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Comedy as Counter-narrative: Examining *Patriot Act* and its Reception

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Abstract

Comedy can convey political, economic or social commentary through humour. Yet, jokes in mainstream comedy have typically been made at the expense of marginalized communities by people of privileged social, economic, and racial standpoints. In recent decades, this has begun to change with comedians from racialized minority groups using stand-up comedy as a medium to combat negative stereotypes, represent their intersectional identities and experiences, as well as critique society. Yet, Muslim responses to Islamophobia or public responses to the representations of Muslim identities, particularly in comedy, has been a topic left relatively unexplored. This honours research thesis examines the political comedy show *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* alongside comments under the program's YouTube videos using critical discourse analysis. It incorporates theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality, orientalism, and hegemony to explore the discourses both the text and audience commentary reproduce, maintain, or challenge. Audience reception of the show varies from comments revealing a discomfort with the decentering of whiteness, comments maintaining Islamophobic discourses, negative and positive responses to Minhaj's representation of his intersectional identity, and comments indicating an acceptance of Minhaj's proposing of counter-hegemonic discourses. Thus, this thesis ultimately argues that Minhaj's work and portrayal of his identity as a Muslim, Indian American provides counter-narratives to Muslim stereotypes that are met with ambivalent audience reception, further indicating how he challenges negative public perceptions of Muslims in a North American society where Islamophobic sentiments are pervasive.

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Introduction

Comedy is not always designed purely to elicit laughter. It often possesses underlying messages and conveys political, economic, or social commentary through humour. Yet, the jokes and critiques have typically been made at the expense of marginalized communities by people of privileged social, economic, and racial standpoints (Hirji, 2009; Pérez, 2013, 2017). In recent decades, this has begun to change as comedians from racialized minority groups are using stand-up comedy as a medium to combat negative stereotypes, represent their identities and experiences, as well as critique society. Such comedians include Hasan Minhaj, a Muslim, American born-and-raised, ethnically Indian comedian.

Minhaj's early career began with small stand-up comedy shows around San Francisco and Los Angeles. In 2014 he joined the popular, satirical talk show *The Daily Show* as a correspondent, further augmenting his popularity. After a highly successful one-man stand-up comedy special, *Hasan Minhaj: Homecoming King*, about the immigrant (or child-of-immigrant) experience in the United States that premiered on Netflix in 2017, Minhaj signed on with the streaming platform for his own weekly comedy show in 2018. The comedy series, entitled *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*, is a six-season show that analyzes and explores the current socio-cultural, economic, and political landscape of the world, particularly focusing on the United States, through comedy and satire. The title itself produces a clever irony as it shares its name with the USA Patriot Act signed into law by President George W. Bush after 9/11. The Patriot Act was "designed to increase the surveillance and investigative powers of law enforcement agencies in the United States in an effort to combat terrorism" (Best & McDermott, 2007, p. 2). The law brought with it a myriad of concerns from citizens, including the fear of

certain people or groups being purposefully targeted by government suspicion and investigation (Best & McDermott, 2007).

It is interesting then that a show hosted by a Muslim American should share its name with a law introduced in the wake of 9/11 in a society becoming increasingly wary or fearful of Muslims. The promotional video for the series released by Netflix on their YouTube account plays on this naming similarity by showing Minhaj and his media (text messages and emails) being tracked by a government surveillance team who scoff at his intentions to create a show that "explores the modern cultural and geopolitical landscape through a comedic lens" (Netflix, 2018). One member of the team asks, "So, should we frame this guy for murder?" to which another replies, "I don't know. Let's wait and see if the show is any good" (Netflix, 2018). The promotional video simultaneously informs the audience what the show will be about, builds anticipation, and satirizes the law itself through this exaggerated portrayal.

The Patriot Act law further utilized the acronym "PATRIOT" to "cue Americans to consider patriotism when thinking about the Act" (Best & McDermott, 2007, p. 15), and encourage Americans to view it as necessary for their wellbeing, assuring them that allowing such surveillance is an act of patriotism to ensure the safety of the country. Thus, titling a show that critiques American society, politics, and economy (for the most part) the "*Patriot Act*" invokes the idea that instead of the American government surveilling Muslims out of patriotism, a Muslim is examining the government and the society in his own form of patriotism: a form that aims to raise awareness about certain issues, potentially correct misrepresentation, and educate through satire.

I initially began watching the show simply for entertainment and because, for once, the person making the jokes and commentary was someone from a similar background to mine:

South Asian, Muslim, and raised in a Western country. After paying closer attention to why I was watching the show, what the representation meant to me, and my reactions, I began to wonder how the greater public and American society is reacting to Minhaj's critiques, commentary and jokes, particularly considering the socio-political climate of the country and the increasingly negative representations surrounding Muslims. Thus, I arrived at my research topic for this thesis, seeking to answer the question: how are Muslim comedians and their works received in a society where xenophobia and Islamophobic sentiments, rhetoric or imagery has become prevalent? I answer this question through an analysis of audience responses to select episodes of *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* and argue that Minhaj's political comedic work and portrayal of his identity as a Muslim, Indian American provides counter-narratives to Muslim stereotypes that are met with ambivalent audience reception, further indicating how he challenges negative public perceptions of Muslims in a North American society where Islamophobic sentiments are pervasive.

Literature Review

Racial discrimination is a subject that has been studied across academic disciplines, drawing from the work of scholars such as bell hooks, Stuart Hall and Kimberlé Crenshaw. However, religious discrimination – as well as discrimination based on one's intersectional identities often involving both race and religion – has been a topic left relatively unexplored (Sheridan, 2006). Nevertheless, after the events of September 11th, 2001, there has been a surge in literature concerning discrimination against Muslims and individuals of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent in North America and Europe (Kaplan, 2006; Love, 2017; Sheridan, 2006). Such works have also examined the role of media in perpetuating discriminatory, anti-Muslim rhetoric and encouraging Islamophobia (Lean, 2012; Ogan, Willnat, Pennington, & Bashir, 2014).

Aside from this research, few studies are dedicated to exploring Muslim responses to Islamophobia or the representations of Muslim identities in media by Muslims themselves – particularly through the avenue of comedy (Ahmed, 2013; Amarasingam, 2010; Michael, 2011, 2018; Miles, 2015; Seja, 2011; Sills, 2017). This particular field of research tends to be embedded in a greater body of study regarding racism and its relation to jokes or humour – whether it be satirized or used as a means of further discrimination (Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016; Pérez, 2013, 2017; Weaver, 2011, 2013).

These studies ultimately focus on the content of jokes and comedians or comedic media productions themselves, touching only briefly on audience reception of such content in a society where Islamophobia has become prevalent. Thus, this chapter aims to examine the aforementioned literature – considering the history of anti-Muslim rhetoric, the sensitive topic of race and comedy in a supposedly "colour-blind era", as well as studies on Muslim representation

and identity in comedy – to offer a basic understanding of pre-existing academic bodies of work leading up to my analysis of audience reception as an important variable to draw into this sphere of study.

History of Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in North America Post-9/11

Islamophobia is a term that bundles together racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice; it is used most often to refer to "a dread or hatred of Islam and therefore a fear or dislike of Muslims" (Sheridan, 2006, p. 317). The term is first documented to have emerged in public discourse about a decade prior to the events of 9/11 (Sheridan, 2006); however, anti-Muslim or anti-Middle Eastern sentiments and depictions of them as dangerous existed long before the term's usage (Lean, 2012; Love, 2017; Ogan et al., 2014). Edward Saïd's (1979) concept of Orientalism, for example, is based on a historical account of this dynamic where Middle Eastern cultures have been explicitly "Othered" by the West. Other key points in history prior to 9/11 include the oil crisis in the 1970s – where Muslim media representations involved the image of the "treacherous 'oil sheiks'" where "the duplicitous Arab served as a scapegoat for Americans upset by economic recession and high gasoline prices" (Love, 2017, pp. 86-87) – the Iranian Revolution and Iran hostage crisis in 1979 (Lean, 2012; Love, 2017; Ogan et al., 2014), as well as several terrorist attacks around the world in the 1980s (Love, 2017).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked an important shift in the public language surrounding Middle Eastern representation in media from the conniving "oil sheikh" to "terrorist" (Love, 2017). During the revolution, the American embassy in Tehran was seized whilst staff were held as hostages for fourteen months – all of which was broadcast on daily news television. In addition, war broke out between Iran and Iraq nine months after the revolution in which the United States sided with Iraq (Lean, 2012). To add on to these political

developments, various terrorist attacks occurred in the 1980s (including destruction of the American embassy in Lebanon, airplane bombings, and hijacking of American cruise ships). Love (2017) maintains that although "terrorist attacks were carried out by all kinds of militants throughout the 1970s and 1980s, […] attacks by Middle Easterners attracted perhaps the most sustained attention in the United States" (p. 87), which led to persistent negative stereotyping of Middle Easterners in not just news media but also popular culture. Anti-Muslim sentiments became pervasive enough that when a terror attack destroying the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City occurred, "professional analysts, investigators, and journalists immediately assumed that the attack must have been carried out 'by Arabs.' [When] in reality, the perpetrators were White, Christian, and American." (Love, 2017, p. 88). Thus, when the catastrophic events of 9/11 occurred, the large-scale tragic event and its surrounding media coverage amplified such sentiments.

To exemplify the extent to which 9/11 impacted the development of Islamophobia, many studies have been done to not only analyze popular media or news coverage and its role in fearmongering (Lean, 2012; Ogan et al., 2014), but also the experiences of hate crimes perpetuated toward Muslims in European countries and America (Kaplan, 2006; Sheridan, 2006). A study done with a sample size of 222 British Muslims found that "levels of implicit or indirect discrimination rose by 82.6% and experiences of overt discrimination by 76.3%" after September 11, 2001 (Sherdian, 2006, p. 317). Moreover, "since 2002, there have been a persistently high number of hate crimes affecting Middle Eastern Americans – at least one hundred reports per year, compared to fewer than fifty per year before 9/11" (Love, 2017, p. 90). Another study examining public opinions regarding Islam found that "unfavorable opinions toward Muslims […] increased in the United States between 2004 and 2008" (Ogan et al., 2014, p. 37), due to

certain proliferating images or stories, supporting the researchers' hypothesis that media exposure to Muslim-related issues has an impact on public attitudes towards Muslims and their religion.

Although several of these studies focus on the years immediately following 9/11, Islamophobia persists, and anti-Muslim rhetoric as well as hate-crime have not disappeared. Particularly notable recent examples of hate-crime include the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shooting in 2019 done by a white man motivated by irrational hatred and ignorant misconceptions (Rahman, 2020). The development of this irrational fear and hatred is in part due to mass media depictions and rhetoric surrounding Muslims, something Lean (2012) terms "the Islamophobia industry", where "the Islamic threat has been seized upon by a cadre of individuals – an industry of Islamophobia – that use lurid imagery, emotive language, charged stereotypes, and repetition, to exacerbate fears of a larger-than-life, ever-lurking Muslim presence" (pp. 39-40). An example Lean (2012) offers is that of Fox News, an American television station that he argues:

> has been, for the better part of the last decade, at the heart of the public scaremongering about Islam, and has recently [as of 2012] become the home for a slew of right-wing activists who regularly inhabit its airwaves to distort the truth to push stereotypes about Muslims. (p. 66)

It is important to note that Lean (2012) is writing prior to the 2016 presidential election after which the right-wing sentiments on Fox News inevitably grew alongside the presidency of Donald Trump, including in support of his intentions to institute a ban on Muslim immigration (Lloyd, 2016).

The aforementioned literature demonstrates the historical progression of Islamophobia and touches on the role of media in proliferating such messages. It also uses quantitative and qualitative research to illustrate how such media images and rhetoric have influenced the Muslim communities in Western countries as well as their role in shaping public opinions. Although these works focus on the negative results of media coverage, which greatly outweigh positive outcomes, some acknowledge that due to the events of 9/11, "one of America's least visible minorities was now making important inroads into the American public consciousness for the first time" (Kaplan, 2006, p. 9). Yet few scholars focus on counteractivity in media that aims to educate the public on this historically "least visible minority" or counter the negative stereotypes. The study by Sheridan (2006) cites information obtained by a telephone poll in the UK in 2002 that found "69% of Muslim interviewees said that they felt excluded from mainstream British society, and 41% believed that their own communities should do more to aid integration" (p. 318). As such, much of the work on exploring how members of the Muslim community engage with media to aid integration of Muslims in Western society, improve public image and thwart negative stereotyping still needs to be done.

Race and Comedy

The involvement of race in comedy has existed for a long time, with some early forms ranging from theatrical performances, including blackface minstrel shows, to older radio or television programs that drew on explicit racial stereotyping as a source of humour. These early and overt forms are not as common today; yet, they have become precursors to contemporary forms of comedy with relatively implicit but existing racist undertones (Hirji, 2009; Pérez, 2013, 2017). Several scholars maintain that humour today can incorporate racism, stereotypes, or racist discourse in ways that are deemed acceptable on the basis of being simple 'jokes' with a lack of

seriousness or intent of harm (Hirji, 2009; Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016; Pérez, 2017; Weaver, 2011, 2013). In an ethnographic study by Raúl Pérez (2013) on the training of stand-up comedians, it was found that "comics make racist discourse palatable by learning to employ certain strategies of talk which are intended to circumvent the current 'constraints' on racial discourse in public" (p. 479). These constraints on racial discourse arise from the perception of modern society as existing in a post-racial, 'colour-blind' era in which all forms of racism are not tolerated and where people often assert that they "do not see race" or "race no longer matters"; this may seem ideal at first but can prove to be problematic (Blum, 2002; Pérez, 2013, 2017).

Blum (2002) asserts that the insistence of colour-blindness can be problematic in teaching and educational institutions, for instance, where it may prevent instructors from servicing students of different backgrounds effectively if they ignore factors such as race. Colour-blindness can also encourage society to disregard the existing structures that maintain inequity and prohibit equal access to certain resources, facilities, or opportunities, further indicating an "unwillingness to believe that racism continues to exist and negatively impact the 'life chances' of racial and ethnic minorities" (Pérez, 2013, p. 480). Moreover, in a society where overt racist discourse is taboo, "individuals may be more compelled to indulge in the 'forbidden fruit' of racism, in an ostensibly post-racial society, via 'fun' and 'humor' to circumvent perceived constraints on racist discourse" (Pérez, 2017, p. 957). Circumventing these "constraints" through comedy, like older versions of overt racist humour, aims to maintain dominant systems of oppression, superiority, and power (Hirji, 2009; Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016; Pérez, 2013, 2017; Weaver, 2011). Such humour further reinforces racism by raising the tolerance for discrimination (Weaver, 2013) and Othering racialized minorities through inferiorization with ridicule, or exclusion (Weaver, 2011), allowing it to be used "as a mechanism for fostering social

cohesion among whites at the expense of nonwhites [*sic*] in [Western countries like] the United States" (Pérez, 2017, p. 957). This is, in part, accomplished by comedy functioning within three significant theories of humour: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity.

Superiority theory is key in reproducing hegemonic ideals of power, as its main function is to dominate others commonly through ridicule (Pérez, 2013). A joke that employs superiority theory places the joke-teller in a position of superiority for being able to tell the joke, while also offering the audience a sense of superiority via their ability to laugh at the subject of the joke. Thus, by contrast, the subject becomes placed in an inferior position. Relief theory operates differently as it aims to release social anxieties or tensions through humour. This may be done by demeaning and belittling the Other to make them appear less intimidating; however, scholars maintain that relief theory can also be used to deescalate racial conflict as "during the civil rights period [such conflict] was eased in part by comedians of color who appealed to white audiences as they sought to challenge racial inequality with their wit" (Pérez, 2013, p. 481). Relief theory can also contradict certain humour that aims to exclude the Other by painting them as a threat that must either be destroyed, eradicated, or segregated to ensure the safety – and the supremacy – of the dominant group (Weaver, 2011). Finally, incongruity theory contrasts supposedly incompatible ideas to comedic effect due to the glaring juxtaposition and can be used to further enhance disparities between certain groups (Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016; Pérez, 2013; Weaver, 2011, 2013). An example of this is the contrasting of Black stereotypes with whiteness in ways that reinforce white centrality or superiority. This further entrenches such stereotypes because "when audience members laugh at humour derived from a racialized parody, they validate any stereotypes embedded within" (Hirji, 2009, p. 570). In Weaver's (2013) analysis of anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic jokes online, incongruity was also observed in scenarios where the

punchline of a joke starkly contrasts with the buildup for comedic effect, resulting in what he calls "semantic alienation," in which, "The incongruities developed in comic meaning will often wrench definitions of self and group identity away from their referent and realign them in a ridiculous and alienating manner" (p. 486). This further reinforces a disparity between majority and minority groups, sustains white supremacy, and perpetuates exclusion based on race or religion.

The majority of these studies focus on how comedy (as well as the three theories of humour) is utilized by dominant groups in society to maintain their status whilst further subordinating racialized minorities. However, several authors touch on how racialized communities or people of colour can engage with comedy and race differently as a form of protest or in an effort to change public perception and contest subjugation as well as stereotyping (Hirji, 2009; Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016; Pérez, 2013, 2017), particularly in the context of Black Americans during (and after) the civil rights period for instance. Faiza Hirji (2009) also discusses the work of Canadian-South Asian comedian Russell Peters, whose jokes often tend to be based in race. She explores how his "techniques can validate racist assumptions but may also diminish them by bringing them into the open" (Hirji, 2009, p. 567) – indicating the fine line a comedian of colour may walk between countering racism or reinforcing racist stereotypes. She concludes her work with the assertion that such comedy, as difficult as it may be to tread carefully with, can broaden the space for discussions regarding race.

Nevertheless, Pérez's (2013) ethnographic study on stand-up comedian training demonstrates how while white students are taught to deny racism while engaging in overt racial commentary, comedians of colour are often "encouraged to engage in racial stereotypes uncritically", which is a performance strategy that further reflects "the position in the 'racial

hierarchy' of the performer" (p. 487). Here, the white performer holds a higher position in the racial hierarchy that forces them to tread carefully when engaging in racist humour through certain strategies such as distance and disclaimer mechanisms that try to detach the speaker from what they are saying (Pérez, 2013). This mechanism operates along the lines of acknowledging that the joke may be overtly racist, but the comedian vehemently tries to save face by asserting that they themselves are not racist. The performer of colour, on the other hand, occupies an inferior position where they are encouraged to use their race as a key selling point in their comedy. These "race-based jokes 'reinforce hierarchically structured racial differences,' which are less likely to be critically challenged when veiled through humor" (Park et al., 2006 as quoted in Pérez, 2013, p. 484). Moreover, when comparing the experiences of performers of colour to white comedians, it was also found that there is a "tension […] between performing to the audience's 'expectations' from a performer of color and the desire to 'get away' from racial stereotypes [which] is not one white performers have to face" (Pérez, 2013, p. 497). These findings suggest it is difficult to escape the negative effects of racialized comedy and indicate that productively engaging in racial discourse through humour to counteract racism is a scarce as well as challenging practice. As "race-based humor walks a fine line between challenging racial inequality and strengthening hegemonic notions of race" (Pérez, 2013, p. 482), comedians of colour in particular may struggle with producing jokes that effectively satirize and critique racist assumptions, instead of further perpetuating them in a society that upholds the myth of colour-blindness.

Muslim Identity, Humour and Comedy

In addition to Muslims being represented in (particularly news) media as terrorists, other related representations also reinforce certain key stereotypes. For instance, the image of a

bearded, dark-eyed, turbaned man who lacks civility – a highly gendered stereotype – connects Muslim identity to violence and barbarism to strengthen the association between what "looks like" a Muslim and terrorism (Michael, 2011; Weaver, 2013). Such imagery constructs the Muslim "as an active 'Other' or threat to Western society" (Weaver, 2013, p. 496). Moreover, the hegemonic narrative of Muslims as humourless extremists is also key in supporting these representations (Miles, 2015).

These sorts of depictions construe Muslims or Islam as antithetical to Americanism and Western values. A dichotomous binary is created, for example, with regard to humour, where the funny white man occupies one end of the binary and the Muslim (man) who 'cannot take a joke', the other (Miles, 2015). Furthermore, humour is "often seen as a signifier of intelligence" (Miles, 2015, p. 169); thus, by corollary, if Muslims are humourless then they are also implied to be unintelligent, lacking clever cheek and wit, which are seen as appealing qualities that help build friendships or relationships. According to Tim Miles (2015), the ability to 'take a joke' and be humourous is also perceived as a marker of perspective, particularly in Britain, where since one is able to 'see the funny side' they are deemed more open-minded and less likely to have extremist views. Therefore, "to claim that Muslims lack a sense of humour and cannot take a joke is to claim that they are unintelligent, un-English, lack perspective, and are not worthy of friendship" (Miles, 2015, p. 170), further supporting the stereotype that Muslims are violent and irrational. In the American context, Michael (2011) concurs that such stereotypes also serve to Other Muslims where a "contemporary fascination with American Muslims wonders how they can be patriotic citizens and believers in Islam at the same time" (p. 129). Michael (2011) further discusses how these representations lead to apologist attitudes where individuals try to defend or

apologize for their religion and on behalf of a small, yet loud, group taken to be wrongly representative of their religion.

Additionally, representing Muslims or the religion of Islam as oppositional to American or European values further complicates or distorts concepts of identity and national belonging (Ahmed, 2013; Michael, 2011, 2018). In some cases, in addition to apologist attitudes, it can lead to American Muslims trying to conceal their Muslim identities in public spaces by "altering patterns of observable 'Muslim' behavior such as dress or speech" (Miles, 2015, p. 144), or by the shortening of Arabic names to make them sound more English. This further facilitates exclusionary sentiments not only among non-Muslims but also internalizes them within the community, leading to an avoidance of confronting or potentially counteracting dominant stereotypes.

The normalizing and justification of exclusion is part of the eight characteristics of Islamophobia suggested by a think tank on racial inequality cited by Miles (2015). These characteristics are part of what inform stereotypical representations of Muslims and include the viewing of Islam as inferior to the West, primitive, irrational, sexist, violent, and a threatening political (or military) ideology instead of a religion (Miles, 2015). Following these statements, the sixth characteristic outlined asserts, "Criticisms of the West, made by Muslims, are rejected out of hand", followed by the seventh and eighth that maintain, "Hostility towards Islam is used to discriminate against Muslims and to justify the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society" and "Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal", respectively (Miles, 2015, p. 171). These characteristics of Islamophobia lead to the reproduction of narratives of domination (the West must defeat the Muslim threat), demonization (they are barbaric and not fully human,

so hatred feels justified), and ethnocentricity (they do not appreciate Western values like humor), further reinforcing the dichotomy (Miles, 2015).

However, multiple studies find that not all Muslims confine themselves to these representations, nor do they all resort to apologist attitudes or a concealment of identity (Ahmed, 2013; Michael, 2011, 2018; Miles, 2015; Sills, 2017; Seja, 2011). Many use entertainment media and comedy as an effort to reclaim space and control representation. In an examination of Muslim online comedy, Miles (2015) finds that humour can be used to propose counter-narratives to Islamophobic representations by analyzing and comparing a broadcast television situational comedy with several Internet series. Miles (2015) defines 'counter-narrative' as "anything that opposes hegemonic representations" or narratives, quoting Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren and Peters (1997) who describe those narratives as "those legitimising stories propagated for specific political purposes to manipulate public consciousness by heralding a national set of common ideals" (p. 168). In this case, these narratives coincide with the aforementioned characteristics of Islamophobia that aim to establish Islam as oppositional to what are deemed "national, common ideals".

Yet, Miles' (2015) analysis of the British television situational comedy *Citizen Khan* demonstrates that not all comedy may be effective in its aim to counter such narratives, arguing that the show reinforces certain Islamophobic stereotypes. Ahmed's (2013) study of the same show concurs with this assertion, further maintaining, "not only does *Citizen Khan* propagate troubling discourses on British Muslim identity, but is also wildly out of touch with the reality of the British Muslim experience" (p. 92). Ahmed (2013) argues that the show often recycles anti-Semitic tropes into Islamophobic tropes of which the show's leading character, Mr. Khan, is a prime example as he is "portrayed as cheap, patriarchal, idiotic and passively racist" (p. 91) with

misplaced allegiance and no attachment to Britain or its values. This representation of confused values reiterates a "British Muslim identity that clashes with 'British' values such as freedom, liberty and choice" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 93). Moreover, when Muslim audiences displayed negative reactions to the show, they were undermined, told to 'lighten up' and described as "not British enough" by individuals conflating "informed criticism with reactionary offence" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 95), further solidifying the stereotype of the humourless Muslim.

In addition to attempts at producing counter-narratives that may themselves sink into stereotype reinforcement, other works explore the tension between representations of Muslims as terrorists or as victims (Seja, 2011). Nina Seja's (2011) study on the politics of the terrorist/victim narrative looks at how "comedy firstly creates proximity to the 'terrorist' figure […] and by doing so raises important questions about anxiety and ethnic difference in the US post-9/11, and the ownership of the status of victim in this climate" (p. 228). However, when drawing Muslims into narratives of victimhood through comedy, one must keep certain limitations and ethics in mind. For example, there is "the 'overuse of icons of atrocity' – producing an 'aura of horror' that does not provide specific knowledge about the event being represented" (Seja, 2011, p. 230). Here, what is represented may skew reality, potentially misinform, or lead to numbness and compassion fatigue, especially when concerning the distant suffering of the Other (Seja, 2011).

Nonetheless, Seja (2011) argues that humour negotiating the terrorist versus victim narrative can lead to emerging discourses encouraging audiences to be active in the politics of looking and how they view Muslims. She posits that it "is the strength of media […] to bring the suffering of the Other closer and ask us to think about victimhood of the Other in question" (Seja, 2011, p. 230). Instead of simply sympathising with the suffering of the Other, how can comedy that uses

ideas of victimhood ask the audience to re-evaluate their own assumptions about the Other and their world? Used this way, comedy can then "offer productive criticism of controversial political topics and perhaps offer a cathartic release from anxieties about terrorism" (Seja, 2011, p. 232). Other scholars echo Seja's (2011) perspectives on the potential of comedy to being used by Muslims as an effective counter-narrative, a reclamation of space, and a way to contest stereotypes (Ahmed, 2013; Amarasingam, 2010; Michael, 2011, 2018; Miles, 2015; Sills, 2017; Warren, 2009).

For example, Miles (2015) compares *Citizen Khan* to several British internet series, including one titled *Halal in the Family*, that effectively counter notions of Otherness with the comic form instead of highlighting negative stereotypical representations and using them as a source for comedic value. Ahmed (2013) mentions British Muslim comedian Imran Yusuf who, unlike *Citizen Khan*'s confusing portrayals of identity that imply Islam is fundamentally incongruous with British values, "highlights the fluid nature of identity, his own sense of belonging to London, and the stereotypes others hold about migrant identities and origins" (p. 92); thus, effectively establishing a more nuanced British Muslim identity that challenges stereotypes. In the American context, Michael (2011) studies how comedians "use humor to boldly challenge widely held social assumptions of Muslim America" (p. 130) and discusses the usage of humour to educate, influence public opinion, and negotiate or correct misinformed understandings that distort Muslim American identity. She argues that public comedic spaces also serve as "important sites for observers of social life to index the cultural integration of minorities" (Michael, 2011, p. 131). As such, if this cultural integration is in the hands of minorities themselves, they can control how they, or their communities, are incorporated into a greater American framework, as well as the types of representations that are put forth regarding them.

Amarasingam (2010) also explores the role of Muslim stand up comedians in post-9/11 America. His work examines how these comedians are "breaking down cultural barriers, promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as tackling the misperceptions about Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States" (Amarasingam, 2010, p. 463). These scholars indicate how Muslim comedians can satirically challenge hegemonic "common sense" and negative stereotypes by using their craft as a way of social activism (Amarasingam, 2010). There are several methods by which comedians can accomplish this, one of which is by using the three theories of humour and how they work differently when employed by a visible minority or person of colour. According to Michael (2011), "When used by subordinate social groups, superiority humor provides an imagined role reversal that is a vehicle for their resistance in the face of social oppression" (p. 137). By reversing the prevailing understandings of superiority-inferiority relations, subordinate groups can decenter hegemony and contest the dominant narratives. With relief theory, comedians can relieve social tensions and mitigate the threatening imagery surrounding the Muslim while also promoting psychological bonding and social cohesion within the group through shared laughter – whether this be with other Muslims, or non-Muslim Americans (Michael, 2011; Warren, 2009). Sills (2017) also maintains that "comedy is a force often used to rhetorically dampen fear", and therefore "assure others (and the self) that something perceived to be a danger is in fact safe or illusory" (p. 162). Finally, in terms of incongruity humour, Michael (2011) recounts Henri Bergson's (1911) observations that "incongruous laughter first requires a 'social signification' that is shared among the group that is then called into question by humor that compares it with an inconsistent or illogical image" (p. 138). Muslim comedians can use this method to effectively satirize and counteract stereotypes by depicting them as illogical. This can be done through a process of re-signification in which the

comedian redefines an idea or reassigns meanings to contestable imagery (like the notion of Muslims as violent) through subversive performances that suggests otherwise (Michael, 2011).

Both Michael (2011) and Amarasingam (2010) examine the work of a diverse range of Muslim American comedians including male, female, and those of Arab, South Asian, or African backgrounds to support these ideas. In a later piece, Michael (2018) discusses some of the earlier work of Hasan Minhaj prior to *Patriot Act*, the focus of this thesis, in which she asserts how he too "often reports on developments that affect Muslim communities using comic strategies of exaggeration and inversion to reveal the dubious premises of anti-Muslim bias and disrupt discourses meant to dehumanize and disempower Muslims" (p. 63). In this earlier stand-up comedy special titled *Homecoming King* (2017), Minhaj focuses on his lived experiences and "what it means to be South Asian and Muslim in America today" (Michael, 2018, p. 62). Michael (2018) argues that comedians like Minhaj with this work "remind us how important publicly performed humor is as a window on discourse about being and belonging in America, as their work exposes audiences to the diverse representations of Muslim lives" (p. 66). She comments on the power of these comedians to use humour to potentially hold America accountable for how it treats, misrepresents, and excludes its Muslim citizens, whilst reclaiming space and opening a window on discourse about national belonging (Michael, 2018).

Ultimately, these scholars demonstrate how Muslim comedians, through the very act of participating in their craft, contest one of the major stereotypes discussed earlier: the humourless Muslim. For example, the inclusion of outtakes at the end of episodes of *Halal in the Family*, demonstrate how on top of being a comedy, the show's "actors can laugh at their own mistakes, thus challenging the 'Muslim's can't laugh at themselves' narrative" (Miles, 2015, p. 174). Comedians who draw on personal anecdotes and represent them in a comedic light do the same.

Moreover, as comedy is seen as a quintessentially American cultural activity, Muslim comedians successfully participating in it on behalf of their communities counteracts the perceived incompatibility of Islam with Western values such as humour or intelligence (Amarasingam, 2010). Finally, "standup [*sic*] comedians can be thought of as cultural anthropologists who 'pattern their comic material close to everyday reality, making obvious behavioral patterns, explicit and tacit operating knowledge and other insights about American society objects of conscious reflection'" (Koziski, 1984 as quoted in Amarasingam, 2010, p. 470). This can establish comedy as a method of non-violent resistance to oppression and a response to racist assumptions or stereotypes.

These scholars speak to the potential of comedy and Muslim comedians to articulate counter-narratives, develop sympathy, as well as establish accurate understandings of Muslim representation and identity in North America or Britain. However, their examinations focus on the content as well as the comedians themselves. Miles (2015) concludes his study with how "it remains to be seen the extent to which comedy can change prejudicial attitudes to[wards one of the] currently most demonised group[s] in the West" (p. 176). In order to gauge these changes as well as ascertain whether or not (as well as to what extent) counter-narratives are effectively achieved, the role of the audience and public reception must also be taken into account alongside the comedian and their content. This thesis will expand the existent scholarship by drawing audience perception into the discussion, looking particularly at Muslim American comedian Hasan Minhaj's *Patriot Act* and how it not only serves as a counter-narrative to the humourless Muslim stereotype, but also challenges the characteristics of Islamophobia such as the assertion that Muslims cannot make criticisms of the West, by virtue of it being a political comedy that aims to educate, establish his identity, and offer positive representation.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a concept employed by a body of scholars and activists to study the relationships between race, racism, and power. Critical race theorists aim to understand how race is constructed, its role in society, how racially informed relations play out culturally, politically or socio-economically, the development of racism, and how experiences informed by one's given race influence their identities. According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017), critical race theory has branched off and expanded over the years to include various diverse groups that have developed their own bodies of literature under CRT and their own sets of priorities like "scholars of Middle Eastern and South Asian background [who] address discrimination against their groups, especially in the aftermath of 9/11" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 4). Such scholars examine racial and religious prejudice as well as its role in communicating power.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) list six main tenets of critical race theory: racism as ordinary, interest convergence, social construction of race, differential racism, intersectionality, and unique voices of colour. The latter three are particularly pertinent to this research thesis. Differential racism examines "the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 10). This shift in racialization is seen in how Muslims moved from being exotic folks from the East with foreign but harmless practices to treacherous "oil sheiks", to being seen as terrorist threats to national security in response to shifting economic or political needs. The notion of unique voices of colour posits that "due to experiences with racism, minorities have a perspective that is markedly different than Whites and racial truth emanates from this standpoint" (Cabrera, 2018, p. 212). It

holds that a minority status "brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism", communicating to their white counterparts matters they are unlikely to know (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 11). Comedians of colour are able to employ this unique voice to discuss as well as represent matters of race, racism and identity through humour to audiences of different races, statuses and privileges, thereby communicating racial truths from their standpoint that audiences then react to.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a key tenet of critical race theory. It asserts that "[n]o person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity", and "everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 10-11). Aside from race, one's identity includes gender, sexual orientation, religion, political alignment, economic status, and so forth. Comedians like Hasan Minhaj can express experiences or potential conflicts of identity by incorporating ideas of their ethnic background (Indian), religion (Muslim) and citizenship (American) into their comedy, something that will be further analyzed and explored in this thesis. This public expression through humour before an audience further builds on their use of a unique voice of colour to express their intersecting identities and racial truths.

Intersectionality examines how various combinations of identifiers inform different experiences, interact under varying circumstances, and "shape complex social inequalities" as reciprocally constructing phenomena (Collins , 2014, p. 2). In her article "Mapping the Margins" Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), known as the scholar who coined the term "intersectionality", explores the experiences of women of colour who "are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism", asserting that "these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism" (pp. 1243-1244). Similarly, as

highlighted in the literature review, stereotypes surrounding Muslims that inform their experiences with racism are the products of intersecting identifiers including race (whether they look Middle Eastern or South Asian and fit the racialized imagery), religion, and gender (where Muslim men are particularly targeted with highly gendered stereotypes differently than Muslim women). Moreover, these experiences are often discussed simply under discourses of racism against Muslims as a general group (Lean, 2012; Love, 2017; Miles, 2015), with occasional focus on the experiences of Muslim men, women, Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds, or white converts to the religion. In addition, if one is born in a Western country, was raised there, and holds that citizenship, political loyalty or national allegiances can also become potentially conflicting intersecting aspects of one's identity – especially if it is a person whose status as Muslim stereotypically establishes them as having antithetical values to that of their birth country.

Orientalism

Literary critic Edward Saïd (1979) coined the term "Orientalism", a critical concept that describes the stereotypical depictions, representations, or imitations of the East (the "Orient") by the West (the "Occident") by which the East is established as an exotic, uncivilized, backwards Other. In his work, the Orient refers to the Levant region (the Middle East), the lands east of Europe, including the Mediterranean Arab countries, North African Arab countries, and a brief mention of South Asian countries (like Afghanistan and India), instead of more contemporary understandings that include the far East (China, Japan, Korea) and Southeast Asia. The Occident, on the other hand, primarily concerns European regions (especially France and Britain) instead of extending to America, as the Orient has a "special place in European Western experience" and is "the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies […] and one of its deepest and

most recurring images of the Other" (Saïd, 1979, p. 1). Saïd maintains that the Orient and

Occident are social constructs rooted in geographical and sociocultural distinction "where the

Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality,

experience" (pp. 1-2). Borrowing from Foucauldian ideas, Saïd asserts that the development of

this distinction through Orientalist discourse results in a systematic disciplining, domination, and

restructuring of the Orient by European cultures, allowing them to gain strength and identity. The

work of cultural hegemony results in the "reiterating [of] European superiority over Oriental

backwardness" (Saïd, 1979, p. 7).

Imaginings of dangerous, backward, and barbaric Orientals were "based more or less

exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an

Oriental world emerged" (Saïd, 1979, p. 8). These themes and images, as demonstrated in the

literature review, have developed over time in the West based on shifting needs but still carry

similar discourses of superiority, centrality, and efforts to strengthen Western identity by

Othering. Moreover, Orientalizing does not occur rigidly within an established constant, but

depends on flexible positional superiority "which puts the Westerner in a whole series of

possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand […] because he

could be there, or could think about [the Orient], with very little resistance on the Orient's part"

(Saïd, 1979, p. 7, emphasis in original). However, with the work of comedians of colour

operating in the West, the upper hand has the potential to shift as the person resists the

Westerners efforts of Orientalizing using humour to challenge the discourse.

Decentering Whiteness

Similar to the work of Orientalizing in establishing the West as normal and superior in

comparison to the East, media scholar Raka Shome (2000) describes how in contemporary

sociocultural rhetoric, a process of white self-identification takes place allowing for the re-centering, reproducing, and securing of whiteness through the establishing of an Other. She further maintains that "race scholarship usually tends to study the 'other' (the non-whites) and in so doing leaves the 'norm' (whiteness) intact and free of any critical scrutiny" (Shome, 2000, p. 366). This lack of critical scrutiny can be tackled by comedians of colour who draw their experiences with racism into light and criticize whiteness through humour, thus disallowing it from recentering or reproducing itself. A processing of decentring Whiteness would be one where it cannot be "maintained […] by its 'everydayness,' by the everyday, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity" (Shome, 2000, p. 366). When the "seeming normativity" is questioned (or even laughed at), the "everydayness" struggles to maintain itself and secure its hegemony in a racialized system.

Hegemony and Counternarrative

Building on the work of Karl Marx, Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci have contributed to the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a total ideology that operates by manipulating language and culture to establish dominant power relations as common sense, allowing them to go unquestioned (Williams, 1980/2006). This concept lays behind much of the work in CRT that aims to understand how power relations are maintained. Williams (1980/2006) explains that hegemony

> […] is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience. (p. 135)

Hegemony ensures power is reproduced and maintained through a dynamic process where society constantly influences individual thought and consciousness by what Gramsci calls "consent" (as cited in Hebdige, 1979/2006). Therefore, hegemonic ideologies are not often coercively forced onto the masses, rather the meanings and values are permissibly incorporated into lived experience thus constituting a sense of reality accepted as common sense. By operating through consent, hegemony becomes a form of cultural leadership where "certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others" (Saïd, 1979, p. 7). However, despite hegemony's constitution as common-sensical, alternative or oppositional cultures and ideologies can emerge as counter-hegemonic, aiming to question and disrupt dominant power relations, drawing on new or different readings of meaning and values.

Encoding/Decoding Meaning

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980/2006) outlines a process of reading texts and constructing meaning as one with two key operations: encoding and decoding. Although Hall's model focuses on television broadcast, it describes how meaning develops or alters from the creation of a media text to its transmission to its reception. Broadcasting structures "yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse" which are then transmitted via technologies (Hall, 1980/2006, p. 165). These messages and meanings are informed by societal frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and the technical infrastructure. Yet "before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" by viewers (Hall, 1980/2006, p. 165). Hall identifies three reading positions from which decodings can be constructed: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated position, and counter-hegemonic. In terms of the first, "the viewer is operating inside the dominant code" decoding the message the same way it

was encoded as one that "serves to reproduce the dominant definition precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality" (Hall, 1980/2006, p. 171). The negotiated position is one in which the audience acknowledges the legitimacy of the preferred hegemonic reading but modifies it according to personal circumstances or interests, operating with exceptions. Lastly, in a counter-hegemonic reading the viewer understands the text but reads it in an oppositional way, opting for an "alternative framework of reference" (Hall, 1980/2006, p. 173). These concepts can be applied to various other media texts including comedy shows that not only demonstrate how the comedian may be reading dominant texts (reacting to news broadcasts humorously for instance), but also how the audience of the comedy show reads the encoded meanings relayed by the comedian.

Discourse

Meanings are largely determined by the cultural context in which they are produced or consumed by a community operating within a broader system of social relations. Social theorist Michel Foucault refers to the development, representation, and expressing of meanings as well as the shaping of social reality through language, speech or writing as discourse (cited in Hall, 1992). Discourse refers to a group of statements representing a kind of knowledge about a topic that makes it possible to construct it in a certain way; however, "it also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed" (Hall, 1992, p. 201). Thus, discourse can influence social practices and maintain relations of power by defining rules including who is permitted to speak about a topic, the way they are to do so, and what kind of speaking authority they may carry. In his book *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*, Hall (1992) examines how discourse can facilitate Othering as it is "a particular way of representing 'the West,' 'the Rest,' and the relations between them" (p. 201) using Saïd's *Orientalism* (1979) as an example. He further

mentions how contemporary "discourse continues to inflect the language of the West, its image of itself and 'others,' its sense of 'us' and 'them,' its practices and relations of power towards the Rest" (Hall, 1992, p. 225). These contemporary discourses can be analyzed and examined to understand whether a sense of "us" and "them" still permeates Western society, or whether the work of people of colour on various platforms through various mediums like comedy can effectively counter such discourses, representations and stereotypes.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis

This research primarily takes the form of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a few elements of textual analysis. A textual analysis is a method used to discern and interpret the content or characteristics of aural or visual messages in a media text, while critical discourse analysis is a research method that examines the use of language as a form of social practice (Janks, 1997). According to discourse scholar Teun A. van Dijk (2015), CDA "studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (p. 466). CDA provides insights into how speech and texts help shape and reproduce social meanings and ideologies. Thus, it is a suitable method for analysing public discourse or commentary and what it may reveal about how individuals represent themselves, others, and the relations of power between them.

Janks (1997) describes Fairclough's (1989, 1995) model for CDA which involves three interrelated processes: the text or object of analysis, the process by which it is received (or produced), and the sociocultural and historical conditions or practices surrounding these processes. Discourse is produced in relation or response to the text which is located in a greater sociocultural context. Moreover, the manner in which a text is received is informed by larger socio-historical conditions and relations of power. Some of these greater socio-historical conditions have been outlined in the earlier portion of the literature review that establishes a background of Islamophobia and its presence in the Western consciousness.

Focusing on audience reception can further reveal how people consume a media text, their perspectives on the text's content, who is delivering the content, and the potential counter-

hegemonic ideas they are conveying. Audience reception, through a discourse theoretical approach, is seen as a "meaning-making practice where discourses are used, negotiated, and contested in shaping personal narratives around media texts, all against the backdrop of a contingent social reality" (Van Brussel, 2017, p. 381). Therefore, as critical discourse analysts aim to "understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality" (van Dijk, 2015, 466), this research will focus on critically analysing the public discourse that develops surrounding or in response to the chosen text to identify how power relations and inequalities are maintained, reproduced, or effectively resisted.

Research Design

This research thesis seeks to answer the question: how are Muslim comedians and their works received in a society where xenophobia and Islamophobic sentiments, rhetoric or imagery has become prevalent? The analysis process to answer this question took place in two stages – the first of which was a textual analysis to select which episodes were to be used for further audience reception study. The selection criteria for the episodes included choosing those that explicitly contain Minhaj's representation of Muslim, Indian American identity, jokes surrounding identity, religion, and race, critiques of Western politics that potentially draw race or religion into discussion, and counter-narratives to stereotypes about Muslims. To choose the episodes, I watched all six seasons and made detailed notes of jokes and content from various episodes. From there, I selected which episodes fit the criteria and narrowed the list down to six episodes collected from different seasons over the course of the series. A complete list of selected episodes can be found in appendix A.

Although the show is distributed by and produced under Netflix, all episodes are available on YouTube in order to make them more accessible to those who do not subscribe to

the streaming service. YouTube is a platform that allows for users to subscribe to channels, like or dislike video content, as well as comment on it and interact with other users in comment threads. Audience reception and public response was gauged by collecting and analysing YouTube comments under the selected episodes. Comments were chosen purposively based on their relevance to the thesis topic. The selection criteria included considering whether comments indicated a response (either in support or opposition) to Minhaj's work, jokes, topics, critiques, or representation of his identity. To collect them, I read through as many comments as possible from each of the chosen episodes and took screengrabs of those that were relevant, storing them in a document organized by episode.

Once comments had been collected, they were printed, cut out, and visually organized into categories based on their content, irrespective of season or episode. These categories were: comments demonstrating an acceptance of Minhaj's countering of stereotypes, positive comments regarding identity and representation, negative comments regarding identity or representation (or those that rejected Minhaj's representation), comments expressing a discomfort with the decentering of whiteness, comment reflecting Islamophobic sentiments, mixed positive and negative comments existing on threads (in response to one another), and general comments interacting with the themes of this topic that were not enough to procure an entire category.

After the comments were categorized, they were further organized into four major, recurring themes most salient to the research analysis: discomfort with decentring whiteness, Islamophobic discourses, identity and representation, and countering stereotypes. To analyze them according to these themes, the three levels of Fairclough's (1989, 1995) model (as cited in Janks, 1997) were utilized to discursively examine jokes from various episodes, comments

responding or reacting to them, and finally the greater socio-cultural discourses and ideologies that inform them, as well as discourses that are reproduced, maintained or challenged by them. To do this, jokes and comments were isolated and briefly recounted before carrying out a detailed exploration of the language, sentence structure, punctuation, and visual expressions (in terms of the episodes) used. These elements were then contextualized and further scrutinized using theories of intersectionality, Orientalism, hegemony, and counter-narrative to reveal how complicated power relations and efforts to counteract dominant discourses are received.

As this research pertains to the collection and examination of public data in the form of YouTube comments, certain ethical considerations have been taken. Scholarship on public data research ethics advises proper identification and respect of expectations of privacy and the employment of strategies for data anonymization (e.g., Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Zimmer, 2010). Therefore, all comments cited, referenced, or included as screenshot evidence ensure user privacy is respected and no names or profile pictures are associated with the commentary. Any characteristics of the user, including nationality, race or gender, may either be inferred based on the content of their comment or drawn from the user directly stating it in their comment.

In addition, since the Internet is fluid and subject to change, I must acknowledge that when I initially decided upon this research topic, the episodes had been uploaded on a YouTube channel titled "Patriot Act". However, immediately prior to my beginning my research, all episodes were moved to a new channel called "Netflix Is A Joke". This change removed all previous comments under the episodes on the original channel. Therefore, the YouTube comments I am working with in this research are relatively more recent and were not contributed in the same socio-political environment as some of the original content. Nonetheless, the comments are still valid for studying audience reception. This is simply one of the challenges of

doing internet-based research: the data is ephemeral because it exists only on privately owned platforms unless otherwise deliberately archived.

Lastly, as no research is without its limitations, it is important to acknowledge that this research examines a limited number of audience responses, selected purposively, to gauge the reception of Hasan Minhaj's work. A more expansive project may take critic reviews, ratings, and opinion pieces or non-academic publications into account, or may survey or interview viewers directly. Moreover, it does not examine the show as a whole and omits several episodes and jokes, intentionally choosing only those deemed most salient to the thesis and appropriate for its breadth criteria. Another limitation is that only that commentary which individuals have chosen to publish on the online platform are taken to represent "public reception" and be examined as such, since not everyone who watches the show may comment or display their reactions on social media and streaming networks. In addition, these comments are informed by particular parameters of the platform and cultural norms or conventions surrounding public commentary as a genre of written expression that encourages or allows for certain kinds of speech. Commentary is generally brief and informal, potentially involving lack of proper grammar, use of emoticons and, at times, profane language. Therefore, the comments are not taken to signify in-depth or formal reflections that arise from more expansive methods of data collection such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups.

Analysis

Hasan Minhaj's political comedy show *Patriot Act* covers a wide range of socio-cultural, political, and economic issues typically focusing on the United States of America, but at times also discussing other countries around the world. As a Muslim comedian of colour, Minhaj's work draws on his intersectional identity when examining such issues, and contests various negative stereotypes about Muslims alongside Islamophobic and Orientalist discourses. In this chapter, I discursively analyze specific jokes chosen from my selected episodes and the public commentary relevant to them found on the platform YouTube. I discuss the four major recurring themes apparent in these jokes, episodes, and comments. First, I examine how certain jokes Minhaj makes prohibit whiteness from recentering itself as dominant and how related comments demonstrate a discomfort with such decentering. Then, I explore how certain comments demonstrate an effort to maintain the Islamophobic discourses that Minhaj aims to satirically critique. Third, I discuss Minhaj's representations of his intersectional identity and what it means to be Indian (Asian) *and* Muslim living in America, as well as audience responses, both positive and negative, to his doing so. Lastly, I examine episodes or jokes that actively counter negative Muslim stereotypes and audience reception that indicates agreement with or acceptance of Minhaj's proposing of counter-hegemonic discourses.

Discomfort with Decentering Whiteness

The first episode of *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* covers the topic of affirmative action (sharing the episode title with the policy). The policies of affirmative action were "first entered into the language by President John F. Kennedy, in his Executive Order 10925 in 1961, in which he called for aggressive hiring of minorities by the Federal government" (Chrisman, 2013, p. 71). Minhaj begins the piece by mentioning how at the time, such a policy was heavily needed. He

illustrates this by displaying an image on the screen behind him of the NBA world champion Lakers team in 1950, asking in an incredulous tone, "really? You're telling me these were the world champions?" while audience applause and laughter are heard off-screen. The team is notably composed entirely of white males, sharply contrasting with contemporary NBA champions or the current Los Angeles Lakers team. The joke uses the incongruity theory of humour that elicits comedic effect through procuring a contrast between two supposedly discordant ideas; "people are amused by the perception of incongruity, the gap between what is considered commonsensical and the absurd or contradictory" (Jang & Cordero-Pedrosa, 2016). Minhaj relies on the audience's prior knowledge of contemporary NBA team composition, with a notably high concentration of African American[1] players, to perceive the absurdity – further accentuated by his tone – of a team of white men being considered "the best basketball players in the world". The use of the term "really" as a rhetorical question emphasises the incredulity by suggesting an incongruity between expectations and reality, the expectation being that it is unlikely these individuals were truly the best players at the time. The use of the pronoun "you" suggests Minhaj is addressing the past, considering the photograph as a trace of the past discordant with today's known reality regarding NBA champions and their races.

Throughout the episode, Minhaj continues to critique white Americans who reject the need for affirmative action and promote neoliberal discourses that it is one's personal responsibility to ensure their own welfare. One way he does so is by highlighting the anti-affirmative action practices of certain white officials in positions of power, like Edward Blum. Blum is a conservative activist and president of an organization called "Students for Fair

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[1] Which in itself is both progressive and not progressive in terms of the implication of the fetishization of black bodies as another way of oppressing racialized people by essentializing what they can and cannot do. Celebrating their athleticism has a negative side of essentializing it.

Admissions". Minhaj shows a promotional public relations clip of Blum endorsing a lawsuit against a post-secondary institution in an effort to terminate policies of affirmative action (see Figure 1). When Minhaj begins his critique of the video, he starts with "so what he's saying in this ISIS recruitment video is…", to which the audience responds with laughter, applause, and cheers. Once more, he uses incongruity theory to relate two supposedly contradictory ideas: a white man to a Muslim extremist terror organization. The jokes also often rely on the audience to actively fill in information or have prior knowledge to understand the joke. His pause, indicated by the ellipses, allows the audience to notice his reference and determine how it invokes incongruity. He does not explain or show the audience what an ISIS recruitment video looks like; instead, the audience is assumed to know what it is to understand that this clip of a white, American man nonsensically echoes the iconography or visual semantics of one, such as being dimly, ominously lit and only framing the speaker's upper body against a background representative of their organization which ultimately aims to recruit followers (in Blum's case, plaintiffs to testify against "unfair" affirmative action policies).

Figure 1. Screenshot of the clip of Blum endorsing a lawsuit against institutions and recruiting plaintiffs shown in *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* Season 1, Episode 1, "Affirmative Action".

Although the live audience in the episode appears to enjoy these jokes, some members of the YouTube audience do not. One user, making a short, concrete statement trying to classify the episode, asserts, "This video is anti white racist" while another contends it is "[o]vert discrimination against whites (and Asians, too) to combat 'covert' discrimination against other races. Is this really OK? I don't think we can assume that it is" (Figure 2). In terms of the latter comment, unlike the former, it is unclear whether the user is referring to the video and Minhaj being overtly discriminatory against white people or to the policies of affirmative action. However, either way, the user indicates perceived antagonism towards white Americans. Both comments clearly state their opinions on the matter and address the public, the public here being individuals who purposefully clicked on this episode and chose to scroll down into the comments to read them, as per the conventions of the platform's usage. The user on the left posits a question as well, asking if others echo the user's perspective that overt discriminations against whites to combat discrimination against others is not acceptable. Their use of the word "really" implies that although some may think it to be okay, they must reevaluate if it truly is, which the user then goes on to answer themselves for a greater "we" saying they should not assume it is. Both users decode the messages and jokes in the video as anti-White, upholding a counter-hegemonic reading to what Minhaj proposes: that white (and certain Asian) communities have been disregarding structural inequalities that their respective communities have benefited from in various ways, rejecting the necessity of affirmative action policies.

Figure 2. Comments demonstrating a perception of *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* Season 1, Episode 1, "Affirmative Action", as anti-white.

These users' comments indicate a discomfort with Minhaj's jokes that decenter whiteness. According to Shome (2000), whiteness centers itself by establishing an inferior, antithetical Other. This act of centering and recentering institutes whiteness as the hegemonic norm, "intact and free of any critical scrutiny" (Shome, 2000, p. 366). However, when Minhaj sheds light on racist practices of white officials, subjecting them to "critical scrutiny", he prohibits whiteness from recentering itself, disrupting a normative white discourse. Comparing Blum's promotional clip to an ISIS recruitment video further draws on the superiority theory of humour that can establish the person or group being laughed at as inferior to those making the joke or laughing. As Muslims are typically the ones constructed as inferior by terrorist stereotypes, Minhaj's evocation of superiority theory provides an imagined role reversal that can be a vehicle for resistance against racialized stereotyping, thus decentering whiteness and contesting dominant power relations. In relation to this, users, such as those in Figure 2, imply a disapproval of the typically subordinated asserting superiority.

Similarly, in the fifth episode of the fourth season, "The Two Sides of Canada", there is a segment where Minhaj interviews Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau. He is seen asking politically motivated questions at times that visibly appear to discomfit the Prime Minister, indicated by Trudeau's speechless pauses after Minhaj makes questions or statements that can be understood as politically controversial in the context of the Prime Minister's activities (for

example, the selling of arms to Saudi Arabia). In response to this, several users – implied to be

Canadian via the context of their comments – expressed discontent with Minhaj's dialogue using

diction such as "attacking" or "aggressively" and demanding he "stop this" alongside the use of a

person emoticon that is notably white (see Figure 3). One user asks the comment-reading public,

"what agenda is he representing?" (Figure 3), referring to Minhaj, evoking suspicion that his

"aggressive attacking" of the Prime Minister may be driven by a hidden objective – indicated by

the term "agenda". Once more, Minaj's questioning, as a racialized minority, of a white official

in power throws off typical racial power relations and decenters whiteness by drawing it under

critical scrutiny. The reception of it by particular users, indicated via their commentary, further

demonstrates that the decentering of dominant discourses of racial power not only makes the

Prime Minister uncomfortable, but certain members of the audience as well.

Figure 3. Comments on Season 4, Episode 5, "The Two Sides of Canada", expressing discomfort

with Minhaj's critiques of Canada and Prime Minister Trudeau.

Islamophobic Discourses

As an Indian American, Minhaj expressed the desire to dedicate an episode to the 2019

Indian elections, as they were occurring, on *Patriot Act*. Instead of beginning with the typical

introduction theme, the sixth episode of season two, titled "Indian Elections" begins with a clip

displaying Minhaj discussing his plan to cover the Indian elections on his show with several

family friends – all Indian adults. Once Minhaj mentions he is planning an episode on the

elections, they vehemently discourage him, trying to convince him not to do so, asserting that he will receive lots of backlash as it is a highly controversial subject. One woman tells him, "you are an NRI" which stands for 'Non-Resident Indian', while another man follows saying "you are an ABCD. You are an American-born Desi"[2] to justify why Minhaj cannot discuss Indian elections. What the "C" stands for in ABCD is not described in the clip; however, users responding to inquiries about it in the comments mention that it stands for "confused". This expression indicates that South Asians born in America tend to be disoriented or uncertain about their diasporic identities and nationality (Naujoks, 2010). This uncertainty regarding coexisting nationalities and intersectional identities is exemplified in this clip with the language used by elders in the community that suggest although Minhaj may be ethnically of that region, he is ultimately, "not really Indian".

The clip continues to show one man who begins commenting on Minhaj's name. Minhaj interrupts him saying, "Hasan means 'nice' in Arabic", to which the man responds, "India is not Arabia. Your name rings a bell that you are a terrorist." There is a pause, during which the camera turns to Minhaj who has a visually disgruntled and shocked expression on his face. The woman seated next to the man continues, "You're maybe a Pakistan agent", to which Minhaj replies by repeating the statement as a rhetorical question in an incredulous tone – drawing attention to how absurd he finds the speculation. The clip ends with the man muttering, "could be" as the scene transitions into the episode's introductory theme. As the episode formally begins, Minhaj introduces the topic like this:

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[2] "Desi" is a term describing people from South Asian countries and has its roots in the Hindi/Urdu term for "homeland".

> Talking about politics in India can get you in a lot of trouble, especially… because I'm
>
> Indian, and Muslim. It's very weird to be something that people love, and then also be
>
> something that people do not like. Right, it's like if one half of you was Oreo cookie…
>
> and the other half was Muslim. There's no winning! It makes everything so much more
>
> complicated and confusing!

His words illustrate the uncertainty contained in the concept of being an "ABCD" and the
confusion that comes with trying to represent one's intersectional identity. Intersectionality, a
key tenet of critical race theory, asserts that "everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping
identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 11). Here, Minhaj is
describing how being both Indian and Muslim is conflicting[3] and positions him awkwardly when
trying to examine Indian politics, while also drawing on incongruity humour to illicit laughter
and ease potential tensions around his contending identities. The placement of this comment at
the beginning of the episode is also significant as it behaves as a disclaimer that what he is about
to say is informed by multiple overlapping aspects of his identity. The exclamation that "there's
no winning", immediately following his analogy of the Oreo cookie, further implies that when
one's identity includes "Muslim", there will always be people who dislike them or disagree with
them. In the analogy, Oreo cookie is understood to represent being Indian, assuming people
generally love Oreo cookies as they generally love Indians, but it also carries the connotation of
being black or brown on the outside and white on the inside, once more highlighting confusion
regarding diasporic identity (Perkins, 2008). The fact that no metaphor was used to replace
"Muslim" suggests that there is no analogy that can match the degree of implied dislike toward

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[3] He is drawing on the tumultuous history between Muslims and non-Muslims in India, including the war that split
India and Pakistan, continued turbulent relations between the countries rooted in Hindu-Muslim discordance, as well
as ongoing anti-Muslim oppression in India.

Muslims. The pause between the two statements first develops anticipation, to hear what being

Muslim may be analogous to. When he concludes in an anticlimactic manner, the anticipation

built shatters which accentuates his assertion that "there's no winning". In this way, Minhaj

prepares the audience, indicating that there is bound to be disagreement on the topic, one that is

difficult to approach as a Muslim, Indian-American. He also offers a framing for a continued

attention to his own incongruous identity throughout the episode.

As the episode continues, Minhaj frequently and comedically draws attention to the

absurdity invoked at the beginning of his being a terrorist or a spy. When discussing how certain

politicians and Hindu nationalist groups in India are being unconstitutional by going against

secularism laws, Minhaj interjects saying, "I know what you're thinking, 'Of course Hasan

Minhaj would say that about Mother India! After all, we all know he's a spy… for Pakistan.'" As

he utters the last two words after a pause, ominous lighting suddenly shrouds him as he stares

directly into the camera (see Figure 4) and thunderous sound effects are heard in the studio,

followed by audience laughter and applause. He does this a second time after mentioning the

ruling political party's efforts to institute voter disenfranchisement against mostly Muslim

immigrants declaring, "But of course! Hasan Minhaj, the Pakistani agent, [this Muslim boy],[4]

would come to the defense of Muslim immigrants and to that I say, how could I be a Pakistani

agent when I'm actually being paid by… Qatar?" Finally, near the conclusion of the episode he

does this a third time after another discussion regarding Hindu religious extremism saying,

"Now, I know people are like, 'Of course, Hasan Minhaj, the spy from Qatar, is trying to divide

India once again.' But how could that be possible when I'm already being paid by… Iran? Now

you know why the Saudis don't like me." Regarding the last statement about the Saudis, he is

---

[4] Translated by author from Hindi.

referring to an earlier episode where he covered Saudi Arabia and corruption in its leadership.

The episode, seen as controversial, received backlash, and was ultimately banned in Saudi

Arabia. The audience is assumed to be aware of this to understand Minhaj's reference to their

dislike.

Figure 4. Screenshot of the moment Minhaj mentions the country he is supposedly a spy for in

Season 2, Episode 6, "Indian Elections".

The moments after the pauses, preceding his naming the country he is supposedly a spy for,

are always conveyed while staring directly into the camera with ominous lighting and thunder

crash sound effects, immediately followed by Minhaj causally returning to a normal flow of

dialogue, with normal lighting. The juxtaposition, exaggerated effects, and constant changing

from one country to another all heavily imply the comedic, sarcastic nature of the statements,

proposing a counter-narrative to the discourse of a threatening Other. Part of this counter-

narrative is that there is no one unified "Other", instead there is a conflict between all these

countries, complicating the neatness of the "west" versus the "rest" binary. The term "you" that

appears in each of these three instances harkens back to his disclaimer-like joke at the beginning of the episode, indicating that he understands certain viewers will feel or think this way about his being Muslim.

Several comments support this understanding with users agreeing with the elders that "he could be a Pakistani agent" (see Figure 5), and that he is "pushing an Islamic agenda very smartly" (see Figure 6). The terms "very smartly" echo the sentiments of a previously discussed comment (Figure 3), evoking the suspicion that Minhaj is cleverly and deceitfully embedding an "agenda", whether it be anti-Indian or anti-white, into his work. One user explicitly includes the time stamps corresponding to the three aforementioned instances of Minhaj humorously declaring agentry, titling it as "the truth about Minhaj" (Figure 5). Moreover, users employing affirmatory diction like the terms "truth", "definitely", and "for sure" (Figure 5) regarding his being a spy, further indicate that they did not perceive Minhaj's words as a joke and firmly believe it to be true. Another user provides the time stamp for the clip where the man tells Minhaj his name rings a bell that he is a terrorist commenting, "well that's true in reality." (see Figure 7). The matter-of-factness invoked by the term "well" preceding the statement suggests that the user believes it to be a well-established reality that Arabic names like Hasan, regardless of their meanings, are associated with terrorism.

Figure 5. Comments on Season 2, Episode 6, "Indian Elections", indicating they think he is or could be a spy.

Figure 6. A user suggesting Minhaj has an Islamic agenda under Season 2, Episode 6, "Indian Elections".
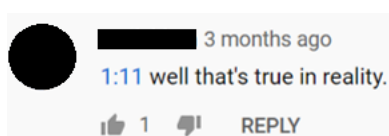
Figure 7. A user agreeing that Minhaj's name "rings a bell that [he's] a terrorist" under Season 2, Episode 6, "Indian Elections".

Similar commentary is found under the "The Two Sides of Canada" episode. In another clip of his interview with Prime Minister Trudeau, Minhaj asks him about Quebec and the controversial "secularism" law (Bill 21) that prevents anyone working in the public sector from wearing any religious symbols – including the hijab (a headscarf worn by Muslim women) and Sikh turbans. Trudeau responds with how he disagrees with it. Minhaj asks "So, you would say you're accepting of all faiths and religions?" prompting a list including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Once Trudeau utters the words "that includes […] accepting Islam", Minhaj pauses and points at him. Trudeau trails off asking "why?" to which Minhaj responds with, "you accept Islam as the one true faith, and the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as the last and final messenger?" This statement is typically what one believes and announces when they accept Islam as the religion they shall follow. Trudeau begins to laugh, joined by the viewing audience, indicating that he is aware of this. Trudeau replies, "I am proudly Catholic, but I have a

tremendous respect for all religions". Minhaj then turns to the camera whispering, "guys, I tried." The screen transitions from the interview to Minhaj in the studio who continues, "he'll come around. Oh, I know it." Again, he stares directly into the camera and moves closer – while the camera also zooms in creating a close proximity – as the beginning of the Muslim call to prayer plays in Arabic in the background – all of this occurs alongside audience laughter and applause.

Minhaj foreshadows this joke and sets up for it by saying, "I'll be honest, I'm just sick of this notion that Muslims are trying to push ourselves and our beliefs on everyone all the time. It's nonsense. We're not trying to convert everybody we meet" prior to showing the clip. The juxtaposition between this statement and the moment in the interview procures a humourous incongruity, further establishing his "effort" to "convert" Trudeau as a joke. Moreover, as the camera zooms in on him while the call to prayer is heard, Minhaj maintains a look with hooded eyes but a subtle smirk indicating sarcastic, humourous, unserious intimidation. His initial setting up for the joke as well as his expressions afterwards serve as a humourous exaggeration of the stereotype that Muslims are out to convert everyone and push their beliefs onto others, thereby critiquing it and depicting it as absurd. Many users understood this segment as a joke conveying their comprehension through the phrase "I lost it" paired with laughter emoticons (see Figure 8). The term "losing it", perceived alongside greater contextual cues like emoticons, has come to represent the losing of one's composure to bouts of laughter. However, comments replying to the two users in Figure 8 demonstrate that not everyone understood Minhaj's critique of the stereotype of Muslims forcing conversion. One user replies with a rhetorical question asking, "isn't that the national anthem of the terrorists ?", referring to the call to prayer. The call to prayer begins with the words "Allahu Akbar" which directly translate to "God is great". Unfortunately, the term has been misused by Islamic extremist groups, often heard prior to the

occurrence of a terrorist activity such as a bomb explosion. This has resulted in an association

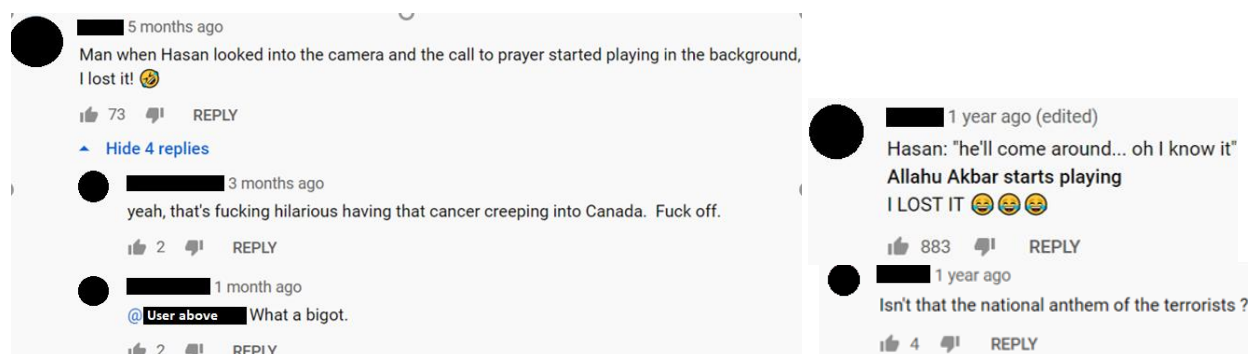between the revering, consecrated term and terrorism.

Figure 8. Comments regarding the Islamic call to prayer in Season 4, Episode 5, "The Two Sides

of Canada".

Another user, responding to a different comment, sarcastically and profanely replies, "yeah,

that's fucking hilarious having that cancer creeping into Canada. Fuck off." (Figure 8). The

obscene language conveys aggression and extreme dislike towards Muslims and Islam while the

disease imagery likens Islam (and Minhaj) to a detrimental plague endangering Western

countries, another longstanding metaphor for the threatening Other (Saïd, 1979). Additionally,

one user accuses Minhaj of opportunism, claiming that he is "bait[ing] Trudeau to convert to

Muslim" (see Figure 9). The use of the verb "baiting" suggests deceit and demonstrates that the

user did not perceive Minhaj's actions as a joke. They further say they "consider [Minhaj] a

smug American" indicating they perceive Minhaj's identity position as American, but one that is

excessively prideful and asserting superiority over the Canadian Prime Minister in a way

commensurate with U.S. cultural hegemony. Also, the user indicates they are not entirely aware

of what the terms "Muslim" and "Islam" mean. They incorrectly say "convert to Muslim" which

does not make sense and is like saying someone has "converted to Jew" as a "Muslim" or "Jew"

is what you call someone who follows the religion of Islam or Judaism, respectively.
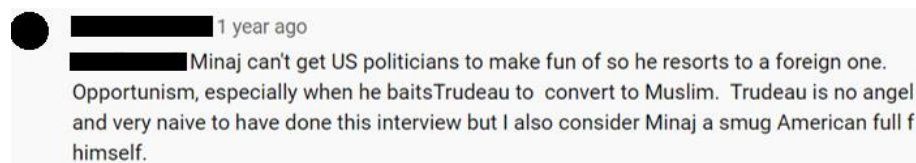
Figure 9. A user accusing Minhaj of opportunism in Season 4, Episode 5, "The Two Sides of

Canada".

Commentary that matter-of-factly states Minhaj's name rings a bell of him being a terrorist

or refers to his religion as a "cancer" reproduce Islamophobic and Orientalist discourses. In

addition, believing that he truly is "baiting" "naïve" (Figure 9) white men into religious

conversion affirms negative Muslim stereotypes, the very stereotype Minhaj attempts to subvert

by comedically exaggerating it in his episodes. Orientalizing the East, and in this case Muslims,

involves establishing them as a backwards, uncivilized Other whilst simultaneously defining

"Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Saïd, 1979, pp. 1-

2). By referring to Minhaj, and Islam, as a cancer creeping into Western countries, the user

reveals the work of Orientalist discourses that view Islam as problematic and the West (Canada)

as pure, healthy, and better off without it; thus, "reiterating European [or in this case, Western]

superiority over Oriental backwardness" (Saïd, 1979, p. 7).

Identity and Representation

Several months after the "Indian Elections" episode, Minhaj returns to the topic with an

episode titled "Indian Elections Update" (season three, episode four) that covers the election

aftermath. It once more begins with a discussion with some of the same Indian family friends as

the other episode. They chastise Minhaj for going through with it to which he responds, "why can't I talk about Indian politics? I'm Indian." The man scoffs and incredulously replies with "You're Indian? You didn't even live there. How do you call yourself an Indian?" The woman joins in to say, "people think you're American. You're a white washed [*sic*]." Minhaj protests this claim, "No, I'm not. You know me and uncle are brown[5], you know that." The man replies, "Ha! But you don't behave like a brown. You think that you are a smart white dude… Sorry, you're not." The pause indicated by the ellipses involves the camera transitioning to show Minhaj's face expressing confusion. Their words imply that there are certain acceptable ways to behave or specific lived experiences that dictate if one is 'brown' and can identify with being 'Indian'. Instead of perceiving Minhaj's identity as intersectional and accepting it as such, they reject his claim of an Indian identity on the basis of him having never lived there or his supposedly non-Indian behaviour. The use of the term "white washed" accentuates this as it is commonly applied to individuals who are not ethnically white but adopt aspects of white or Western culture (whether intentionally or not). The word 'wash' in specific has two primary meanings: 'cleanse' and 'coat' or 'overlay'. In addition, when used as a compound word, to "whitewash" means to gloss over and whiten. Thus, it implies that Minhaj's American identity trumps his Indianness because being 'brown' has been glossed over and washed away by whiteness and American culture.

Several comments agree with the statements of the elders, while others identify with Minhaj's struggles with asserting his intersectional identity. Users responding to the comment quoting the man's statement that Minhaj thinks he is "a smart white dude", with clear emphasis

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[5] The term "brown" is a racial classification like "black" or "white", typically used to refer to South Asians. It is also sometimes used to refer to Middle Easterners or Hispanics. In Western countries, it can be used to signal South Asian (or Middle Eastern or Hispanic) ancestry.

on the term "white" in all capital letters indicating race is the salient aspect of the comment,

express agreement asserting, "He ain't [*sic*] no Indian. He is an American of Indian origin" (see

Figure 10). Another user responding to the same comment argues that "there [is] a difference in

culture that is very distinctive of someone born in the US […] here, you're an [A]merican that

speaks [H]indi […] but not an actual Indian" (Figure 10). The use of the term "actual" implies

that he may be Indian based on language spoken or ethnic origin, but he can never be a 'real'

Indian. Both users contend that there are certain requirements that must be met for a person to

claim "actual" Indian identity, furthering an exclusionary discourse that gatekeeps 'Indianness',

and maintaining that Minhaj does not meet these requirements in their opinion.
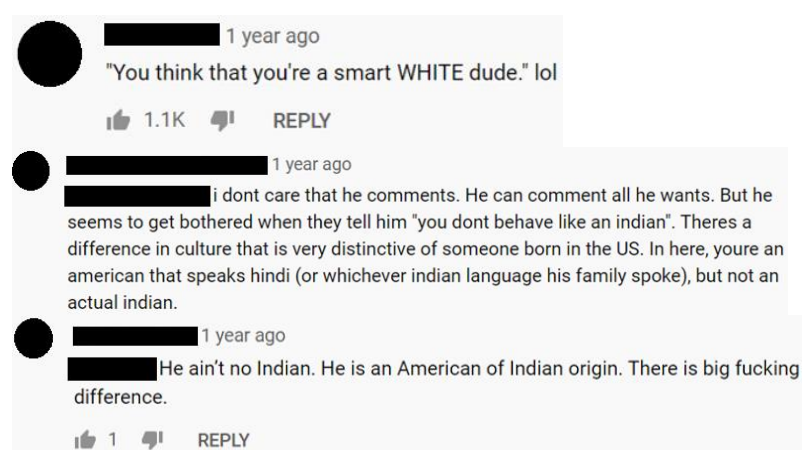
Figure 10. A user quoting the man at the beginning of Season 3, Episode 4 "Indian Elections

Update" with several users replying under the comment regarding Minhaj's Indian identity.

Other users comment on the struggles of representing and reconciling intersectionality or

indicate they relate to Minhaj's struggle. One user particularly draws on the difficulty of being a

racialized minority in America where someone like Minhaj can be told "you're not American,

you're brown, you're Indian" by (inferred to be white and non-Indian) Americans but then also

"you're not even Indian" (see Figure 11) by members of their ethnic community. Another user

agrees that the beginning of the episode is "real" for them as a dual citizen where, "if you're part

of two countries, you aren't part of either" (Figure 11). By saying the segment at the start of the

episode is "real" for them, the user indicates that having one's identity invalidated is a reality

they also face. The user does not reveal what intersecting identities they possess, other than the

implication that they are not a racial minority; however, they demonstrate that they relate to

Minhaj's situation and his representation of contending intersectional identities that inform his

perspectives and lived experiences.
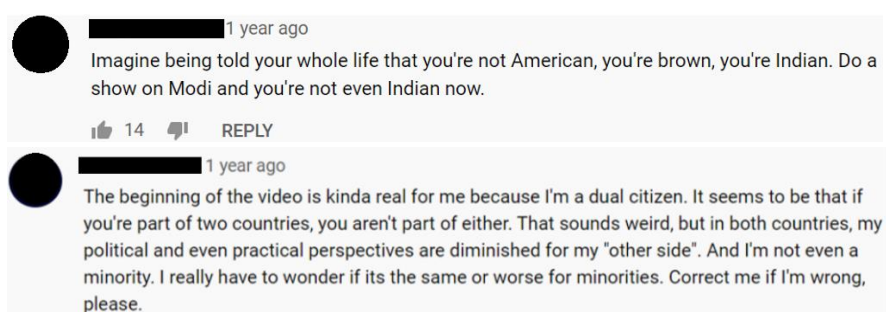
Figure 11. Two comments on Season 3, Episode 4 "Indian Elections Update" on intersectional

identity.

Likewise, users have also commented on episodes such as "Affirmative Action" (season

one, episode one) mentioning they related to Minhaj's jokes and representation regarding Asian

identity. Contrary to comments discussed previously that accused Minhaj of being discriminatory

against (primarily whites) but also Asians in this episode (see Figure 2), others commend him

saying "great job in relating Asian Americans […] even though I am of Hong Kong background

I still was able to relate" (see Figure 12). The terms "even though" preceding the user's

declaration of their ethnic background imply that despite Minhaj being of an Indian background

and speaking from a standpoint informed partially by that part of his identity, he still managed to

make certain non-Indian audience members feel represented and related to. Another user echoes

these sentiments, also notably using Minhaj's first name reinforcing ideas of relatability, and

directly mentioning the term "relatable", commenting that Minhaj "did a great job of making all Asian Americans feel consolidated by including East and South Asians in the same group" (Figure 12). Their comment alludes to the shift in discourse mentioned by Saïd (1979) where the term "Oriental", or even more contemporarily "Asian", is typically understood to refer to people from the far East (China, Japan, Korea) and Southeast Asia, often excluding other south, west, or central Asian groups when discussing Asian identity or issues related to it. The comment thus suggests Minhaj is effective in his effort to challenge this discourse and validate broad Asian American experiences through inclusivity.
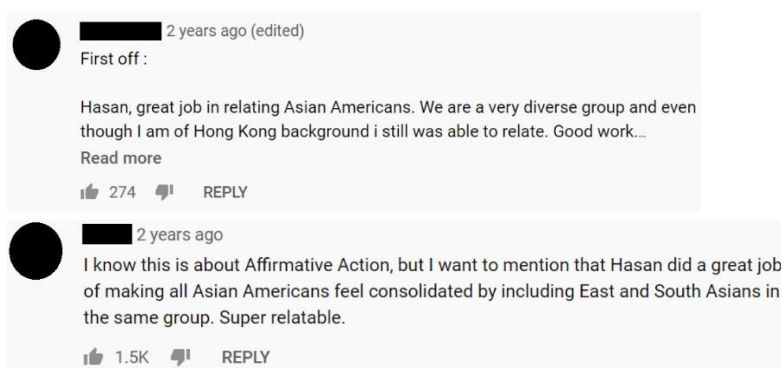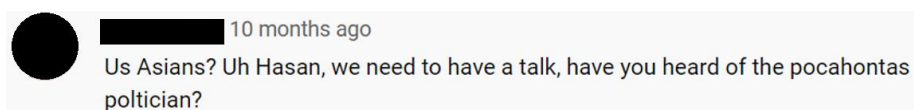

Figure 12. Two comments under Season 1, Episode 1 "Affirmative Action" commending Minhaj on relating to and consolidating Asian Americans.

Nevertheless, certain users disagree with his representation of Asian American identity, once again arguing that he is "not an [*sic*] real Asian" (see Figure 13). One user replying to another who says Minhaj "makes us [inferred to be Asian Americans] feel relevant and represented" disagrees, contending that "he cares more about other races than his own [and] is a backstabbing traitor" in their opinion (Figure 13). It is not ascertainable if the user has seen other episodes of *Patriot Act*; however, considering Minhaj covers multiple issues throughout the show in various episodes, including many on Indian issues, demonstrates that matters concerning his own race are also important for him to discuss. Moreover, by mentioning that Minhaj caters

to "other races" instead of his own, the user suggests that issues concerning Indian Americans and Asian Americans are mutually exclusive with no overlap and by discussing one of the two Minhaj is traitorously ignoring the other. Another comment also questions Minhaj's identification with Asian identity asking, "Us Asians? Uh Hasan, we need to have a talk, have you heard of the [P]ocahontas politician?" (Figure 13) The idea of the "Pocahontas politician" refers to former US President Donald Trump's nicknaming of Senator Elizabeth Warren 'Pocahontas' as a taunt after her claim to Native American ancestry, supposedly proven by DNA testing asserting that she is 1/32 Native American (Lee, 2016). The name itself is problematic as it was given to a Native American woman by white colonists; moreover, her story holds that she supposedly saved the life of a white colonist man, turning against some of her own people. By calling on this term and questioning Minhaj using the object pronoun "us", declaring Asian identity, the user implies that Minhaj is claiming an identity he does not belong to – similar to Trump asserting that Warren is trying to claim Native American identity as a white woman. In addition, considering the history of Pocahontas, the term further possesses connotations of betrayal harkening back to comments accusing Minhaj of being a "backstabbing traitor". This comment ultimately illustrates an internalization of the shift in discourse where 'Asian' does not include certain groups of people, even though India is ultimately in the continent of Asia.

Figure 13. Several comments under Season 1, Episode 1 "Affirmative Action" disagreeing with Minhaj's representation of his identity (the third comment is a reply to the second).

Another episode that involves Minhaj's declaration and representation of Asian identity is the fifth episode of season five, "Don't Ignore the Asian Vote in 2020". The episode was released several months prior to the commencement of the 2020 American presidential election and once more draws on Asian Americans as a collective commenting on the model minority narrative, low Asian American voter turnout, as well as the historical exclusion of Asians from American politics and America as a country. Several apparently racialized users (see Figures 14 and 15) thank Minhaj for mentioning issues relevant to their racial communities, in this episode as well as others, suggesting that such issues are rarely covered or acknowledged in media whether it be news or entertainment and they are grateful Minhaj is highlighting them. One user directly states their perspective that "the media covers less about Asians living in America" in addition to Asian civic participation (Figure 14). This demonstrates that the user appreciates Minhaj utilizing his platform to underline and represent Asian minorities. Their words indicate that Minhaj aims to incorporate racial inclusivity into his work, using comedy to make visible various underrepresented groups, further indicating that his comedy proposes counter-hegemonic narratives to dominant media representations of racialized groups that further white-dominated discourses.
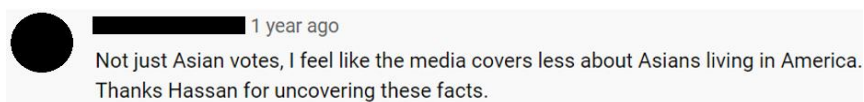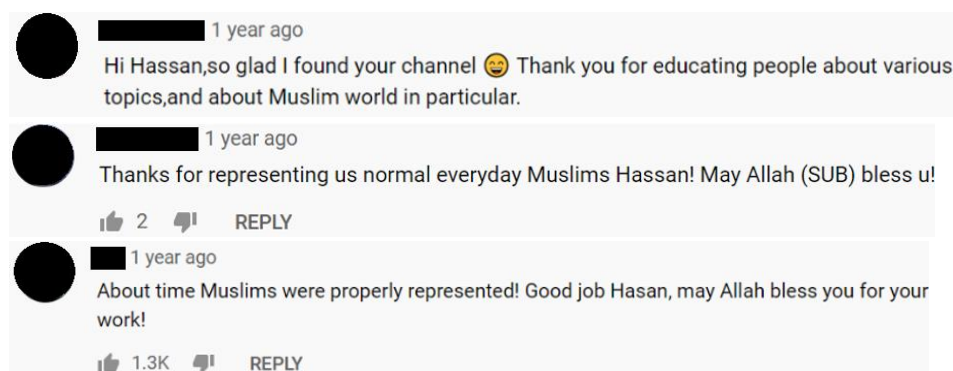
Figure 14. Users thanking Minhaj for covering topics concerning racial minorities on Season 5, Episode 5 "Don't Ignore the Asian Vote in 2020".
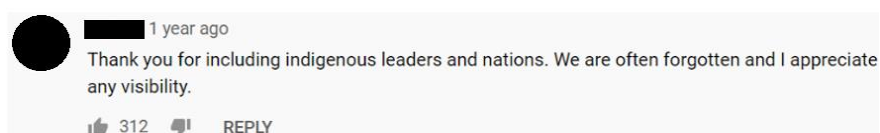
Figure 15. Users commenting on Minhaj's racial inclusivity under Season 4, Episode 5 "The Two Sides of Canada".

In alignment with this idea, users commenting under the episode "Saudi Arabia" (season one, episode two) also thank Minhaj "for educating people about […] [the] Muslim world" and for "representing us normal everyday Muslims" (see Figure 16). The use of the adverb "properly" preceding "represented" in a third user's comment (Figure 16) indicates that Muslims have typically been inaccurately represented in mainstream media. The adjectives "normal" and "everyday" suggest that certain Muslims are 'abnormal' or 'out of the ordinary', presumably those who belong to extremist groups and engage in terrorist activity. It demonstrates that some Muslims perceive a need to distinguish themselves from the negative portrayals on mainstream media taken to be representative of all Muslims. In addition, these comments support Sheridan's (2006) British study that finds many Muslims feel excluded from mainstream society, and believe "that their own communities should do more to aid integration" (p. 318), further indicating that they think Minhaj is effectively representing Muslims or Muslim identity, including them in mainstream media, and aiding their integration into a dominant discourse that has commonly excluded them or represented them negatively.

Figure 16. Several users thanking Minhaj for representing Muslims in Season 1, Episode 2 "Saudi Arabia".

Countering Stereotypes

Throughout the episodes, Minhaj counters multiple Islamophobic stereotypes, first and foremost of which is the humourless Muslim stereotype that depicts the Muslim as unable to 'take a joke'. Humour is often seen as a valuable characteristic particularly in Western countries like America and Britain (Michael, 2011; Miles, 2015); thus, by constructing the Muslim as humourless, the stereotype develops a dichotomous binary between the white man who can laugh easily and the supposedly hard-hearted Muslim man. Minhaj's very career counteracts this stereotype by virtue of him being a Muslim comedian who elicits audience laughter not only at jokes about certain issues or clever, comedic analogies, but also at personal anecdotes and scenarios such as the clips involving his family friends scolding him. Several comments under multiple episodes express how entertaining and humourous they find Minhaj, appreciating his comic prowess. The first comment in Figure 17, for instance, from "Affirmative Action" (season one, episode one) describes how Minhaj is able to discuss "one of the most sensitive issues very easily and very comically". The user indicates that they find affirmative action and race-related issues to be rather sensitive and difficult to approach through their use of the term "easily". They suggest that Minhaj is able to approach the issue with ease and discuss it through humour

without demeaning its sensitivity. Another user commenting under the fifth episode of season

five, "Don't Ignore the Asian Vote in 2020", observes "he [Minhaj] changed the political

satire/comedic format […] Really inventive production" (Figure 17). The user describes multiple

aspects of Minhaj's work that support his assertion that Minhaj has "changed the political

satire/comedy format" using positive, appreciative diction such as "engages the audience more"

and "eye catching", further mentioning that the set up allows the audience to seem "much closer

to him". These words suggest that Minhaj has changed the political satire comedy (an area of

comedy that has typically been dominated by white comedians) format for the better and

improved it; thus, contesting the humourless Muslim stereotype.

Figure 17. Two users commenting on Minhaj's comedic skills under Season 1 Episode 1

"Affirmative Action" (*top*) and Season 5 Episode 5 "Don't Ignore the Asian Vote in 2020"

(*bottom*).

Humour is also "often seen as a signifier of intelligence" (Miles, 2015, p. 169) and a

marker of perspective. Therefore, the humourless Muslim stereotype implies that Muslims are

unintelligent. Moreover, one of the eight characteristics of Islamophobia asserts, "Criticisms of

the West, made by Muslims, are rejected out of hand" (Miles, 2015, p. 151) because Islam is

stereotypically represented and viewed as inferior to the West, primitive, irrational, violent, and a

threatening political (or military) ideology instead of a religion. Therefore, this feature of

Islamophobia contends Muslims have no right to critique the supposedly superior and intelligent Western world. Characteristics of Islamophobia such as this reproduce discourses of domination and demonization as well as Orientalist discourses of ethnocentricity where the West is antithetical (and superior) to the barbaric, backwards East. Minhaj's work aims to counter these stereotypes as his show merges comedy with intellectually-based discussion on prominent issues. In terms of their production, the episodes seem like video essays with the use of visual evidence, such as news extracts or graphs of data, and citations that appear on screen giving his program an academic quality and further aligning Minhaj's Muslim identity with intellectual tropes.

Alongside the many comments on multiple episodes that clearly label and describe Minhaj as "intelligent", users commenting under "The Two Sides of Canada" also demonstrate an acceptance of counter-hegemonic readings that contest the unintelligent Muslim stereotype, a stereotype that aims to maintain cultural hegemony and hegemonic knowledge production. One user thanks Minhaj for "the most succinct (and funniest) education" they have had regarding what is happening in their "own country" (Figure 19). The term "own" indicates that the person is Canadian, and their words state how they find Minhaj's work to be funny and educational – contesting both the humourless Muslim and unintelligent Muslim stereotypes. Another user thanks him, beginning their comment with "as a Canuck" (another word for Canadian), saying Minhaj "nailed everything about us [Canadians] and it felt good to hear the uncomfortable truth" (Figure 18). The verb "nailed" in this context is drawn from the English phrase "hitting the nail on the head", meaning Minhaj perfectly covers the topic or "truth" exactly. Both comments further contest the Islamophobic discourse that any criticism of the West by a Muslim are rejected.
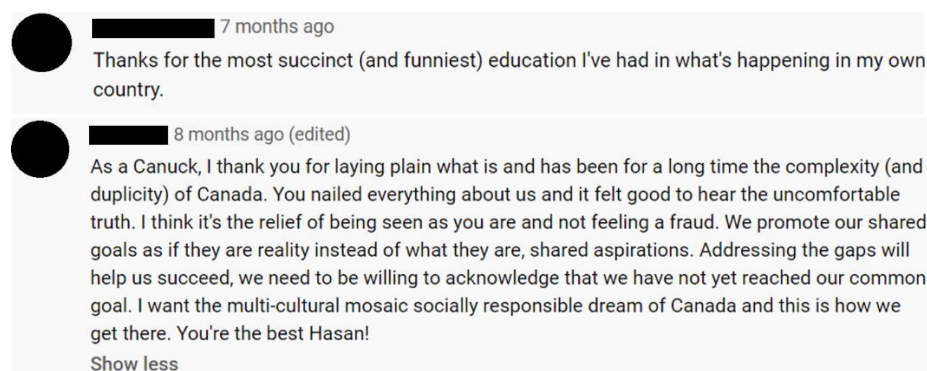
Figure 18. Comments appreciating Minhaj's humour, intellect, and critiques (Season 4, Episode 5, "The Two Sides of Canada").

A third major stereotype Minhaj contests is that which deems Muslims as dangerous terrorists who aim to convert everyone, forcefully or not, and induce harm. Many comments under the episode with Minhaj's sarcastic, humourous 'attempt' to 'convert' Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, demonstrate their understanding and acknowledgement of the joke as a critique of Islamophobic and Orientalist discourses that construe Muslims and their religion as a threatening force. The first user is replying to someone whose comment seems to have been removed. However, based on the construction of the comment, it can be reasonably assumed that the user they are replying to did not understand the joke or find it humourous. The user goes on to say that the "joke is a big slap in the face to all those Islamophobes" (Figure 19). The phrase "big slap in the face" is figurative and implies that the joke makes a strong anti-Islamophobic proposition. Another user comments "[I] love how he [Minhaj] just trolls Islamophobes instead of being offended" (Figure 19). This comment also highlights how Minhaj contests the stereotype that Muslims cannot 'take a joke' and are therefore always on the offence. Instead, he "trolls" (which in this case can be taken to mean 'makes fun of') Islamophobes, drawing into light the ridiculousness of their assumptions and discriminatory claims that aim to maintain Orientalist discourses.
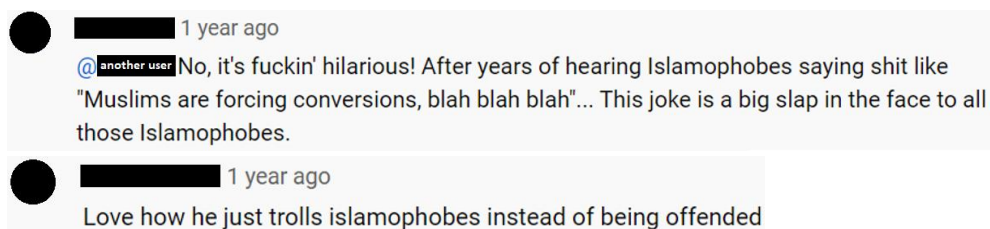
Figure 19. Several users discussing Minhaj's exaggerated 'attempt' to 'convert' PM Trudeau in Season 4, Episode 5, "The Two Sides of Canada".

Ultimately, these specific jokes from various episodes indicate counter-hegemonic readings to mainstream representations that encode Muslims as humourless, unintelligent terrorists. Such stereotypes preserve dominant Islamophobic and Orientalist discourses that fundamentally maintain relations of power and authority. The practice of Orientalizing constructs a flexible positional superiority "which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand" (Saïd, 1979, p. 7). However, Minhaj's work as a Muslim comedian of colour operating in the West, shifts that upper hand supposedly cemented in place, meaningfully re-encodes such stereotypes as ridiculous, resists efforts of Orientalizing, and uses humour to challenge the discourse.

The particular comments examined in this section accept Minhaj's countering of such stereotypes, decoding them in the same way he encodes them: as ridiculous, demeaning representations that aim to recenter whiteness and maintain hegemony. In addition, although there exist comments that express a discomfort with decentering whiteness, reject Minhaj's representations of intersectional identity, and reiterate Islamophobic stereotypes, such reactions ultimately indicate that Minhaj is indeed effectively disorienting understandings of racial domination and superiority, as well as contesting Islamophobic discourses while paving the way for more positive Muslim and minority representations in mainstream media.

Conclusion

This thesis has discursively explored the work of Muslim, Indian-American comedian Hasan Minhaj, political comedy series *Patriot Act*, and offered critical insight into how some of its audiences are receiving the work in a society where xenophobia and Islamophobic sentiments, discourses and imagery has become prevalent. Through the analysis of select episodes and jokes, this thesis has demonstrated that Minhaj's political comedic work provides counter-narratives to negative Muslim stereotypes, including the "humourless Muslim", "unintelligent Muslim", and the "Muslims are terrorists out to violently convert others" stereotype. *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* further challenges characteristics of Islamophobic discourses, such as the assertion that Muslims cannot make criticisms of the West, by virtue of it being a political comedy that aims to educate, establish Minhaj's intersectional identity, and offer positive Muslim representation.

Nevertheless, through an examination of a limited amount of audience reactions expressed through YouTube commentary, this thesis has shown that not everyone decodes Minhaj's jokes as satirical critiques of Islamophobic stereotypes and discourses. Many users express a discomfort with the decentering of whiteness, reject Minhaj's representations of his intersectional identity, and instead reiterate Islamophobic stereotypes, revealing efforts to maintain Orientalising tropes, hegemony, and dominant power relations. However, such reactionary comments expressing discomfort, outrage, or disagreement ultimately indicate that Minhaj indeed disorients understandings of racial superiority while prohibiting whiteness from recentering, and contests Islamophobic discourses while advancing more positive and inclusive Muslim and minority representations in mainstream media. This is further demonstrated by comments acknowledging Minhaj's comedic skill, appreciating his representation of racial minorities, as well as accepting his critiques of Western societies (describing him as intelligent)

and his counter-hegemonic readings of negative mainstream media representation that propose counter-narratives to demeaning discourses.

In a more expansive project, allowing for greater time and scope, more episodes and commentary could be examined. In addition, to more broadly, inclusively, and effectively gauge audience reception, future research can expand data collection to include interviews, surveys, focus groups, mainstream news articles, critic reviews, and comments from other social media platforms. Initially, I planned to include in this analysis the comments found on the personal Instagram page of the comedian himself who posts clips of his work. A more expansive research project could also consider the varying affordances of multiple platforms that inform user commentary and audience reception. Lastly, as the series was cancelled by Netflix while I was doing my research, comments relevant to episodes found on YouTube became interspersed with comments exhibiting frustration, anger, and backlash regarding the cancellation. With more time and scope, these comments may have also been included to further examine audience sentiments and support an analysis of how audiences value Minhaj's contributions and perspectives.

Despite these limitations, this research has contributed to the relatively under-researched topic of Muslim comedians, their challenging of dominant discourses, and responses to Islamophobia. Moreover, this thesis significantly expanded on audience reception and interactions on social media platforms, like YouTube, surrounding Minhaj's comedic content instead of purely discussing racial and religious representation as well as the contesting of negative stereotypes and dominant exclusionary narratives through comedy. Lastly, this research thesis has demonstrated how new, emerging methods and platforms are being or can be utilized by people from ostracized, racialized communities to represent their intersectional identities and counteract negative stereotypes that affect them, and others like them.

When discussing stereotypes that serve to Other Muslims, Michael (2011) mentions there is a "contemporary fascination with American Muslims [that] wonders how they can be patriotic citizens and believers in Islam at the same time" (p. 129). *The Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* with its content and clever title name play strongly suggests that they can. It suggests that Islam is not the antithesis of Americanism, that citizenship and expressing concern for Western issues can be done whilst one holds a standpoint informed by intersecting identities. Finally, it suggests that instead of the American government surveilling Muslims out of supposed patriotism, a Muslim can examine the government and the society in his own form of patriotism: a form that aims to raise awareness about marginalized populations, potentially correct misrepresentation, contest unfavourable narratives, and educate through satire.

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Appendix

"Netflix Is A Joke" YouTube channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCObk_g1hQBy0RKKriVX_zOQ

Episodes Analyzed

Season 1, Episode 1 "Affirmative Action": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm5QVcTI2I8

Season 1, Episode 2 "Saudi Arabia": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUhbZdvtzcw

Season 2, Episode 6 "Indian Elections": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqZ_SH9N3Xo

Season 3, Episode 4 "Indian Elections Update": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQaSU1VT-vM

Season 4, Episode 5 "The Two Sides of Canada":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDPeXoQUrbI

Season 5, Episode 5: "Don't Ignore the Asian Vote in 2020":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwFr6RX2Y40