities on Reddit in order to exaggerate niche behavior because they aligned with

her sense of humor. Likely because of her engagement in these spaces, she came across a post from r/FundieSnark describing a particular fundamentalist influencer’s “hat journey,” a roughly month-long saga in which this influencer made increasingly dubious fashion choices in an attempt to persuade her followers to buy and wear more hats. And with that, she was hooked.

At first, the original r/FundieSnark subreddit was a good match for her interests and humor. She recalls, “I went over to the original Fundie Snark subreddit and I was like ‘Oh my God this space is for me.’” However, as noted in Chapter 2, r/FundieSnark was struggling to maintain its balance of humor amidst restrictive moderation policies and increasingly mean-spirited snark. Like many other members of r/FundieSnark, Crystal found herself banned from the original subreddit for being too outspoken of the moderation practices, namely for creating a parody of r/FundieSnark’s rules and moderators on a third, meta-snark subreddit, r/FundieSnarkieSnark. As the number of users banned from r/FundieSnark grew and a group splintered off to create r/FundieSnarkUncensored, Crystal’s previous experience with creating and moderating smaller subreddits prompted her to get involved. In creating the new subreddit, she and the other founding moderators sought to create more social and lighthearted approach to snark, describing the founding ethos as “Come here where everything is fun and nice and you can actually be complimentary to people.” In her overview of her role as a moderator, Crystal emphasizes the importance of kindness and the allowance of nuance in discussions, reflecting a deliberate effort to foster a more supportive community atmosphere: “You don’t have to be mean all the time,” she states, highlighting the subreddit’s focus on creating a space where positivity is as valued as critical snark.

Of course, the logistics of maintaining such a space, especially through large influxes of new users, proved challenging. During the course of the subreddit’s first year, the moderators needed to address a range of issues: new users who tried to replicate the kind of snark previously endorsed on r/FundieSnark, issues of body snark and misogynist appearance-shaming, and recurrences of antisemitism and transphobia justified through “snark” on Christian fundamentalists. Early on, the original moderator team realized they did not have the necessary perspectives to reliably recognize and address these problems, so they deliberately recruited new moderators who could do so. The collaborative nature of

decision-making among the moderators is crucial in shaping the parameters of r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Decisions about rule changes or closing loopholes are made collectively, with each moderator having an equal say. This democratic approach both ensures that a variety of perspectives are considered, creating a more balanced and inclusive environment, and limits the emotional fatigue of moderating. In describing the inner functioning of the volunteer moderator team, Crystal acknowledges that while moderation is necessary, there is a fine line between maintaining order and stifling free expression. When asked about the labor of moderating a growing and sometimes-contentious forum, she laughs, “[Having a team of moderators] really helps us out. Like, you know, if it was just one or two people, oh my God, we would be so behind! I don’t want to have to spend every single second of my day moderating, like, deleting things. I want to have fun on Reddit too!” Her approach is to strike a balance, ensuring the forum remains active without descending into chaos or negativity: “If we walk away they’ll be fine. Like things probably won’t catch on fire. But if they do, we’re popping in pretty regularly to check it out.”

Overall, Crystal's experience as a moderator and her approach to the role significantly shaped the affective architecture of r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Her and the rest of the moderation team’s commitment to creating a positive, nuanced space through collaborative decision-making, sensitivity to contentious issues, and balanced rule enforcement contribute to the forum's unique emotional landscape, compared to other snark subreddits, an aspect discussed further in Chapter 6.

### ***Taylor***

Similarly to Crystal, Taylor's entry into fundie-snarking was driven by critical humor and a fascination with the darker aspects of humanity, as reflected in the extreme and sometimes bizarre lives of fundamentalist figures. She first discovered the r/DuggarsSnark subreddit, which eventually led her to r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Initially, she was driven by a "morbid curiosity" to understand the harmful aspects of fundamentalism, particularly how fundamentalists treated others within their families and people outside their belief systems. She describes being unable to look away from the "unhinged" behavior of certain fundamentalist figures and began a deep dive into the histories accrued within r/FundieSnarkUncensored. There are similar spaces on Reddit where people explore fringe

or disturbed ideologies, such as r/Cults and r/SerialKillers, but r/FundieSnarkUncensored's use of humor provides a unique experience. For Taylor, this forum satisfied her morbid curiosity but also offered a space to vent negative emotions through pointed humor. She says:

It's sort of a release valve for my judgmental nature. You know, I try to be a nice, considerate kind person, in general, to the people that I meet and, you know, have empathy and grace for the people that I meet in my daily life. But, at the end of the day, we all have to, like, let off steam somehow. And so these people who are just so awful in so many ways, they have these horrible, bigoted views, or they're just generally unlikable, or they treat their children really poorly, or they, you know, are just bad people in some way. It's kind of like, okay, great, like, I don't feel bad targeting them, or with, you know, these unkind words, because likely, they'll never even see it. Even if they do see it, it doesn't really affect them in any way. And like, maybe as a positive effect, they might think twice about what they're doing. But I highly doubt that. So it's just sort of this, this area where I can kind of just be mean, and it's okay. And it's acceptable, and it's not really harming anyone.

For Taylor and similar snarkers, the fundamentalists snarked upon within r/FundieSnarkUncensored are considered fair targets for mockery because they (the fundamentalists) choose to publicly document and proselytize for beliefs that cause clear harm to others. Accordingly, snark can function as a form of public shaming—a practice that sets clear boundaries around what the snark community finds to be unacceptable social behavior, with the small hope that fundamentalists who encounter the snark might use the negative emotions incurred through public shaming to reflect on their behavior. By participating in this activity and contributing the knowledge she gained during her exploration of fundamentalist media, Taylor built a sense of camaraderie with other snarkers (something that Crystal and the other moderators hoped to foster within the forum), saying “[Something] that I really appreciated was just how people were able to have more of a discussion in the comment threads and kind of go off on tangents.” Because of the interactions between snarkers as they record, preserve, and critique fundamentalist media, Taylor characterizes r/FundieSnarkUncensored as a quasi-feminist space, one that critiques the bigoted, racist, sexist, and homophobic views often espoused by fundamentalist figures, yet is also not in perfect alignment with feminist ideals of mutual respect.

## **Erin**

Erin describes herself primarily as a lurker, having commented only a few times since discovering the subreddit. Her discovery of r/FundieSnarkUncensored was somewhat incidental, happening either during the Josh Duggar trial or through the *Fundie Fridays* podcast hosted by Jen Sutphin. While other participants, like Crystal and Taylor, were interested in the subreddit because of their participation in other snark-type forums or curiosity about socially-fringe lifestyles, Erin has a more personal connection as a deconstructed Christian. Her experience with r/FundieSnarkUncensored is filtered through this lens of deconstruction, and she sees its value primarily as a space where individuals can freely express their frustrations and critiques of fundamentalism and evangelicalism, without the need to censor or moderate their views for a broader audience. In her own words, she describes the subreddit as a space that "lets you be catty, lets you look at fundamentalism and evangelicalism and see it from outside the lens of the Christians." However, she tempers this appreciation for the snarkiness of the snark with the importance of recognizing the humanity in the subjects of snark. She compares the "militancy" of some snarkers in ensuring that every positive comment about a fundamentalist figure is paired with a reminder of their terrible beliefs to the mantra of "hate the sin, love the sinner." She says,

And so I felt like a lot of the militancy with [r/FundieSnarkUncensored]... was the same thing where they're like, "Sure, love these fundies because they're human beings, but we can never forget how terrible they are." And it's like, you are doing the exact same thing to them as they have done to you. ... It just was something that was really, like, heartbreaking to see, but at the same time, seeing so many people that were genuinely concerned for these very dangerous situations, like I do hope that someday, Morgan is able to look through and see how people were genuinely concerned about her. And that Elissa, someday, can look through and see how people were genuinely like, cheering her on to be able to get out of [Ukraine] and give birth in a safe place. Like, I think that things like that are really, like, something that's beautiful, that even though there's a lot of, like, disgust or like, "Oh, I hate this!" it is, too, like nope, at the end of the day, you're mean, and I'm not watching a TV show. I'm watching somebody and this is their real life.

Because of her consciousness that these are real people going through difficult and sometimes dangerous experiences, Erin stated that she avoids engaging with posts about fundamentalists who appear to be going through traumatic events or experiencing mental

health breakdowns, stating, “There's no fun to it, when it no longer feels like this is somebody that deserves it. Like when it feels like this is someone that is genuinely going through a very, very difficult time.” She goes on to say that snarkers who continue to engage with these fundamentalists are, in a sense, participating in the fundamentalists’ self-abuse via refusal to get support or mental healthcare and can also drive traffic to these individual’s profiles, incentivizing further self-exploitative content.

These concerns partially inform her decision to use Reddit through a third-party, offline app. This approach allows her to maintain a degree of separation from the content, choosing when and how to engage to avoid undue stress or anger. By participating primarily as a lurker, she is able to maintain the benefits of reading other snarkers’ stories in r/FundieSnarkUncensored, which validate her experiences as a former fundamentalist-adjacent Christian and connect her to resources, without feeling the pressure to constantly engage in emotionally-taxing conversations.

### ***Kathryn***

While Erin describes herself as deconstructed Christian, Kathryn describes herself as someone who grew up religious and still practices a liberal form of Christianity and who supports causes like Black Lives Matter, is pro-choice, and is LGBT-friendly, although some of her own family had grown up in fundamentalist groups like the Institute for Basic Life Principles.<sup>109</sup> As a result of her and her family’s experiences with both liberal and fundamentalist Christianity, Kathryn finds it “cathartic to discuss these assholes [fundamentalists] on social media.” For Kathryn, similarly to both Taylor and Erin, there is a balance between showing the ridiculousness of fundamentalist lifestyles and critiquing the harm that they create. At times, like Taylor notes, the snark can skew towards inadvertently reifying the beliefs it seeks to critique. Kathryn points out that at times, the subreddit has used racist tropes to describe Mandrae Collins, father of a large multiracial fundamentalist family in Texas, and has used nicknames like “Heitler” to reference to Heidi Baird, the mother of Bethany and Kristen Baird (founders of Girl Defined Ministries) who

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<sup>109</sup> The Institute for Basic Life Principles is a Christian fundamentalist organization founded by Bill Gothard in 1961. Gothard ran the Institute until his resignation in 2014 following a series of sexual harassment allegations spanning several decades. The Institute remains popular with members of the Independent Fundamental Baptist churches and associated denominations.



posted positively about her grandfather's service in World War II as a member of the Nazi Party, that were uncomfortable for Jewish snarkers, who felt that the nickname trivialized Adolf Hitler and the genocides he perpetuated. While these specific snark trends have both been curtailed by moderators, Kathryn notes, the subreddit still experiences tensions as it navigates the interplay between race, gender, and class with fundamentalist beliefs:

But at the same time, we still get very vicious. Particularly to white women (don't get me started on how we treat the black fundies, the racism is so real) and I think we snark on them the most because they are presumably our demographic. And we are eating our own whether we be religious, non-religious, one who has escaped the cults discussed, or ones not impacted at all directly but know the effects of colonization that are still being used by these religious zealots. [It is] hard to be human and kind to people who deny [others] their rights and liberty to do as they please: as a bisexual woman I pass in these spaces and they [fundies] wouldn't hesitate to harm those who don't, hard to feel empathy for them.

That said, as a Christian, Kathryn isn't interested in policing how other snarkers critique Christianity and the church. When asked to describe an interaction in r/FundieSnarkUncensored that felt particularly meaningful to her, she describes a moment when a snarker dismissed another snarker's perspective and Kathryn intervened:

I saw someone respond to someone's comment saying "Well, not all Christians are like that." Which upset me because they made a valid criticism of the church, [so] I responded and clarified that I was a religious person. I explained that it wasn't anyone's business to gatekeep how people critique the church. That we need to take responsibility to hear what people have to say and feel without judging them. And someone responded with a thank you and a heartfelt message that it meant a lot to see religious folks take responsibility of the church like that. It wasn't my goal to be thanked and it kinda went against my comment that we didn't need to be catered to, but I think about that person who said that and how it must have made them feel good to see religious people take ownership of our abusive past (and present, let's be real). I pray for that snarker.

For snarkers like Kathryn, snark is a complex activity that requires negotiating hostility to fundamentalist beliefs, a tempered empathy for the fundamentalists who both harm others and are harmed by their own beliefs, and care for other snarkers in the community, who may themselves hold different values and orientations to the shared project of snark.

## ***Anonymous***

The emotional complexity of snarking can build camaraderie, as Crystal and Taylor describe; can prompt introspection and re-evaluation of personal or cultural beliefs, like for Erin and Kathryn; and it can also influence how participants engage in the subreddit itself. The final interview participant, who wishes to remain anonymous without the use of a pseudonym, found the r/FundieSnarkUncensored forum early in the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person interactions were restricted. Although she was familiar with shows like TLC's *19 Kids and Counting* and had an intellectual interest in religion, she hadn't engaged in snark before because, on face value, it didn't fit with the ways she prefers to interact with others. In her offline interactions, she's careful to avoid gossip or speaking judgmentally of others, but, like Taylor, the public nature of fundamentalist media changes her relationship to the subjects of snark, reasoning "I try not to be too judgmental about a lot of stuff. I usually don't care, whatever. But when people create public personas to promote, especially promote a certain viewpoint or something, I can think of them more as fair game." For her, the online-ness of fundie snarking provides a layer of distance. Not only are the subjects of snark intentionally creating public profiles to share their beliefs, thus opening themselves to response, Anonymous is careful to maintain an emotional separation, focusing on critiquing the ideologies and behaviors of fundamentalists and avoiding the sorts of edgy humor that draw others to the forum. She says, "It's like, no, I'll discuss your opinion and, like, what I consider [to be] something dumb you said, but I really don't want to discuss how you look or anything. Because that's—I don't care." For Anonymous, the primary appeal of snarking lies in unraveling the foundational beliefs of fundamentalism, a sort of morbid intellectual curiosity akin to Taylor's initial interest in fundamentalist lifestyles. As the subreddit grows, Anonymous is concerned that snark may devolve into simple bullying or lose sight of the elements that make this space valuable:

There's the very basic [understanding of snark], like it deals with public people who have made themselves into public figures in the fundamentalist social media-verse. And there are a couple [fundamentalists] that get way more popular and focused on, I think, because they post a lot. And [post] things that are perhaps easier to snark on and not as—this is gonna sound snobby—but intellectually challenging to deal with, like Bethany posting and not spelling things correctly. But I think it's easy [to snark upon], especially with something like Reddit, where someone's scrolling and commenting and it's just fun and you're looking maybe for entertainment. But then

there are the posts that are more like, 'No, this is what's the problem with her argument and the background behind it.' And so there's a lot of both. I think it's easier with the quick and easy critiques of, like, oh, look bad spelling, go to the dining room table.<sup>110</sup> But again, I'm more there for the other stuff. It gets old, it gets boring, it's not exciting to be all 'They can't spell properly.' Okay, well, like typos and such. And so I think the more [the subreddit] grows, the less in-depth analysis and critique you see. And to me, that's the more interesting part.

For Anonymous, though, there is an emotional limit to her engagement with the in-depth analysis and critique that she values in r/FundieSnarkUncensored. As other interview participants have noted, the comments sections within the subreddit are a mix of jokes, stories, and shared information that maintain a mostly positive tone, specifically towards other snarkers. While Anonymous values the information that she learns from others in the forum (and the opportunity to contribute her own knowledge, when applicable), she also recognizes that, at times, that shared knowledge is both hard-won and potentially reflective of the snarker's own biases. At times, the topics discussed in r/FundieSnarkUncensored veer too close to issues affecting snarkers and other non-fundamentalists, as noted in the previous chapter. Throughout her responses, Anonymous balances her desire to bear witness to the harm done within and by fundamentalism with her need to protect her own well-being. The overarching theme of her approach to fundie-snarking is *complexity*. Forming interactions with others in a wholly online, parasocial community is complex, and as human beings, both snarkers and the fundamentalists upon whom they snark are contradictory, which increases the difficulty of engaging in empathy across the ideological and digital divides between fundamentalists and snarkers. Taken as a whole, Anonymous, Kathryn, Erin, Taylor, and Crystal's navigation of the interactions that form r/FundieSnarkUncensored demonstrate the affordances (and potential pitfalls) of rhetorical empathy as a foundation for feminist storytelling.

### **Complicated empathy**

For Blankenship, as discussed at the end of Chapter 4, empathy is "an epistemology, a way of knowing and understanding, a complex combination of intention and emotion"

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<sup>110</sup> This is a reference to the "School of the Dining Room Table," a figure of speech for fundamentalist homeschooling practices.

that encompasses both affective and cognitive elements.<sup>111</sup> In framing empathy in this way, Blankenship demarcates it from pity, which is a more hierarchical rather than bridging emotion. In pity, one expresses sorrow for what another person lacks; in Blankenship's conceptualization of empathy, one "feels with" rather than "feels for" the other person.<sup>112</sup> To "feel with" another person, particularly someone with markedly different values or engaged in practices that contribute to harming others, requires vulnerability, as noted in Blankenship's first tenet of rhetorical empathy: "Yielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories."<sup>113</sup> In an idealized sense, rhetorical empathy provides a means to access a common-ground of shared feeling, yet, as Ahmed writes, empathy is necessarily dependent on an imagined or interpreted, and thus mediated, sense of the Other:

All of these forms of fellow-feeling involve fantasy: one can 'feel for' or 'feel with' others, but this depends on how I 'imagine' the other already feels. So 'feeling with' or 'feeling for' does not mean a suspension of 'feeling about': *one feels with or for others only insofar as one feels 'about' their feelings in the first place.*<sup>114</sup>

While the participants in r/FundieSnarkUncensored are, perhaps at times inadvertently, participating the project of politicizing pain through their storytelling, doing so transforms the community beyond the intentions of the founding members. While the impetus for forming a story-based snark community had been to reshape interactions between snarkers, the cumulative effect has also reshaped snarkers' relationships towards the fundamentalists upon whom they snark. To draw again from Ahmed's work on emotion,

Bringing pain into politics requires we give up the fetish of the wound through different kinds of remembrance. The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present. ... Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history.*<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Lisa Blankenship, *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*, 1st edition (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019), 7.

<sup>112</sup> Blankenship, *Changing the Subject*, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Blankenship, *Changing the Subject*.

<sup>114</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Ahmed, 33–34.

For snarkers, the question of pain and to whom empathy can or should be extended is complicated by the parasociality of the relationship—again, the fundamentalists are present in the relationship only through the media content they project—and by the very real, ongoing harms fundamentalists inflict on others. Storytelling extends a bridge between snarker and snarkee, yet this bridge is in many ways illusory. On one level, snarkers hold the power to (mis)represent the fundamentalists whose media they collect, interacting with their own understandings and, at times, imaginations of the real people who have created the original posts. In this dynamic, snarkers hold the power. Offline, however, fundamentalists form part of a politically powerful social group that holds outsized sway over the legal and physical futures of others, including snarkers, such as through restrictions on gender-affirming and reproductive healthcare or anti-discrimination protections. As media ecologist Jade E. Davis notes in her critique of empathy, the promise of reaching a shared experience can obscure the nature of dominance or control, writing “To be in the shoes of an Other still leaves you with your own feet.”<sup>116</sup> Further, as rhetorician Dennis Lynch argues, to step into someone else’s shoes “is only possible if those shoes are empty; this desire makes empathy dependent on the physical, bodily displacement of the other.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, rather than understanding empathy as a personal emotive experience, to effectively use empathy, we must understand it as shaped by social histories.

In his delineation of what he names “critical empathy,” rhetorician Eric Leake acknowledges that empathy is not always as positive as it is often described.<sup>118</sup> Easy empathy, he notes, can simply reify the empathizer’s conceptions of how the empathized should or must feel. This form of empathy is primarily an exercise in allowing the empathizer to see themselves as an empathetic, and thus good, person, without providing an actual encounter with an Other or a real shared experience. Difficult empathy, in contrast, occurs when the empathizer resonates with feelings, traits, or behaviors in the empathized that challenge the empathizer’s self-conception. This can include empathizing

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<sup>116</sup> Jade E. Davis, *The Other Side of Empathy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

<sup>117</sup> Dennis A. Lynch, “Rhetorics of Proximity: Empathy in Temple Grandin and Cornel West,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773949809391110>.

<sup>118</sup> Eric Leake, *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

with those who are made less-than-human in our social systems as well as empathizing with those who are considered “the enemy” or dangerous to the empathizer. For Leake, difficult empathy requires a re-evaluation of the self, the Other, and the social systems that have constructed both *self* and *Other*, sometimes leading to changes in identification similar to those experienced by snarkers within r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Ultimately, Leake argues for the value of critical empathy, a construct that holds the contradictions and critiques of empathy as valuable, yet still critically deploys empathy to illuminate the social borders and uses of feeling.

In the case of r/FundieSnarkUncensored, snarkers employ a tactic that could be described as critical empathy to recognize shared experiences between themselves and fundamentalist women, not to erase the social histories of fundamentalism, to absolve fundie women, or to wholly villainize fundamentalist women, but instead to draw strategically create a shared political experience of being in a disproportionately restricted or targeted social class (women) under Christian fundamentalism and its attendant political ideologies. While snarkers might initially approach snark as though viewing fundamentalist women across or through an impenetrable divide (voyeurism, morbid curiosity), the empathy often extended to other snarkers in the stories shared within the forum begins to trouble the boundaries of identification, as noted in Chapter 4, leading snarkers to reformulate their understanding of what it means to snark and to be a snarker and how fundamentalism shapes both the fundamentalists’ lives and their own.

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## **Chapter 6: In conclusion, or Snarking to repair**

When a group of frustrated Redditors set out to create a new fundie snarking community, they primarily sought to reshape their interactions with one another by making space to share their personal stories. In actuality, their shift to story-based snark affected so much more. On a mechanical level, the shift to story-based snark necessitated significant changes in the subreddit's moderation style as moderators pursued a more relational strategy for community governance. The changes in moderation style in turn produced changes in user behavior that are further reinforced by Reddit's sorting algorithms, a factor which had previously intensified r/FundieSnark's discourse towards bullying and targeted hate but now instead intensifies and rewards further prosocial interaction. These infrastructure-based changes are internalized into snarkers' understanding of what it means to be a snarker, and members of the forum thus began exploring a more complex, empathy-based relationship with the fundamentalist women upon whom they snark. Altogether, the forum's first year demonstrates that, while storytelling is not a panacea for all online hostility or aggression, it can be a meaningful intervention strategy in volatile communities. In this final chapter, I synthesize the findings from Chapters 3 through 5, then situate those findings within the theoretical framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2. Finally, I conclude by looking towards future research to extend the work begun in this dissertation study.

### **Countering Intensification**

From the beginning, r/FundieSnarkUncensored's pivot to story-based snark directly and immediately changed one of the intensification factors that led the original forum, r/FundieSnark, towards the forms of toxicity narrated in Chapter 2: moderation style. As noted in the name of the subreddit itself, which is a snarky reference to the heavy-handed moderators of the parent subreddit, the moderators of r/FundieSnarkUncensored sought to encourage snarkers to share personal stories, to add context, and to engage in pointedly nuanced snark, rather than to relegate these participants and their contributions to the infamous "mommy-blog" of r/FundieSnark. Because the volunteer moderator team is responsible for both setting and enforcing the rules of the forum, the new subreddit's focus on storytelling fundamentally redefined the style of their moderation practices. As with any subreddit, moderation must focus to some extent on curtailing toxicity by enforcing strict



rules against inflammatory content. In r/FundieSnarkUncensored, this manifests in rules against bigoted (e.g., racist, homophobic, or transphobic snark) and specific forms of harmful snark (e.g. body-shaming). However, with the incorporation of storytelling, the subreddit's moderators took a more expansive role in supporting positive content, in addition to discouraging and removing offensive content. This task is arguably more complex and has required the moderation team to be in consistent communication with the members of the subreddit in order to create responsive and supportive subreddit policies. The moderator team has enacted several strategies to maintain this open communication.

As noted in Chapter 4's discussion of the "meta discussion" theme within r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year, the moderators played a more active role than usual during the forum's early months, monitoring and responding to snarkers' concerns that harmful forms of engagement, such as body-shaming, would carry over from r/FundieSnark to r/FundieSnarkUncensored. As the subreddit evolved and its conversations shifted from reactions to the issues of r/FundieSnark to the actual practices of snark itself, the community encountered hurdles to implementing its values, and, occasionally, snark again began to reify the values it ostensibly sought to critique. In these instances, the moderators employed two strategies to better recognize and respond to instances of bigoted snark, such as transphobic or anti-Semitic statements: consensus-based decision making and an expansion of the moderation team. As moderator Crystal shared in her interview, discussed in Chapter 5, the r/FundieSnarkUncensored moderation team operates by consensus, wherever possible. This strategy prevents a rogue moderator from implementing overly-restrictive, unfair, or otherwise unpopular rules, but it also allows moderators to share insights with one another. Ideally, these shared insights allow the team to recognize more insidious forms of bigotry, such as the racist memes discussed in Chapter 3, that may not be obviously offensive or recognizable rule-violations to members of socially-dominant groups. When the team's shared expertise fails, Crystal notes, they proactively seek new members of the moderation team to better reflect the diversity of snarkers within the forum and to contribute to the team's shared knowledge.

In short, the moderation team of r/FundieSnarkUncensored has been tasked with fostering an environment that can encourage the sharing of personal stories, which requires a sensitive approach to moderation beyond the simple removal of rule-violating

content. This involves not only ensuring that discussions remain respectful and on-topic but also protecting the space for vulnerable narratives to be shared without fear of dismissal or attack (including by moderators themselves). In line with existing research on proactive community moderation, discussed in Chapter 3, r/FundieSnarkUncensored's moderation practice has thus evolved from merely enforcing rules to actively cultivating a community ethos that values empathy, understanding, and nuanced critique. This practice is supported by several behaviors that resonate with current literature on successful community moderation.

First, in contrast to Cullen and Kairam's findings that volunteer moderators often learn to moderate through trial-and-error in the absence of structured training, r/FundieSnarkUncensored's creation and consistent use of moderator-only communication channels creates a form of quasi-mentorship. While the moderation team does not use a formal training program, new moderators are supported in both understanding the community's existing ethos and contributing to the refinement of the team's informal code of ethics, which will, in turn, shape the community's formal rules. Second, the moderation team employs listening strategies and demonstrates empathy when engaging with the community at large. As noted in the discussion of meta-discussions and explicit storytelling within r/FundieSnarkUncensored's themes, moderators created space for snarkers to air their grievances with the previous community, then guided snarkers to transform those grievances into positive foundational behaviors within the new community. In these threads, moderators first created the space for discussion (a stickied "Vent" thread), listened to snarker responses and replied with clarifying questions where needed, then synthesized community responses into new community guidelines. These guidelines were further refined through the use of stickied "Cool Mod Update!!!!" posts to both publicize the new rules and invite further comments and discussion. Resonating with Trujillo and Cresci's findings that moderation interventions can significantly alter participant behaviors within an online community, the moderation practices of r/FundieSnarkUncensored's volunteer moderators built the structural foundation for the community's pivot to story-based snark.

While one intensification factor—moderation style—was accessible to participants in the new forum and was changed accordingly, individual Redditors do not have the ability

to change the way the site prioritizes content in its sorting algorithms. Subreddit moderators have a limited amount of power to arrange posts within their own forum, primarily through the ability to pin posts to the top of the forum's page and to remove posts that violate the subreddit's rules or Reddit's terms of service; however, post-r/The\_Donald, the effects of these abilities have been somewhat curtailed, as discussed in Chapter 3. That said, the changes to r/FundieSnarkUncensored's moderation style secondarily influenced the values that were amplified through Reddit's sorting algorithms. Rather than incentivizing users to post increasingly inflammatory content in order to stay ahead of moderators' bans, the new moderation style and community ethos pushed users to post more complex content. As stories tend to invite more thoughtful responses, reflections, and discussions, they inherently encourage the type of sustained engagement that Reddit's algorithms prioritize. Consequently, this shift not only elevates the visibility of such content within the subreddit but also potentially influences the broader Reddit community's exposure to more complex, nuanced discussions, should these discussions become popular enough to appear on r/Popular, a homepage populated by trending posts from a variety of subreddits to which the user is not necessarily subscribed. The resulting dynamic creates a feedback loop where community values and algorithmic priorities mutually reinforce each other, promoting substantive and reflective snark practices rather than ever-more-pointed snark.

Thus, as snarkers join and participate in the community, these influences are internalized into their understanding of what it means to be a snarker, at least within this particular context. The interview responses from snarkers with a range of previous understandings of fundamentalism, discussed in Chapter 5, demonstrate how r/FundieSnarkUncensored's shared ethos encourages snarkers to shift from voyeuristic or purely cathartic snark focused solely on individual fundamentalist figures to a more nuanced snark on fundamentalist ideologies as *represented* through specific fundamentalist figures. Several participants noted that they originally began snarking in r/FundieSnarkUncensored out of a "morbid curiosity" about fundamentalist lifestyles or as a form of socially-acceptable release for critical behaviors. However, across interview responses, participants noted that they learned about fundamentalist ideologies and the social effects of those ideologies through r/FundieSnarkUncensored, and most referenced

other snarkers' stories as a key factor that shifted their perspectives on fundamentalism and fundie snarking.

### **Internalizing Storytelling**

Because the moderation style of the subreddit both allows and prioritizes storytelling and because story-based posts garner a larger number of comments, which in turn increases the posts' rankings within the content algorithms, the mechanics of the subreddit push snark towards relationality, nuance, and critical analysis. In turn, snarkers reshape their understanding of what it means to be a snarker to encompass these strategies. As a result of these practices, the discourse present with r/FundieSnarkUncensored incorporates new kinds of affective identification that work in tension with the inherent distancing of snark, as discussed in Chapters 2, 4, and 5. Although it remains true that snark relies on distance (that is, one does not snark on beliefs or practices that are shared with the object of snark), r/FundieSnarkUncensored's storytelling strategies situate the objects of snark (specific fundamentalist figures) within a more expansive understanding of fundamentalist ideologies and their effects on both fundamentalists and snarkers, most often within the context of the United States. In this way, snark shifts from primarily mocking superficial features of fundamentalist figures, such as personal style, to using combined dark humor and personal storytelling to explicate how fundamentalist ideologies are promoted and circulated through specific fundamentalist figures' media. To revisit an example from the introduction to this dissertation, rather than snarking upon fundamentalist influencer Kelly Havens Stickle's decision to cosplay a *Little House*-esque lifestyle in a suburban Ohio neighborhood, snarkers in r/FundieSnarkUncensored might snark upon both the cosplay and the underlying revisionist fundamentalist histories that glorify homesteading as part of an imagined past and desired future rooted in Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism. Throughout, snarkers continue to use their personal stories to situate fundamentalist figures and their ideologies in a shared, real world, which then enables them to trace the effects of these ideologies on their own lives. In this way, story-based snark functions similarly to feminist consciousness-raising.

As snarkers participate in politically-conscious, story-based snark, they must necessarily engage in a more complex identification with the fundamentalist figures upon

whom they snark, primarily the fundamentalist women whose re-posted content makes up the bulk of the subreddit. Storytelling remains key to this ongoing pivot, as snarkers use their stories to engage a form of rhetorical empathy with fundamentalist women, exemplified by three of the five themes surfaced in Chapter 4's analysis of topic-modeling results and by the affective language used in interviewees' responses in Chapter 5. When snarkers engage in ideological critique through storytelling, they are placed in an uneasy relationship with fundamentalist women. This tension is perhaps best demonstrated in the subreddit's vacillating responses to Anna Duggar during her husband's indictment and subsequent trial (Chapter 4). When snarkers share stories about how fundamentalist ideologies have affected them personally, regardless of their personal religious histories, snarkers demonstrate recognition that fundamentalist women occupy a complex position of both being harmed and enacting harm through their beliefs. Accordingly, snarkers employ strategies similar to Blankenship's theory of rhetorical empathy and Leake's critical empathy to navigate the tension. Within r/FundieSnarkUncensored, rhetorical empathy functions as a "feeling-with" that does not elide the complex power dynamics at play within discussions of fundamentalism, especially considering the saliency of fundamentalism's sociopolitical reach for US-based snarkers.

As a whole, r/FundieSnarkUncensored's turn to storytelling has enabled it to function as a site of catharsis, education, and epistemic activism that may counter the functions of fundamentalist influencer media as noted in the introduction to this dissertation. While fundamentalist figures may seek to use their social media profiles to normalize their beliefs, to make those beliefs appealing to others through invocations of an idealized imagined past, and to sanitize extreme political visions for a Christian Nationalist future, r/FundieSnarkUncensored uses its storytelling snark to peel back the layers of fundamentalist media, exposing the stark disparities between the imagined past they invoke and the lived realities of those subjected to their doctrines. In this regard, the snark community punches above its weight, so to speak, using a rhetorical form that is often used for petty criticism (and at times, simple online bullying) to instead delegitimize fundamentalist narratives through pointed humor, to provide education about fundamentalism, and to foster complex forms of identification among snarkers and between snarkers and fundamentalist figures.

While the storytelling strategies demonstrated in r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year are not a panacea for online polarization or hostility, they do demonstrate the potential effects of storytelling. The structural changes within r/FundieSnarkUncensored's community governance and snarker-to-snarker interactions highlight storytelling's potential for concrete intracommunity changes, but perhaps the most exciting aspect of their shift to storytelling is the way these intracommunity changes have grown through snarkers' self-identification and sense of relationality towards the fundamentalist women who become the subjects of snark. This growing relationality is a cultural rhetorics practice in motion— "constellating stories in order to visibilize a web of relations." By prioritizing storytelling as their basis for interacting with one another and understanding the overlapping effects of fundamentalist ideologies on snarkers and fundamentalist women themselves, snarkers have begun establishing feminist rhetorical empathy that challenges the us-versus-them binary otherwise inherent to snark practices. In doing so, they consistently juxtapose their personal experiences as a lens to reshape the cultural narratives surrounding fundamentalism and around snark itself, meshing them into a more complex lens through which snark is one way to understand, deconstruct, and subvert fundamentalist ideologies while simultaneously creating paths for women either leaving fundamentalism and/or deconstructing from internalized misogyny. Snarkers within this community value vulnerability, including the partiality and specificity of personal experience, and use their stories to pursue intracommunity and cultural healing from the violence of fundamentalist ideologies.

### **Limitations**

Although I have sought to develop a comprehensive analysis of how storytelling practices have functioned within r/FundieSnarkUncensored, this research is limited by three main factors. First, I have only analyzed text posts and comments, excluding images and videos. Over the course of the subreddit's first year, the proportion of text posts to image or video posts has varied, but an overview suggests that multimedia content makes up about 73% of posts, usually screen captures or recordings of fundamentalist media that snarkers are reposting to the subreddit, with or without a caption or title. This is a high percentage, but the comments on these posts were included in the analysis described in Chapter 4, even if the media of the post itself was excluded. Some of these media posts can

additionally be categorized as “satire snark,” which encompasses snarker-generated content created in the style of specific fundamentalists. A cursory overview suggests that these posts do not appear to use storytelling strategies as frequently as text-based posts; however, future research may consider how these often-satirical posts contribute to or push against the story-based values of the subreddit.

Second, the scope of this analysis is limited to the subreddit’s first year, from August 2020 to August 2021. Since the conclusion of my data collection, the subreddit has experienced major influxes of users, especially from true crime communities after the high-profile trial of Josh Duggar. True crime forums are not snark-based and often operate under very different assumptions of the relationship between forum participants and the object-subjects of their interests. That is, rather than creating parasocial relationships with living figures, who may respond to the community if they choose, true crime forums often create parasocial relationships with victims who are no longer able to speak on their own behalfs, such as homicide victims. These subjects’ stories are taken up, adapted, and used as the basis for speculation and cultural narratives in ways that differ significantly from the function of snark within r/FundieSnarkUncensored, since true crime aficionados may engage in forms of speculative storytelling that are disincentivized with r/FundieSnarkUncensored. Accordingly, these influxes of new users may have had a significant effect on the persistence or adaptation of r/FundieSnarkUncensored’s approach to storytelling that should be explored in future research.

Finally, since August 2021, there has been an increase in critical media coverage of Christian fundamentalism within US media. Popular documentaries, like Amazon Prime’s 2023 *Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets*, Netflix’s 2022 *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*, or HBO Max’s 2023 *Let Us Prey: A Ministry of Scandals*, mark a shift from the voyeuristic, curiosity-driven series of the earlier 2000s towards a more critical examination of fundamentalist communities, often incorporating testimony from former fundamentalists harmed by their ideologies. This investigative turn corresponds with increased news media coverage of US politicians’ ties to fundamentalist or high-control Christian denominations, such as Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barret’s affiliation with People of Praise and current Speaker of the House Mike Johnson’s ties to Christian Nationalism. As discussion of these ideologies becomes more prominent in US media, new snarkers may no longer enter

forums like r/FundieSnarkUncensored with a naive or purely curiosity-driven perspective on fundamentalism. Future research should consider whether more snarkers are driven to the community by political critique and if their motivations for snarking influence the ways personal stories are shared and utilized within the forum.

### **Looking forward**

As a participant-researcher within r/FundieSnarkUncensored, I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to learn alongside this community of snarkers. Too often, online forums that address sensitive or volatile topics devolve into echo chambers or deep polarization, but the relentless dedication of these snarkers to challenging fundamentalist ideologies with both humor and empathy creates a rare chance for genuine dialogue, nuanced understanding, and the creation of shared knowledges. By fostering a community ethos centered on storytelling and nuanced critique, this subreddit has not only resisted the intensification factors that plagued the original community but has also demonstrated the potential for digital platforms to use storytelling to facilitate meaningful cultural and ideological exchanges. The moderation practices and forms of community engagement outlined in this research may serve as a model for other online communities grappling with similar challenges. Further, the storytelling practices of r/FundieSnarkUncensored are evolving as the community adapts to new contexts, both within the platform of Reddit and within the sociopolitical climate of the United States. In my future work, I plan to remain closely connected with this community of snarkers, extending this research to understand how snarkers adapt, persist, or take up new strategies to continue the work of snarking to repair. Their stories set a hopeful precedent for a better form of online community formation, and by extension, for meaningful societal understanding and change.



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## APPENDIX A: Computational Topic Modeling Method

### Overview

In this research, I employed computational topic modeling to surface themes within the text-based posts and comments generated across r/FundieSnarkUncensored's first year. After receiving IRB approval from Michigan State University, all posts and comments generated within the subreddit between August 2020 and August 2021 were collected using PushShift, a Python-based alternative to PRAW (Python Reddit API Wrapper), which I selected for its ability to more easily collect "historical" data from a given month. The post and comment texts along with their metadata were returned as a CSV.

Preliminary text processing was conducted in Microsoft Excel. At the outset, posts and comments were stored in separate CSV files, along with their metadata, organized by month, so initial preprocessing was conducted separately. Because images and video have been excluded from this project, all non-text posts were filtered out, followed by removal of any deleted or removed posts, which presented as "[deleted]" or "[removed]" in the spreadsheet. For comments, deleted and removed entries were also filtered out, but there was no need to remove image or video content. Finally, a new CSV file was created for each month containing only the text content of comments and posts, excluding titles, and their attached comment or post ID.

More comprehensive text processing was conducted in R, prior to topic modeling. Text was converted to lowercase; numbers and punctuation were removed; stopwords (structural words like articles and prepositions) were removed; and a custom list of slang and overrepresented or under-represented words were removed. Over-represented words were subjectively determined as those that occurred at more than double the rate of the next frequent word, and under-represented words included those that occurred in three or fewer documents (posts or comments). Most text-cleaning processes also include a step for stemming or lemmatization. Because the subject of this project is a snark community that depends on clever wordplay, this step was omitted. Some redundancies result in the final topics (e.g. both "fundie" and "fundies" might be present), but the preservation of unique word creations made this worthwhile. As a final step, the cleaned corpus was transformed into a document-term matrix.

Next, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was utilized for topic modeling. LDA is a probabilistic topic model used to surface latent themes within a corpus of documents. Each month's collected posts and comments was treated as a separate corpus, as was each collection of flaired posts and comments, and the parameters  $K$  (number of topics) and  $\alpha$  (document-topic density) were iteratively adjusted to achieve peak coherency, optimized for a human reader.  $\beta$  (topic-word density) was left at a fixed value of 0.01. Resulting topics were thematically coded, then codes were grouped together to identify significant and persistent themes in r/FundieSnarkUncensored's discourse.

## **PushShift: Scraping posts by month**

```
import pandas as pd
from pmaw import PushshiftAPI
api = PushshiftAPI()

import datetime as dt
before = int(dt.datetime(2021,9,1,0,0).timestamp())
after = int(dt.datetime(2021,7,31,0,0).timestamp())

subreddit="fundiesnarkuncensored"
submissions = api.search_submissions(subreddit=subreddit, before=before, after=after)
print(f'Retrieved {len(submissions)} submissions from Pushshift')

submissions_df = pd.DataFrame(submissions)

submissions_df.to_csv('./fsu_posts_august21.csv', header=True, index=False,
columns=list(submissions_df.axes[1]))
```

## **PushShift: Scraping comments by month**

```
import pandas as pd
from pmaw import PushshiftAPI
api = PushshiftAPI()

import datetime as dt
before = int(dt.datetime(2021,8,31,0,0).timestamp())
after = int(dt.datetime(2021,7,31,0,0).timestamp())

subreddit="fundiesnarkuncensored"
comments = api.search_comments(subreddit=subreddit, before=before, after=after)
print(f'Retrieved {len(comments)} comments from Pushshift')

comments_df = pd.DataFrame(comments)

comments_df.to_csv('./fsu_comments_august.csv', header=True, index=False,
columns=list(comments_df.axes[1]))
```

## R Script

```
# Loading the required libraries
library(tidytext)
library(tidyverse)
library(textclean)
library(textmineR)
library(dplyr)
library(tidyr)
library(tm)
library(textmineR)
library(ggplot2)

# Loading documents in a data frame
text <- read_csv("SatireSnark_Comments_LDA.csv")
docs <- as.data.frame(text)
head(docs$text, 10)

# Get the text column
clean_text <- docs$text
clean_text <- gsub("[^A-Za-z0-9 ]+", "", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- tolower(clean_text)
clean_text <- removeNumbers(clean_text)
clean_text <- replace_contraction(clean_text, contraction.key = lexicon::key_contractions,
ignore.case = TRUE)
clean_text <- removePunctuation(clean_text, preserve_intra_word_contractions = TRUE,
preserve_intra_word_dashes = TRUE)
clean_text <- gsub("[^A-Za-z0-9 ]+", "", x = clean_text)

# Filtering escaped contractions and selected overrepresented words
# The extra contraction cleaning is needed because Reddit users' creative spelling and formatting
resulted in many words that escaped the standard stopwords lists.

clean_text <- gsub(" im ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" dont ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" don ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" arent ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" didnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" didn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" doesnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" doesn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" wouldnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" wouldn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" couldnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" couldn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" theyll ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" its ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" isnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
```

```

clean_text <- gsub(" isn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" cant ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" thats ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" shes ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ive ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ve ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" d ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ll ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" t ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" wasnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" wasn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" wont ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" won ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" shouldnt ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" shouldn ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" theyre ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" theyd ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" hes ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" shes ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" shed ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" youve ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" youll ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" youre ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" hes ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" whats ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ding ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" te ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ve ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ha ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" amp ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ty ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ning ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" hing ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ding ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ing ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ly ", " ", x = clean_text)

```

#Removing non-meaningful slang

```

clean_text <- gsub(" lol ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" lot ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" fuck ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ew ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" yada ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" blah ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" totally ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" yeah ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" basically ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" absolutely ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" literally ", " ", x = clean_text)

```

```

#Removing over-represented words
clean_text <- gsub("people", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("things", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" lot ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("haha", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("shit", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("fucking", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("damn", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("gonna", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("guys", " ", x = clean_text)

clean_text <- gsub("god", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("back", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("gods", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("kid", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("kids", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("child", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub("children", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" id ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" ren ", " ", x = clean_text)
clean_text <- gsub(" yo ", " ", x = clean_text)

clean_text <- stripWhitespace(clean_text)
# Put the data to a new column
docs["text"] <- clean_text
head(docs$text, 10)

# Tokenize using tidytext's unnest_tokens
tidy_docs <- docs %>%
  select(doc_id, text) %>%
  unnest_tokens(output = word,
                input = text,
                stopwords = c(stopwords::stopwords("en"),
                              stopwords::stopwords(source = "smart")),
                token = "ngrams",
                n_min = 1, n = 2) %>%
  count(doc_id, word) %>%
  filter(n>1) #Filtering for words/bigrams per document, rather than per corpus

tidy_docs <- tidy_docs %>% # Filtering any remaining words that are just numbers
  filter(! stringr::str_detect(tidy_docs$word, "[0-9]+$"))

# End text cleaning!

# Turning a tidy tbl into a sparse dgCMatrix for use in textmineR
d <- tidy_docs %>%

```

```

cast_sparse(doc_id, word, n)

# Removing any tokens that were in X or fewer documents
dtm <- d
d <- dtm[ , colSums(dtm > 0) > 3 ] # alternatively: d <- dtm[ , tf_mat$term_freq > 3 ]

# Creating a topic model
set.seed(#)
model <- FitLdaModel(dtm = d,
  k = 20,
  iterations = 500,
  burnin = 450,
  alpha = .2,
  optimize_alpha = TRUE,
  calc_coherence = TRUE)

str(model)

# Probabilistic coherence is a measure of topic quality

summary(model$coherence)

hist(model$coherence,
  col = "blue",
  main = "Histogram of probabilistic coherence")

# Getting the top terms of each topic
model$top_terms <- GetTopTerms(phi = model$phi, M = 5)
head(t(model$top_terms))

# Getting the prevalence of each topic, proportional to alpha
plot(model$prevalence, model$alpha, xlab = "prevalence", ylab = "alpha")

# Making labels
model$labels <- LabelTopics(assignments = model$theta > 0.05,
  dtm = dtm,
  M = 1)

head(model$labels)

model$summary <- data.frame(topic = rownames(model$phi),
  label = model$labels,

```



```

coherence = round(model$coherence, 3),
prevalence = round(model$prevalence,3),
top_terms = apply(model$top_terms, 2, function(x){
  paste(x, collapse = ", ")
}),
stringsAsFactors = FALSE)

```

```

model$summary[ order(model$summary$prevalence, decreasing = TRUE) , ][ 1:28 , ]

```

```

# Organizing by beta

```

```

tidy_beta <- data.frame(topic = as.integer(stringr::str_replace_all(rownames(model$phi), "t_", "")),
  model$phi,
  stringsAsFactors = FALSE) %>%
gather(term, beta, -topic) %>%
tibble::as_tibble()

```

```

# Visualizing topics by beta

```

```

tidy_top_terms <- tidy_beta %>%
  group_by(topic) %>%
  slice_max(beta, n = 16) %>%
  ungroup() %>%
  arrange(topic, -beta)

```

```

tidy_top_terms %>%
  mutate(term = reorder_within(term, beta, topic)) %>%
  ggplot(aes(beta, term, fill = factor(topic))) +
  geom_col(show.legend = FALSE) +
  facet_wrap(~ topic, scales = "free") +
  scale_y_reordered()

```

## APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

After receiving IRB approval and beginning computational topic modeling, I recruited interview participants directly from r/FundieSnarkUncensored, using the following post:

Hi everyone! :)

My name is Vee, aka [Reddit username], and I'm a former fundie, current snarker, and PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University. For my dissertation, I'm conducting research about storytelling in online snark communities, specifically through a feminist lens. As part of this research, I'm looking for snarkers willing to talk about their snark experiences in roughly 1-hour interviews over Discord.

To participate, you need to:

- Be over the age of 18
- Have participated in FundieSnarkUncensored in any way between its formation in August 2020 and August 31, 2021. Participation can include moderating the subreddit, making a post, making a comment on a post, or upvoting or downvoting other people's posts and comments.

This study has been approved by MSU's Institutional Review Board, and there are no risks to participants. Because privacy is important, you can choose to participate under a name or pseudonym of your choice (like your Reddit username!) or be completely anonymous. Participants will receive a copy of the interview and any writing that references their interview, and you can withdraw your information at any time, no questions asked.

You can learn more about the study at [link to research overview], or volunteer for an interview at [link to a Google Form]. I'm also happy to answer questions over Reddit message!

This post has been cleared with the mods! :)

In this initial post, I sought to deliberately invite participants who may not have initially considered themselves to be active snarkers, such as people who vote on other people's posts or comments within the subreddit but who do not write original material.

Interviews were conducted over voice and video chat in a Discord server created for this research. Similarly to Reddit, users can make a Discord account using only a username or password, and I did not require email verification to access our server. Although I used

both video and audio during the interviews, some participants chose to use only audio. This enabled participants to most fully protect their anonymity, if they desired.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol and distributed the interview questions to participants in advance. Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interviews, and copies of the transcripts and recordings were returned to participants. The interview questions are reproduced below as they were given to the participants:

These are the questions that will guide group interviews for this dissertation project. You're welcome to save a copy of this document and jot down your thoughts before the interview! If you're comfortable sharing your notes, you can send me a copy of your responses after the interview at [lawsonv2@msu.edu](mailto:lawsonv2@msu.edu) or on Reddit as [username]. If you do so, please add whatever name you would like to be known as so that I can match your written responses to your interview responses! :)

#### Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself! What brings you to r/FundieSnarkUncensored?
- Have you participated in snark spaces before? If so, have any of them been focused on "fundie snark" or similar topics?
- Let's talk snark! If you were to describe this subreddit to someone who had never heard of it, what would you tell them?
- If you participate in multiple snark spaces, what makes this one different from the others?
- The subreddit's rules have evolved over time, but the first rule has remained the same: "Be kind & remember the human." As a snarker, how do you see that reflected (or not!) in the r/FundieSnarkUncensored community?
- Can you tell me a story about a meaningful interaction, positive or negative, you have had in r/FundieSnarkUncensored? What made it meaningful to you?
- Is there anything else that you'd like to share about your experiences in r/FundieSnarkUncensored that didn't come up in the earlier questions or in the interview itself?
  - This final question will not be asked during the interview itself. Instead, I provide it here as a way to share anything that you might want to add after the group conversation!