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## **The feminine bravery construct: the crisis of neoliberal feminine bravery in the #MeToo moment**

Dr Karike Ashworth & Dr Courtney Pedersen

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### **Abstract:**

There is an outpouring of sexual assault stories being told by women in the #MeToo moment. The moment feels celebratory because there have been serious consequences for high-profile abusers such as Harvey Weinstein. It is significant that the women allowed to visibly tell their stories present as brave, postfeminist woman-subjects. The expanded characterisation of feminine bravery in the contemporary context has contributed to a belief that the confessions we are witnessing are emblematic of a new porosity between the public and the private; Carol Hanisch's "Personal is Political" in action. However, in celebrating the ideal brave behaviour of certain postfeminist-types, women continue to be subject to insidious forms of silencing. Utilising a feminist content and discourse analysis, this research explores the contemporary iteration of the Feminine Bravery Construct (FBC) through two (white) publicly confessing subjects: Saxon Mullins and Rose McGowan. The research reveals that these dramatized woman-types serve to reinforce contemporary standards of bravery for women in the neoliberal context.

### **KEYWORDS**

Feminine bravery; feminine brave construct; neoliberal feminism; postfeminist culture; #MeToo; sexual assault

### **Introduction**

The context for this research is the Western Anglosphere where the increasingly dominant variant of neoliberal feminism has produced an individualised feminist subject. Neoliberal feminism is highly visible and popular, particularly in the #MeToo moment, which as Karen Boyle (2019, 2) reminds us, is distinct from Tarana Burke's intersectional Me Too movement. It is feminism "of the individual rather than the collective" kind where women are encouraged to be responsible for their empowerment and well-being rather than look to structures of power to explicate their oppression (Catherine Rottenberg 2018). So guided, women are urged to "come forward, to speak up, to express themselves"—to "find their voice" (Jilly Boyce Kay 2020, 5). Consequently, there is quite an overwhelming outpouring of confessional speech from women happening in the #MeToo moment. Although the archetype of silent stoicism continues to endure, conditions for feminine bravery have

expanded to make way for brave, confessing women who are perceived as liberated from silence. Yet, as this research explores, far from dismantling gender norms, this new ideal for bravery continues to insidiously silence women.

The brave un-silencing of women that is so emblematic of #MeToo is a new normal. For women to be acknowledged as brave, they must confess, and consequently, public confession has become a fundamental requirement for this iteration of the Feminine Bravery Construct (FBC). As this paper examines, just because women now have a “brave” voice, this does not mean they are liberated from the patriarchy. On the contrary, the confessing woman is merely an expansion of the brave woman archetype—still obedient, accommodating, exploited; held back only by her choices and personal limits (Catherine Rottenberg [2018](#)). This is because the expectations of feminine bravery are hegemonic (Chantal Mouffe [2014](#)).

This bravery research draws on the contributions of Wendy Anderson, Sarah Banet- Weiser, Rosaline Gill, Angela McRobbie, Shani Orgad, Janice Peck and Catherine Rottenberg, who have all contributed to advancing a critique of neoliberal, postfeminist culture, and the ideal female subject it perpetuates. These theorists agree that personal transformation is a central aim of the emergent neoliberal feminist project—to quote the poster-woman for this feminism, Sheryl Sandberg, women are encouraged to “internalise the revolution” (Sheryl Sandberg [2013](#)). Second Wave feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan [1975](#), took women’s routine use of drugs and coping strategies in the 1960s and 1970s as reasons to question the social and political structures that had driven women to the edge, while white, affluent women like Sandberg suggest that the solution lies not in social or political change, but in individual empowerment, choice and personal transformation mediated through a strict regime of “self-surveillance and self-managing” (Kath Kenny [2018](#), 230). Class and race are not mentioned at all. These popular feminisms do not focus on challenging social pressures or structures, but on perpetuating an ideal, postfeminist subject (Catherine Rottenberg [2018](#)).

The #MeToo moment is important because, as Karen Boyle ([2019](#)) argues, it is when the ideal postfeminist subject is experiencing peak visibility across all forms of media, and public bravery is key to this. In Boyle’s analysis of #MeToo she is careful to distinguish between the Me Too movement and the #MeToo moment. Started by Tarana Burke in 2006, Me Too is an “intersectional demand for support and recognition for young women of colour who had experienced sexual abuse, as well as a statement” (Burke n.d. cited in Karen Boyle [2019](#), 5). The difference is that Me Too is a movement based on activism while #MeToo is a “mass- mediated narrative” largely co-opted by white women (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 5).

Popular feminisms, and by our inference the FBC, are thriving under neoliberalism because digital media—with its expanded markets, its commitment to capitalism, its circulation capabilities, and its metrics of numbers, clicks and likes—form the social, cultural and economic conditions that have enabled extraordinary levels of visibility (Sarah Banet- Weiser [2018](#)). However, “whiteness” is “coded into our digital environments”, because online life “mimics offline cultural stratification” (Wendy K. Z. Anderson [2018](#), 116). As Wendy Anderson [2021](#), 4 and 9) examines, “whiteness” is membership to a majority white identity, which white people persistently code/recode into our organisations and cultural systems. Consequently, whiteness is normalised and invisibilised. Banet-Weiser ([2018](#), 10) describes it as an “economy of visibility”, whereby the stories (and by our inference braveries) that are most easily commodified are those that become most visible. Typically, the braveries most visible therefore are those that are white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heteronormative, and associated with a trajectory of capitalist “success” (Sarah Banet-Weiser [2018](#), 16)—those that are, as Angela McRobbie [2009](#), 60) describes, “spectacularly feminine”.

This research makes use of a feminist content and discourse analysis method to better understand two examples of where feminine bravery has been judged as appropriate or inappropriate in media representation. It is not intended to undermine the positives of the #MeToo moment, of which there are many. For example, shared confessional revelations do offer traumatised women opportunities for “identification, revelation, and consolation” (Kath Kenny [2018](#), 222), and the #MeToo hashtag has contributed significantly to helping frame the “magnitude of the problem” (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 3). It is also not a critique of Saxon Mullins or Rose McGowan, their politics, or activism. It is also not intended to undermine assertions that victims/survivors of sexual assault often can (and do) heal from rape, and that sharing about these experiences publicly can facilitate healing. The research focuses on the expectations of brave behaviour in public and the media’s role is perpetuating and amplifying acceptable standards for women’s public traumatic voice.

### ***The (subjugated) silent woman***

This section briefly reviews the way public expectations of silence and obedience for women have propagated through representations of women. Its purpose is to explicate why obedient, silent stoicism has been the ideal for feminine bravery for so long. Up until now, silence as a marker of ideal femininity was comparatively rigid. Indeed, it is still valued highly (Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser [2019](#)). Even the most ardent postfeminists would agree that “hysterical” or “rageful” behaviour is unacceptable for women (Rosaline Gill [2017](#), 619).

According to Jilly Boyce Kay ([2020](#), 2–4), across culture, myth and literature, vocal women have been routinely punished. The early modern legacy of obedience and its relationship to silence is

profound. Women were “schooling in deference” and were considered to be “under the governance of their husbands” (Linda Pollock [1989](#), 245). As Linda Pollock ([1989](#)) explores, men “command” and are thereby responsible for “exercising judgment and authority”, while women are required “to obey, evincing humility and deference.”

In film analysis, theorists interpret the cultural figure of the silent woman as either a signifier for resistance and agency, or oppression and normative enculturation (Phyllis Frus [2010](#); Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg [2008](#); Maurer and Gaines [2010](#); Erin McGlothlin [2003](#); Curran Nault [2012](#); Isabel Santaolalla [1998](#)). Furthermore, from broadcast television, electronic media, and advertising; to teen magazines, children’s picture books, Disney films, and literature; rich research exists which has examined the ways this content reinforces gender norms (Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz [2003](#); Scott Coltrane and Melinda Messineo [2000](#); Michael Elasmara, Kazumi Hasegawa and Mary Brain [1999](#); Mary Larson [1996](#); Jocelyn Steinke [2005](#)).

This is not a study of the silent woman archetype, but it is generally agreed that this archetype continues to support the preservation and dissemination of a misogyny that underpins patriarchal society (David Wootton and Holderness Graham [2010](#), 22). The patriarchal contract is that everything considered excessive, unruly, or emotional should remain private. While, rational, contained behaviour is appropriate in public (Sue Thornham [2007](#), 94). As Griselda Pollock [2003](#) points out, “woman is obsessively caught not only as the silenced object of that possessing and empowering gaze, but as its very sign”. In the public sphere women exist as sexual objects; presented for their qualities of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Laura Mulvey [1999](#), 837), and only allowed to speak when their speech aligns with gendered and cultural expectations.

Comprehended through a Foucauldian understanding of “discipline”, behavioural norms are an effective form of control over women. In a society predicated by discipline, we are under constant pressure to conform and be normal—the judges of normality are present everywhere (Michel Foucault [1977](#), 183; 304). The pressure of being potentially judged as failing to meet the norm is a device for making people subordinate; as “docility- utility” (Michel Foucault [1977](#), 183). The implication is that power is fortified, not by hierarchal control, but by a capillary network of multiple small nodes each of which, as Anne Schwan and Shapiro Stephen [2011](#), 102) point out, contribute to women’s subordination. Social structures, rules, conditions, and taboos that reinforce norms are indicative of the way the hegemonic order reinforces control. Women’s obedient silence remains an enduring expectation of public behaviour. When it comes to silencing women, “Western culture has thousands of years of practice” (Mary Beard [2017](#), xi). Conventions for women and silence have changed in the neoliberal, postfeminist context, however.

### *The (still subjugated) confessing woman*

This section examines the contemporary “un-silencing” of women through the media portrayal of Saxon Mullins and Rose McGowan. Today there are many examples of white women suffering, divulging, and subsequently recovering on display, and they are framed as liberating for all women. As Kay ([2020](#), 5) examines, in this moment women and girls are encouraged to “find their voice”. Expanding on Jilly Boyce Kay’s ([2020](#)) research, the bravery reward (as amplification) for “brave” public speech is this section’s focus. It argues that women are typically rewarded as brave when they speak within the bounds of acceptable femininity—i.e., when they are composed and compassionate—and if there are disorderly elements to the story (which is typical) then a narrative of overcoming and containment follows.

The objectives of this bravery research are, firstly, to show that the FBC functions to reward certain types of acceptable femininities in public—those that are still palatable, that are contained, absolved, obedient, and white. If society only celebrates/gives visibility to acceptable responses to adversity over and above vulnerable, unstable or rageful responses, many people/groups are rendered invisible. Responses that should be witnessed, acknowledged and be observable (Shani Orgad [2009](#); Rosaline Gill and Shani Orgad [2018](#)).

Secondly, it explores how the FBC deflects attention away from structural concerns. Persistently focusing on the salacious “what happened” and the way that white women behave/respond to/work through/get over—self-manage—their complex situations, diverts attention away from society’s injustices. Healing is important, but if the focus is skewed towards how white women “bounce-back” from distress, rather than what or who has caused it, then those responsible are not made accountable (Shani Orgad [2009](#); Gill et al. [2018](#)). As Boyle ([2019](#), 28) identifies, it demonstrates that “noise can perform a similar function to silence—distracting, diverting, distorting, disenfranchising”.

Thirdly, in theorising the FBC as a mechanism of control over women, the research extends on the work of other feminist writers, in particular Jilly Boyce Kay ([2020](#)). Kay examines “communicative injustice”—the way women’s public speech (including anger) has historically been contained, and how this is continuing in the #MeToo moment (Wendy Anderson [2021](#); Jilly Boyce Kay [2020](#); Shani Orgad and Rosaline Gill [2019](#); Emily Winderman [2019](#); Audre Lorde [1997 \[1981\]](#)). In this moment women’s public speech is publicly tolerated only when it is temperately expressed by white women through, as Jilly Boyce Kay ([2020](#), 19) explores, “injury, hurt and vulnerability”. Extending on Kay’s arguments, this research shows that women’s public speech should also be judged suitably redemptive to initiate the brave label.

This research draws on “the amazing bounce-backable woman”; “the Balanced Woman”; the psychological turn; “turn to character”; and “the therapeutic enterprise” as signified by the “Oprahfication” of contemporary culture and “public confession as a form of therapy” (Anna Bull and Kim Allen [2018](#); Catherine Rottenberg [2018](#); Gill et al. [2018](#); Shani Orgad [2009](#), Janice Peck [2008](#)). Janice Peck ([2008](#)) traces the history of the therapeutic enterprise and Winfrey’s positioning as liberator. Peck ([2008](#), 105) challenges that “healing” is “empowerment” and examines how this “framework of intelligibility” serves to “depoliticize women’s struggles by translating them into individual psychological defects”. That these healing struggles need to occur publicly is very relevant. It signifies that the world is “paying attention to women’s lives”, which has the appearance of a strong feminist political agenda. However, it is “public confession as a form of therapy” packaged as empowerment (Janice Peck [2008](#), 3), and the women’s lives we are paying attention to are still predominantly white women.

Shani Orgad’s research concerning survivor discourse builds on these arguments. Survivor discourse calls on individuals to transcend feelings of “despair, disappointment, and passivity” and, through a process of “self-exploration and ‘styles of self- management’ abandon their victim identity and take on the role of survivor” (Shani Orgad [2009](#), 151). The media are “central to the production and proliferation of survivor discourse”, and the public proliferation of this type of discourse creates “a space within which ‘survivor’ becomes a meaningful visible, cultural notion” (Shani Orgad [2009](#), 134). Orgad ([2009](#)) describes it as an “envied wound”—that we have become a culture that “invests traumatic experience with moral value and authority”. Gill et al. ([2018](#)) extend on this with the “amazing bounce-backable woman”. Contemporary culture demands women be “adaptable and positive, bouncing back from adversity and embracing a mind-set in which negative experiences can—and must—be reframed in upbeat terms.” Catherine Rottenberg’s ([2018](#)) “Balanced Woman” is also amazing at bouncing back but is also committed to maintaining balance so any leakage—breakdowns—are avoided.

As both Saxon Mullins and Rose McGowan are victims/survivors of sexual assault, made visible by media attention in the #MeToo moment, the research is contextualised by the work of Tanya Horeck, Karen Boyle, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Sarah Projanski and Sujata Moorti. As the portrayal of Mullins on Four Corners shows, Horeck, Projanski and Moorti’s research on public rape helps frame how this program reinforces rape culture. Similarly, Banet- Weiser and Karen Boyle’s ([2019](#)) research on #MeToo demonstrates that even though there have been consequences for men like Weinstein, the rationale that women should “keep telling people” lays the responsibility for bringing an end to men’s violence “at the feet of victims/survivors” (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 29). Yet the stories that the media focus on are often personal stories of white women overcoming—where “the personal remains

personal” rather than on structural change (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 2).

## Context & methods

There are two feminine subjects in the study. The first is Saxon Mullins, a young, white, Australian victim/survivor of rape. Mullins was raped by Luke Lazarus in 2013, and then endured a five-year criminal trial which resulted in Lazarus’ acquittal. The “legal sticking point” was that it could not be proved that Lazarus knew Mullins did not consent— because she did not verbalise her non-consent with explicit words (ABC Four Corners [2018](#)). The acquittal of Lazarus in 2017 was followed in early 2018 by an intimate televised media interview titled *I am that girl* in which Mullins was asked to tell her story for a gruelling 42 minutes, in the hope “that it will lead to change” (ABC Four Corners [2018](#)). She was interviewed by a liberal/leftist investigative journalist television program—the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Four Corners. The day after, Mullins’ bravery was celebrated by the feminist initiative Destroy the Joint on their Facebook page [Figure 1](#).

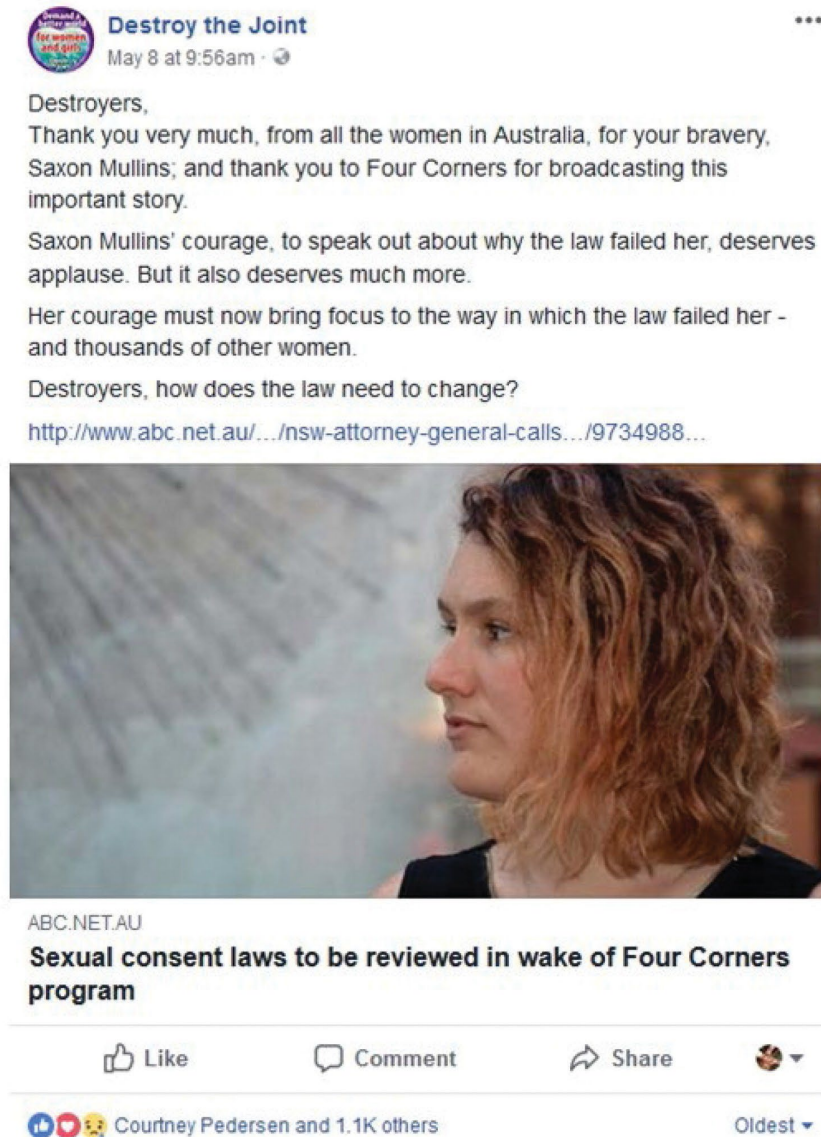
Using a feminist content and discourse analysis, the research analyses the framing of Mullins’ behaviour in this single media interview ([Table 1](#)), how it led to her being labelled brave, and why Mullins embodies the contemporary version of the FBC. It examines what this label, and what an unequivocal focus on Mullins’ brave behaviour/individual resilience, works to reinforce and conceal.

The second subject is the public figure, Rose McGowan, who is also white, and whose revelations that she was raped by Weinstein in 1997 were published in *The New Yorker* in late 2017. Following this, McGowan published her autobiography, *Brave*, in early 2018, where she disclosed details about her life and the rape. McGowan’s story is germane because rather than being rewarded with the brave label (as Mullins was), she gave it to herself. After the release of her book, McGowan embarked on a gruelling media tour. These early interviews were publicly disastrous for McGowan. McGowan had labelled herself brave, but then behaved inconsistently with public bravery’s expectations. These behaviours included her shaved head—“punk as fuck” (Rose McGowan [2018](#)); impulsive use of social media; visceral anger; a cocaine scandal; alleged transphobia; harassment allegations; and these early interviews where she was inconsistent, arrogant, and pissed off. As per Emily Winderman ([2019](#)), her actions felt like acts of “resistant anger”—an undiminished anger that was knowingly pushing back “against the normalising abuse of silencing practices”. It was certainly refreshing to see a woman in the media, rageful and disorderly. As Jilly Boyce Kay ([2020](#), 14) argues, we should celebrate publicly resistant behaviours rather than condemn them. What would it mean if society truly accepted the full spectrum of women and their emotions?

This research used a feminist discourse analysis to study all McGowan’s media appearances



(available online) from just prior to her book launch in early 2018 to March 2019. There were twenty-five appearances ([Table 2](#)). Three were excluded because they were speeches. Speeches were excluded because in a self-written speech, McGowan presumably could control the discourse while interview questions direct the discourse.



**Figure 1.** Facebook post by Destroy the Joint. May 8, 2018.

Both studies are based on a qualitative interpretation of the media appearances supported by a quantitative assessment of the interview content “to understand how frequently types, figures, symbols, and other signs appear (or do not)” (Alison Harvey [2020](#), 41). This quantitative data adds context to the deeper qualitative analysis of meaning-making as accurate and generalizable evidence of the findings and interpretations. In the qualitative assessment of the appearances, we looked for ways in which culturally understood ideals of feminine bravery (outlined earlier) are reinforced in the discourse and the subject performances. The goal was to identify how the speech and images

(gender and cultural performance), the public's response to these, and media constructions and expectations articulate a particular public discourse about feminine bravery for women in response to trauma.

**Table 1: Online media appearances (Mullins)**

# Appearances	1
Date	May 2018
Length	42 min
Format	television interview
Topics discussed	Events leading up to her rape, her rape, her recovery.
Attribute focus	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interview focus/time spent on events/life story; redemptive/recovery narrative; structural change around sexual assault.</li> <li>2. Type of questions asked and expectations regarding answers.</li> <li>3. Camera angles, sound, symbolism, editing.</li> <li>4. Interview structure</li> </ol>

**Table 2: Online media appearances (McGowan)**

# Appearances	25
Key	22 (6.5 hrs)
Dates (range)	Oct 2017 – March 2019
Length (range)	2 min – 90 minutes
Format (range)	panel, television interview, online interview.
Topics discussed	Her life story, rape, 'the deal', Hollywood culture, mental/emotional state, recovery, Weinstein's arrest.
Attribute focus	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interview focus/time spent on events/life story versus healing/redemption versus structural change.</li> <li>2. Type of questions asked and expectations regarding answers.</li> <li>3. Clothing, make-up, body language/gestures.</li> </ol>

### Saxon Mullins

Four Corners has been on Australian television since 1961—"exposing scandals, triggering inquiries, firing debate and confronting taboos"—they "exist to serve the public interest and you." (Four Corners [2021](#)). It is not a tabloid-style program; it is well-respected by left/ liberal-minded Australian viewers. It is significant that the contemporary FBC embodied by Mullins is not only being perpetuated by the conservative media.

Four Corners asked Mullins to recount the most intimate details of her rape, after she had already endured lengthy legal proceedings, which involves reliving the details of the event many times (Tanya Horeck [2004](#), 88–89). Mullins’ interviewers were women, inferring a feminist perspective. That Mullins was asked to relive her trauma on television demonstrates how neoliberal postfeminist culture overestimates the political (and legal) value of individual testimony in mediated contexts, over and above the personal cost to the victim/survivor. As Karen Boyle ([2019](#), 23) explains, “questions about whether speaking out is in itself a transformative political practice have concerned feminist activists and scholars for some time”, and as the framing of Mullins here reveals, it remains vital that we continue to “think critically about what it means to tell personal stories in a highly mediated context” (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 29).

The women interviewers were likely shocked that Lazarus was acquitted and perhaps saw themselves as stepping in where “the law left off” (Tanya Horeck [2004](#), 144). However, according to Horeck ([2004](#), 140), re-tellings of rape are often deeply problematic because they can become trials by public opinion where viewers are “in the position of judge and jury”—however, it is not the perpetrator on trial, but Mullins. Rape discourse commonly centres what Tanya Horeck ([2004](#), 145) describes as “the problem of determining rape”; it is a charge that is often considered “easily made and hard to be proved”. Women’s credibility is “routinely under scrutiny” (Tanya Horeck [2004](#), 80). I am that girl may have been predicated on breaking silences, but the intimate questioning, the use of reconstructed visuals and the airing of original CCTV footage, suggests that Mullins is on trial, judged by the viewing public.

According to Moorti ([2002](#), 2), the media frequently turn the violation of female bodies into “an asset to be traded in consumer culture”. Television adopts a “normative principle” of servicing the “public good” (Moorti [2002](#), 17) but it frequently does the opposite, particularly when it comes to sensational content involving women’s bodies. Despite the media’s arguments that they expose rather than create “the societal problem of rape” (Tanya Horeck [2004](#), 86)—as is the case in the Mullins interview—they often play a role in “constructing and supporting rape culture” (Karen Boyle [2019](#), 76). These programs can become spectacles where viewers watch and debate the innocence/culpability of the subject. To achieve this, they rely on narrative tension regarding the believability/non-believability of the subject, at least initially (Tanya Horeck [2004](#)). Female victims/survivors are typically believable when they are young, white, sorry, were assaulted by a stranger, and are framed as sexually respectable/virtuous (Tanya Horeck [2004](#); Sarah Projansky [2001](#)). Despite indirectly admonishing Mullins for being out drinking in a short skirt in the first half of the program, as it progressed, Four Corners was at pains to prove Mullins’ innocence, even encouraging her to admit that she “had never had sex before”. Framing Mullins as a brave victim of

circumstance highlights the criticality of the neoliberal redemptive narrative in reinforcing rape discourse. Despite celebrations of her bravery, this must have been very distressing for Mullins.

Destroy the Joint is an intersectional feminist group that stands for “gender equality and civil discourse in Australia”. They do important consciousness-raising work. For example, they keep count of the hitherto under-documented number of Australian women killed by domestic violence. Digital activism is important; as Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller (2019, 2) explores, viral hash- tags such as “#MeToo, #BringBackOurGirls, #YesAllWomen,” etc. have successfully highlighted the ongoing problem of gendered violence. We do not relish critiquing the work of organisations who advocate using these mediums—however, as this section highlights, our analysis of liberal-minded programs like Four Corners and feminist organisations like Destroy the Joint is crucial because it demonstrates the insidiousness of these expectations to reinforce feminine redemptive behaviours and mask the injustices of rape culture.

### **Interview focus**

Analysis of the interview (Table 3) reveals that 81% of the time was spent discussing what happened (i.e., Mullins reliving the rape and rape re-enactment); 13% was spent discussing Mullins’ recovery (the “redemptive narrative”), while 5% was spent discussing structural change to address rape culture in Australia. When structural change was discussed, Mullin’s whiteness was elided—i.e., there was no consideration of how BIPOC women’s experiences of both the assault and subsequent treatment by the legal system differs. Table 4 details how speech was classified.

Mullins was asked to recall her rape in a way akin to emotional spectacle (Sue Thornham 2007). The interview peaked when Mullins was asked to describe the most horrid details, forming the zenith of the spectacle. As viewers we knowingly wait for it in voyeuristic anticipation (Sue Thornham 2007). The flow of the dialogue, together with the editing strategies, suggest a gentle manipulation to encourage Mullins to say “anal sex” when she was clearly not comfortable doing so. A detailed analysis of public/watching rape is outside the scope of this paper, however, there is an acknowledged “cultural fixation on the figure of the violated woman”—it “provokes and horrifies, but also engages and fascinates” (Tanya Horeck 2004, 1).

Crucial to the argument about the contemporary FBC, and its maintenance, is the containment of Mullins’ emotional excess, which is the narrative thrust of the program in the second half. Once the zenith of the spectacle has passed, viewers are directed to focus on Mullins’ redemptive behaviour and to consider the difference she is making to other women. For example, Mullins’ sister appears eager to acknowledge how much she looks up to Mullins, “I am so proud of Saxon, and the strength

and courage she has shown” (ABC Four Corners [2018](#)), indicating the respect she has for her sister and how she has bravely handled herself—with strength, composure and compassion. According to Shani Orgad ([2009](#)) survivors are strong, brave and self-sufficient, and represent a “pertinent embodiment” of an individual’s ability to take control of their lives and overcome adversity. It is survivors rather than victims that are valued as “legitimate, desirable, and truthful modes of being” (Shani Orgad [2009](#), 150).

**Table 3: Interview Focus (Mullins)**

What Happened	Redemptive Narrative	Structural Change
81%	13%	5%

**Table 4: Classification of speech (Mullins)**

What Happened	Redemptive Narrative	Structural Change
<p>Related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• events of Mullin’s life leading up to the rape, the rape.</li> <li>• Speech not directly connected to structural change.</li> </ul>	<p>Related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how Mullins feels about events/circumstances etc.</li> <li>• how Mullins is feeling.</li> <li>• how brave/strong Mullins is.</li> <li>• how Mullins has/is recovered/recovering.</li> <li>• how awful it has been/is for Mullins.</li> </ul>	<p>Covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lawyers/experts advocating for consent laws in Australia to be more clearly defined, and/or explaining that the law is a blunt instrument and not the best mechanism for educating the community how to behave.</li> <li>• Mullins discussing enthusiastic consent.</li> </ul>

Four Corners even foregrounds Mullins admitting her guilt that the rape and trial had destroyed her attacker’s life, “there’s an inevitable bit of guilt, you know. I can’t help but feel I kind of destroyed someone’s life” (ABC Four Corners [2018](#)). This is followed immediately by a dramatic beat. An example of what Thornham ([2007](#), 109) describes as a juxtaposition of the “shared (masculine) political realm of rational discourse, and a privatized (feminine) sphere of personal responsibility, guilt and shame.” As a paragon neoliberal brave woman, Mullins is portrayed with strength of resolve—possibly even as an almost but not quite better person for this terrible thing having happened to her.

The last five minutes of the program focused solely on Mullin’s healing—the redemptive narrative. This is the narrative conclusion—that the subject is doing well; that they have recovered/are recovering and are doing good work now. In other words, that they embody a version of the ideal feminine subject. Horrified, entertained and titillated by Mullins’ pain and discomfort, the audience can now feel pleased that she has overcome; moved on; is in control of her sadness/despair/anger;

and channeling her disappointment in productive ways. This points to “the narrow terms on which women’s voices are heard” and critically, that “women [being] listened to is all too frequently conditional on the expression of trauma” (Jilly Boyce Kay [2020](#), 19). This approach potentially lets men who rape off the hook, it lets the government and patriarchy off the hook, but it also lets us—the audience—off the hook. Mollified viewers are not motivated to act. This is the way the mediation of women’s confessional speech pacifies our collective feminist hackles. So soothed, we are rendered impotent.

Mullins is acknowledged as having made an admirable choice in choosing a redemptive path. A path that, as Angela McRobbie ([2009](#)) explains, women are compelled to choose “in exchange for”, or “as a kind of substitute for” feminist political anger and action. This path is fundamental to understanding the way acknowledging feminine bravery functions as a form of reward. Had Mullins displayed unsocialized behaviours— anger, disappointment, or despair—she would not have received her “brave” reward because “angry women have been historically cast as hysterical and irrational” and therefore dismissed; rendered invisible (Kay et al. [2019](#), 605). Mullins can speak out because she presents a type of femininity that is palatable and does not challenge structures of power (Angela McRobbie [2009](#)). It is precisely this “denial of anger and pain that render neoliberal and popular feminisms so devoid of any meaningful political power.” (Kay et al. [2019](#), 607).

### *Rose McGowan*

This analysis demonstrates the way Rose McGowan ultimately had to embody the FBC to be accepted as an appropriate public activist by the media and the public. It examines what this containment, and this focus on McGowan’s version of public bravery, works to reinforce and to conceal.

### *Interview focus*

Using a feminist discourse analysis, twenty-five media appearances were analysed (n = 25). [Table 5](#) outlines the interview focus. 33% of the time was spent discussing “What Happened”, 18% focused on McGowan’s “Redemptive Narrative”, and 49% on “Structural Change”. [Table 6](#) details how speech was classified. The researchers were generous in how they classified speech about structural change. The goal was not to comment on/criticise McGowan’s politics/activist approach, just to classify speech.

**Table 5: Interview Focus (McGowan)**

What Happened	Redemptive Narrative	Structural Change
33%	18%	49%

In the context of the Mullins research, the results around interview focus are positive. McGowan is managing to speak to structural change. As with Mullin’s however, when structural change was discussed, McGowan’s whiteness was ignored. [Table 7](#) is an analysis of the occurrences when the interview ended discussing McGowan’s recovery/redemptive narrative (45%) versus the time the interview ended talking about structural change (41%). This was also a positive outcome. Although the focus at interview conclusion is skewed towards the redemptive narrative, McGowan concludes speaking to versions of structural change over a third of the time.

***McGowan’s obligatory containment***

The research also looked at the role the media played in McGowan’s obligatory containment—bringing her into line with public bravery’s expectations. As the Mullins research examined, composure and compassion in women are key indicators for a bravery reward. A rudimentary scale of 1–5 was used for each interview to assess McGowan’s levels of composure and compassion during each; the extreme ends of composure being the monstrous side of rage (1), and the opposite, calm and rational (some emotion is acceptable) (5). The extreme ends of compassion are open arrogance and dismissal of her perpetrator (i.e., no consideration of forgiveness) (1), while at the other end displaying extremely caring actions and speech (i.e., is outwardly focused and open to forgiving her perpetrator) (5). [Tables 8 and 9](#) explain how composure and compassion attributes were classified.

**Table 6: Classification of speech (McGowan)**

What Happened	Redemptive Narrative	Structural Change
<p>Related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• events of McGowan’s life, rape, various other life events/situations. Speech not directly connected to structural change. If any of this speech was then connected (however tenuously), the researchers classified it as structural change.</li> <li>• speech that provided interview context.</li> <li>• gossip/salacious/spectacular content/rape reenactment-related content</li> </ul>	<p>Related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how McGowan feels about events/circumstances, etc.</li> <li>• how McGowan is feeling.</li> <li>• how brave/strong McGowan is.</li> <li>• how McGowan has/is recovered/recovering.</li> <li>• how awful it has been/is for McGowan.</li> <li>• what a difficult life McGowan has had/had to overcome.</li> </ul>	<p>Covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to address rape culture by encouraging women to stand up for themselves/being strong/saying no to abuse.</li> <li>• McGowan’s 10% better activism.</li> <li>• Discussion regarding feminine and masculine constructs – about expectations of long hair for women/the Hollywood machine/harmful messages coming out of Hollywood etc.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McGowan defending her behaviour.</li> <li>• celebration speech (i.e., Weinstein arrest, release of book.)</li> </ul>		
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**Table 7: End of interview focus (McGowan)**

Redemptive Narrative	Structural Change
45%	41%

As an example of the shift in compassion, McGowan initially explains that she used the money from the Weinstein deal to try to buy a billboard to defame Weinstein, and then a year later she says that she used it for therapy and to donate to a rape crisis group. Her altered speech demonstrates increased levels of compassion. Early on McGowan repeated over and over how she does not care what people think, but in the more recent past, she is taking questions about forgiveness seriously. The interview sample was subsequently reduced to ten (Table 10), with fifteen excluded because they either repeat what has already been covered in her other appearances, the content was not directly relevant, or they were less than two minutes long.

**Table 8: Composure (McGowan)**

Low composure	High composure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bright/bold make-up/clothes</li> <li>• Awkward, intermittent ‘fake smile’ gesture</li> <li>• Expressive hand gestures.</li> <li>• Unfiltered speech/ cursing.</li> <li>• Rage on display.</li> <li>• McGowan not answering question(s) or purposefully redirects.</li> <li>• Tone McGowan uses to describe events/life.</li> <li>• Example of unfiltered/unmediated speech about hair: “You have to have long hair in Hollywood so men will want to <b>fuck you</b>, if they don’t want to <b>fuck you</b>, they’re not going to hire you”. (February 2018)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muted make-up and clothing</li> <li>• Awkward, intermittent ‘fake smile’ gesture absent.</li> <li>• Hands clasped underneath table/on lap.</li> <li>• Highly mediated speech (low tone, no cursing).</li> <li>• McGowan answers all questions (including inappropriate ones).</li> <li>• Example of mediated speech about hair: “When I was told directly that I had to have long hair otherwise the men in Hollywood wouldn’t want to <b>sleep with me</b>. If they didn’t want to <b>sleep with me</b> then they wouldn’t hire me.” (September 2018)</li> </ul>

**Table 9: Compassion (McGowan)**

Low compassion	High compassion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McGowan used ‘I’ more frequently than ‘we’ – indicative of inwardly oriented relations.</li> <li>• McGowan says she doesn’t care frequently.</li> <li>• Is sarcastic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• McGowan used ‘we’ more frequently than ‘I’ – indicative of outwardly oriented relations.</li> <li>• Demonstrates through speech that she is caring.</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little reflection; is angry.</li> <li>• Diverts the questioning away from how she is feeling.</li> <li>• Example of speech about ‘the deal’: “I love it when they say, she took a pay-out deal. I didn’t take a pay-out; I demanded a pay-out. It was my only way of saying fuck you I don’t want this; I don’t like this. And I tried <b>to buy a billboard but they didn’t go for ‘Harvey Weinstein is a Rapist’</b>. I am truly shocked”. (February 2018)</li> <li>• Example of speech about being caring: “I don’t care what you think”. (February 2018). “I don’t care what people say, please get that straight”. (February 2018)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to reflect on past behaviour.</li> <li>• Willingness to talk about how she is feeling/is recovering.</li> <li>• Willingness to take questions about forgiving Weinstein seriously.</li> <li>• Example of speech about ‘the deal’: “I asked for money so I could <b>go to therapy, and to donate it to a rape crisis group</b>”. In my young mind I thought \$100,000 was a lot of money.” (March 2019).</li> <li>• Example of speech about forgiveness: “Can you forgive him?”. “I don’t want to”. “Maybe I’ll get there someday” “It’s a process”. “The next real step in setting myself free”. (May 2018).</li> </ul>
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**Table 10: Key Interview Sample**

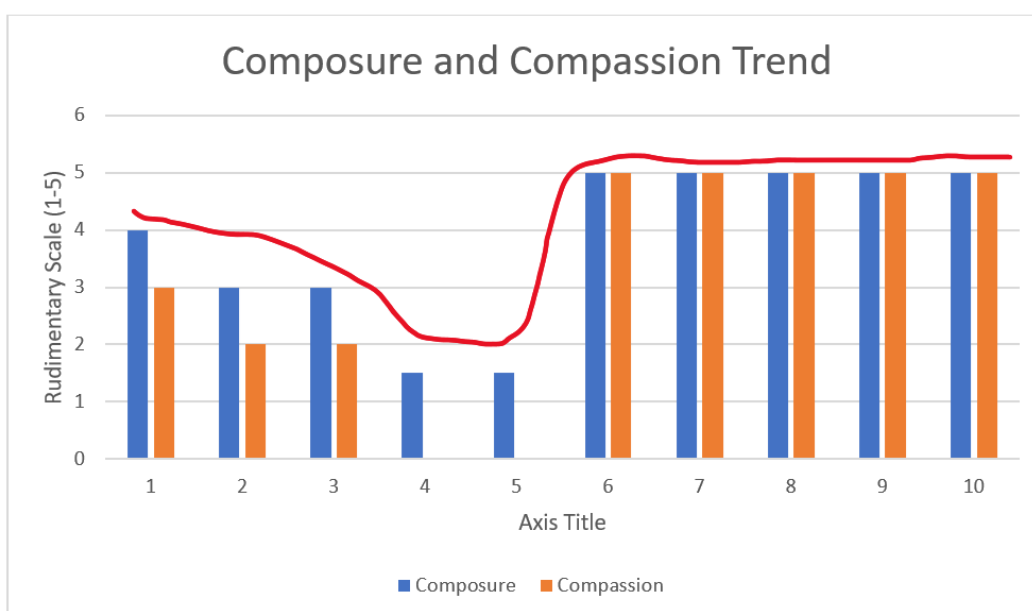
Code	Date	Platform	Media Format	Composure Score	Compassion Score	Total
1	1 Dec 2017	15th Hindustan Times Leadership Summit	Panel	4	3	7
2	30 Jan 2018	Good Morning America	Interview	3	2	4
3	31 Jan 2018	ABC Nightline	Interview	3	2	5
4	1 Feb 2018	Stephen Colbert	Interview	1.5	0	0
5	1 Feb 2018	Ronan Farrow	Interview	1.5	0	0
6	18 April 2018	Good Morning Britain	Interview	5	5	10
7	26 May 2018	Megan Kelley Today	Interview	5	5	10
8	26 May 2018	ABC Nightline	Interview	5	5	10
9	11-27 Aug 2018	Edinburgh Bookfest	Interview	5	5	10
10	6 March 2019	Channel 4 Britain	Interview	5	5	10

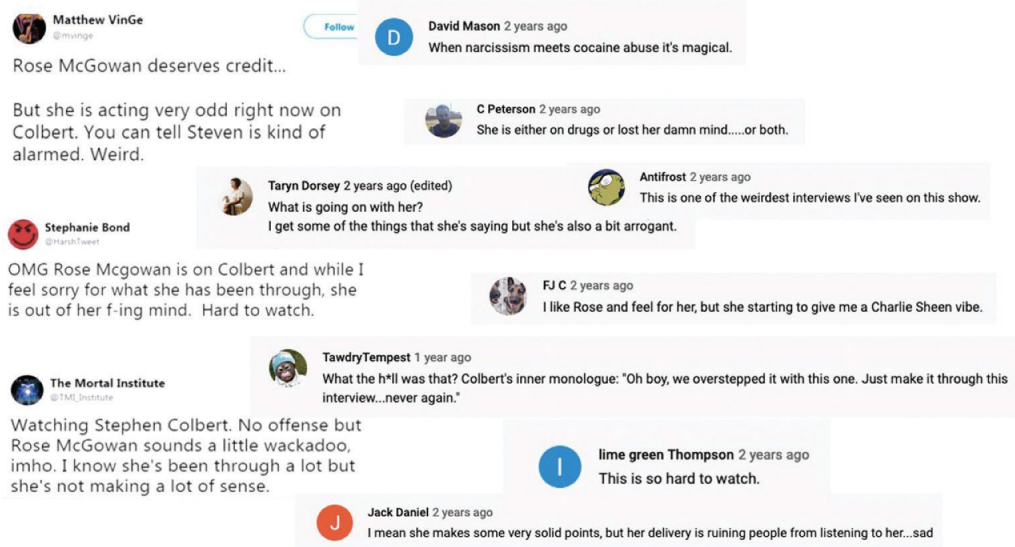
Chart 1 examines the trend. The first interview in the sample was the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit panel in December 2017 (just prior to McGowan’s book launch), where McGowan’s levels were stable, so “acceptable”. Once the book came out, McGowan had a couple of rough days with the media between 30 January-1 February. The Stephen Colbert and Ronan Farrow interviews are where McGowan’s subversive behaviour peaked, which is shown in the trough on the graph (interview 4 and 5). In these interviews McGowan was disorderly, and along the composure and compassion continuums she looked to be ‘out of control’. Our assessment, however, is that McGowan may have been attempting to control the discourse by redirecting the questions and sabotaging the behavioural expectations of compassion and victimhood with excessive, performative, nonsense talk (Kathleen Rowe [2007](#)). For example, in the Farrow interview, Farrow begins by asking, “how are you Rose, on a deeper level . . . how are you?”. McGowan deflects the question

with a long ramble about how her state of mind is comparable to the movies. Farrow jokes along with McGowan’s deflective speech but does not let her get away with it, and asks again, “but, it hasn’t all been easy since this broke. I remember you were texting me saying I walked out of a family dinner, and I am upset, and I am dragging my luggage behind me through the street. Tell me about adjusting to this new reality”? There is a deep, irritated breath from McGowan signalling that she is going to need to respond. She continues to try to deflect the question by telling him that she is crying a lot. It is rambling and uncontained—loose. She says, “It feels violent”, “degrading” “they lie, they lie”. McGowan’s return to structural patterns (“they lie”) works to undermine what Jilly Boyce Kay (2020, 41) argues is a perpetual focus on “individualised trauma narratives”, which can be highly limiting because they can “serve to deflect attention away from the structural causes of gender injustice that permit the profusion of sexual assault”.

After the Colbert and Farrow interviews McGowan experienced severe public backlash (Jilly Boyce Kay 2020, 6) [Figure 2](#). This commentary, largely online, must have influenced McGowan and her ultimate containment. It seems there was no choice if she wanted to continue to have a public voice. As Andersen (2021, 20) explores, “contained agency is most restrictive when people internalize oppression”. According to Sara Ahmed (2010a, 53), the “right” choice is typically the only choice for women, and it is typically “in relative proximity to the social ideal”. A path that, as Angela McRobbie (2009) explains, women are compelled to choose “in exchange for” feminist political anger and action. At this point McGowan disappeared from the public for a couple of months and resurfaced on Good Morning Britain quite changed (interview 6). The outrageous gestures and the disorderly behaviour are gone. This is when McGowan’s clothing and make-up become muted.

**Chart 1: Composure and Compassion Trend**





**Figure 2.** Selection of online “backlash” commentary screen grabbed from the online commentary accompanying the 2018 Colbert and Farrow interviews.

## Discussion and conclusions

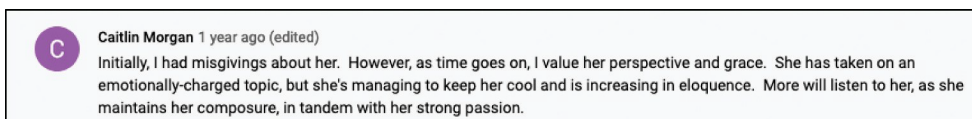
The research reveals that Four Corners used Saxon Mullins’ story to reinforce the ideal neoliberal feminine subject rather than as an opportunity to discuss intersectional structural change around sexual assault. I am that girl—and Destroy the Joint’s response to it—were selected because they reflect the pervasive nature of the FBC in the #MeToo moment. Obscured by contemporary ideals about empowerment and bravery, well-meaning programs such as this are the embodiment of Foucault’s “disciplinary control”. They are dangerous because they are hidden behind a veil of altruism and empowerment; highly manipulative in their application to, and advance of, deliverance and self-determination for women.

It was a difficult to criticise Four Corners and Destroy the Joint, when both do important feminist and justice work—but that we should be grateful for the conditions that neoliberal feminism offers women, resonates strongly with our personal conflict over what is transpiring in the #MeToo moment. While it is gratifying that women are coming forward and sharing their stories of abuse, and that there have been consequences for some perpetrators, we are full of rage and disappointment that in many, many instances, a persistent focus on individual expressions of white bravery are obfuscating the issues. Women are still not believed; BIPOC stories remain invisible; rape culture is not being challenged but continues to be reinforced; male victimisation is gaining traction (Jilly Boyce Kay [2020](#), 29); representations of rape still crowd our screens to violate women and titillate the public. In the context of sexual assault and #MeToo, overestimating the value of individual

expressions of white bravery distracts us from these all these things.

McGowan's journey over the period examined also assists us to understand how the FBC functions. Had McGowan continued to display unsocialized behaviours, she would not have lived up to the "brave" label because, as per Kay and Banet-Weiser (2019, 605), "angry women have been historically cast as hysterical and irrational" and therefore dismissed. Once McGowan presented as composed, compassionate and redeemed she had an easier time because she came into line with the expectations of feminine public bravery. Rage, erratic behaviours, lack of poise and compassion are still unacceptable behaviours for women. As Jilly Boyce Kay (2020, 7) explains, speaking out is a delicate "balancing act" impossible to achieve because, as she argues, "the conditions for its possibility do not yet exist". As Kay et al. (2019, 607) explain, it is precisely this "denial of anger" that "render neoliberal and popular feminisms so devoid of any meaningful political power." This online comment from 2020 powerfully illustrates this [Figure 3](#).

Despite the cost, McGowan is speaking to structural change to some extent, which seems like a positive outcome. However, as Jilly Boyce Kay (2020, 49) explains, we need to give anger a chance. In alignment with Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana L Cloud (2009, 224), "civility should not be advocated as a stance for feminists or others struggling for change." In publicly rewarding these women for their decorum—their brave, diminished anger—not only do we silence their rage, but we fail to "cede space" to the "knowing resistant anger" of other marginalised speakers (Emily Winderman 2019, 342; Audre Lorde 1997 [1981]). If only the brave "muted white rage" of privileged, conventionally beautiful, normatively-abled, CIS, white women is made visible by the media, what chance do marginalised rageful voices have (Emily Winderman 2019, 335)? It is deplorable that "the power of identity politics lies in media access and amplification" (Wendy Anderson 2021, 6) when that access is so limited.



**Figure 3.** Online comment from 2020 in response to transformation of McGowan's public profile.

### ***Further research***

Although it is outside the scope of this paper, the FBC does not function solely in sexual assault cases/narratives, or only in public narratives connected with #MeToo. The broader research suggests that this iteration of the FBC functions as a form of silencing for women across multiple contexts of adversity, but it is particularly visible in the #MeToo moment. The aim of this research is to

contribute to the existing literature as outlined above and to demonstrate the way the contemporary discourse for feminine bravery reinforces acceptable feminine redemptive behaviours and mediates women's speech to continue to silence them in the #MeToo moment.

More work is required on the brave characterization of BIPOC women and/or in different class contexts. As Jess Butler [2013](#) contends, BIPOC women are equally subjected to the demands of neoliberal, postfeminist feminism, but it “strictly regulates and polices the forms their participation may take”. Because BIPOC women often do not, or refuse to, conform to constrained forms of femininity, they are not granted agency in this regard (Jess Butler [2013](#)). According to Sara Ahmed [2010b](#), BIPOC anger is “attributed”. That is, BIPOC women are seen as already and always fearfully angry as compared to white women, who are allowed acceptable, contingent anger in response to unjust events. In recognising that there are dynamics of what the FBC might look like for BIPOC women; across different class contexts; and in non-English speaking contexts, the FBC is a potential lens to assist understand the dynamics of the brave, traumatised voice more broadly, and its ramifications for media portrayals of women's experiences of patriarchal violence.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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