



“Give ’em Hell Nicki”: Muted Group Theory and the Twittersphere’s Battle over Nicki Minaj’s COVID-19 Remarks

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Nicki Minaj, the award-winning millennial rapper, and songwriter of Trinidadian descent, ignited a backlash of negative feedback after tweeting a remark on COVID-19 that went viral. Minaj tweeted, “My cousin in Trinidad won’t get the vaccine cuz his friend got it & became impotent. His testicles became swollen. His friend was weeks away from getting married; now the girl called off the wedding.” She continued, “So just pray on it & make sure you’re comfortable with ur decision, not bullied” (Nicki Minaj, 2021a, September 13). Even though this tweet received about 150 k likes, she irritated users after she attempted to battle Joy-Ann Reid, the host of MSNBC’s *The Reid Out* and the first Black woman to lead a prime-time cable show, after Reid commented on her tweet during her live news broadcast aired later that night. This critical content analysis used muted group theory to investigate a string of Minaj’s tweets and the Twittersphere’s response to two tweets on this issue. Conducting this

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research will help understand the scope of one millennial celebrity's influence on social media, especially since this virus has thus far claimed approximately 6.6 million lives globally (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2022, November 23).

Referred to as “the most successful female rapper of all time” (Billboard, 2021, December 8), Onika Tanya Maraj, best known by her stage name Niki Minaj, sparked controversy after posting her “impotent” tweet on her Twitter (now X) account of almost 25 million followers. Reid replied to her tweet by saying, “For you to use your platform to encourage our community not to protect themselves and save their lives, my God, sister, you can do better than that. ... For you to use your platform to put people in the position of dying from a disease, they don't have to die. OMG. As a fan, as a hip-hop fan, as someone who is your fan, I am so sad that you did that” (The Reid Out, 2021, September 13). In response, Minaj tweeted the clip from *The Reid Out's* Twitter account and called the veteran journalist an “uncle tomiana,” her female derivation of an Uncle Tom and a “dumb @ss” (Nicki Minaj, 2021d, September 13; 2021f, September 13)—and verbal battles ensued in the Twittersphere. One user said, “Joy Reid is a respected journalist and a Harvard Grad. You were an exotic dancer turned rapper. Instead of learning from an educated informed sister, you're going to take her apart in a public forum because she spoke the truth, and it bruised your ego. Be bigger than that” (User 4, 2021, September 14). Another user said, “[Nicki,] I love that you're a free thinker & speaker. what you said tonight, many people secretly feel the same or had doubts about the vaccine too but are scared to express on here because it's a mob mentality” (User 41, 2021, September 13).

Public sentiment has fallen on adherence to the COVID-19 guidelines, and celebrities accused of spreading misinformation or information conflicting with the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control's health guidelines have faced harsh criticism on social media. Rapper M.I.A. was widely criticized after tweeting, “If I have to choose the vaccine or [a] chip, I'm gonna choose death” (M.I.A., 2020). Letitia Wright, the millennial actress, experienced a backlash after tweeting an “antivaccination” video. Wright tweeted, “If you don't conform to popular opinions. but [sic.] ask questions and think for yourself ... you get canceled”; she later deleted her social media accounts (NBC NEWS, 2020). Another millennial, Carrie Underwood, a country singer, faced backlash on social media after liking conservative Matt Walsh's tweet denouncing mask mandates for school children. Walsh tweeted in response,

“Carrie Underwood liked my video, and now the mob is coming for her” (Matt Walsh, 2021, August 17). LaKeith Stanfield, a millennial actor, and rapper, posted on Instagram, “No one should be forcing anyone to put anything in their body” and “There are always other ways to be safe”; after receiving an avalanche of criticism, he deleted his post (Smith, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a critical discourse analysis and to use muted group theory to understand the audience reaction to a millennial celebrity woman rapper, specifically Minaj’s COVID-19 remarks on Twitter, as it relates to the sociopolitical environment in which her remarks emerged. Muted group theory was utilized to investigate her level of influence among Twitter users—a young, Black woman, celebrity rapper originally from the Caribbean—as it relates to her comments on COVID-19 and her negative remark concerning the COVID-19 vaccine.

When one’s language is stifled and the person is made invisible, they are considered a part of a muted group; anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener created muted group theory. It began as a theory expressing how women were silenced and determined inarticulate; it evolved into a theory explaining the process of the inarticulation of minoritized voices—such as women, people of color, and people with low incomes—due to the unpopular nature of their views (Smith Barkman, 2018; West & Turner, 2010).

The following research questions will guide this investigation:

RQ1: How is the language embedded in the Twittersphere’s reaction to Nicki Minaj’s negative COVID-19 remarks relate to muted group theory?

RQ2: What were the main themes stemming from the audience’s responses to Nicki Minaj’s two controversial tweets on COVID-19?

LITERATURE REVIEW

When African Americans recall reasons for their suspicion of the United States medical industry, oftentimes references are made to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study that involved 600 Black men from Tuskegee, Alabama. This location had the highest rate of syphilis at that time (Heller, 2017). In 1932, the United States Public Health Service deceived these men by informing them, they were being treated for “bad blood,” including syphilis, which 399 had contracted. After 40 years, these men never received penicillin, the cure for syphilis (CDC, n.d.-b; The White House, 1997).

Instead, the study was designed to understand how the body reacted when untreated for syphilis, which was found to “cause blindness, deafness, deterioration of bones, teeth and the central nervous system, insanity, heart disease and death” (Heller, 2017). Over 25 years ago, Bill Clinton, the then-American president, officially apologized for the Tuskegee Study (The White House, 1997).

African Americans are more skeptical of taking the COVID-19 vaccine than White Americans based on their mistreatment and historical abuse from the American medical industry. The Kaiser Family Foundation and ESPN’s *The Undefeated* pop culture and sports website collaborated on a project called *The Survey on Race and Health* (Liz et al., 2020). They found that due to systematic racism among Black Americans, they have extremely high levels of reluctance to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. This study was conducted with 1769 adults, including an oversampling number of African Americans at 777.

One method for obtaining authentic responses from others, such as those in marginalized groups, is by studying their language on social media, which can be achieved by conducting a content analysis or a discourse analysis. Content analysis shows how content can become evidence for a social phenomenon. Scannell et al. (2021) conducted a content analysis on 1000 COVID-19 posts that were pro-vaccine, neutral, or anti-vaccine. The researchers found that users incorporated celebrities as a part of the persuasive appeal in their posts. Furthermore, anti-vaccination messages with celebrity figures displayed humor/sarcasm and shared anecdotal stories. These tweets focused on safety, choice, and political/conspiracy theories. Furthermore, a discourse analysis shows how language can become evidence for a social phenomenon and can be constrained via its social context.

The COVID-19 research on youth is promising as it relates to meeting health guidelines. Brandt et al. (2021) conducted a thematic analysis on the “National Study of Youth Opinions on Vaccination for COVID-19 in the U.S.” The researchers found that 76% of those between 14 and 24 would be willing to take the COVID-19 vaccine if experts recommended it, deeming it safe. Porfilio et al. (2013) found, the old youth trope of being “mindless, obedient objects who passively accept the stark social reality they experience” is no longer the case for youth as it relates to their social media engagement.

METHOD

This critical discourse analysis investigated Minaj’s COVID-19 tweets and the international audience’s reaction to her negative COVID-19 vaccine remarks on the Twittersphere. This study investigated all the tweets Minaj sent on that faithful day, starting with her “impotent” tweet and the chain of tweet responses to two important tweets related to her remarks, totaling a census sample size of 460 tweets. The two tweets under investigation included the one that caused controversy internationally.

Minaj’s tweet: “My cousin in Trinidad won’t get the vaccine cuz his friend got it & became impotent.” Will be referred to as the “impotent” tweet, and Minaj’s quote tweet of the video of Reid chastising her will be referred to as the “feud” tweet. Minaj wrote the following for this tweet: “This is what happens when you’re so thirsty to down another black woman (by the request of the white man) that you didn’t bother to read all my tweets. ‘My God, SISTER do better’ Imagine getting ur dumb @ss on tv a min after a tweet to spread a false narrative about a black woman” (Nicki Minaj, 2021d, September 13).

The exclusion/inclusion sampling method was utilized for this study. The inclusion criteria consisted of (1) celebrities who tweeted negative remarks about taking the vaccine; (2) celebrities who were either rappers or pop artists, the favored genres among those 16 to 34 years old (Statista, 2021); (3) celebrities whose remarks were not deleted on social media; and (4) celebrities who were either member of Generation Y or millennials. The scope of celebrities was reviewed in the *TooFab* webzine article titled “12 Celebs Who Will Not Be Getting Vaccinated or Spoke Out Against Vaccines,” which appeared to be the most concise and up-to-date article on this issue (TooFab, 2021, September 11). Based on this research, pop singers who spoke negatively publicly about the COVID-19 vaccine were nonexistent. The only rapper who suited the exclusion/inclusion criteria was Minaj.

The study was conducted with one coder and a digital spreadsheet. The unit of analysis was the tweet. Words were added in brackets to tweet contents when the users’ grammar interfered with sentence comprehension; otherwise, no changes were made to the cited tweets. All comments—limited by Twitter to 280 characters—in response to the celebrities’ remarks were coded. Qualitative thematic coding was conducted after patterns were delineated, and the codes were combined into themes. The data were assessed, and inferences were drawn using muted group theory as a guide.

RESULTS/DISCUSSIONS

Minaj caused a whirlwind of responses after she posted her impotent tweet on September 13, 2021, at 5:45 pm EST. Afterward, Minaj posted 15 more tweets before the 7 pm airing of *The Reid Out* news broadcast later that night. As previously stated, during this broadcast, Reid addressed Minaj looking directly into the camera, “You have 22 million followers on Twitter. For you to use your platform to encourage our community not to protect themselves and save their lives, my God sister, you could do better than that.” Her following remarks were in line with the type of chastisement one would receive from a big sister, “it’s a blessing that you got that [platform]. For you to use your platform to put people in the position of dying from a disease, they don’t have to die. OMG. As a fan, as a hip-hop fan, as someone who is your fan, I am so sad that you did that” (The Reid Out, 2021, September 13). Reid’s tweet of the 44-second video clip accumulated 2.4 million views. Her use of the spiritual terms “it’s a blessing” and “my God” went head-on with Minaj telling her audience to “pray on it.” Reid emphasized the word “our” when she spoke of “our community,” coded language for the Black community, essentially telling her that she let down members of her own community with her ungodly tweet. Reid’s use of “you could do better than that” reinforced that she let her down and her entire community.

Minaj, born in Trinidad and Tobago and raised in New York, NY, Queens borough, would eventually do with Reid what rappers nationwide are classically known for doing feuding. Feuding rappers have typically reached similar levels of success in their careers, usually attracting the same target audience. Even though Reid is not a rapper, Minaj tried to metamorphose this situation into a feud by verbally attacking her after Reid criticized her—possibly presuming their similarities outweighed their professional differences. Reid’s mother is from Guyana, which is near Trinidad, Minaj’s native land and both societies comprise Caribbean culture. Like Minaj, Reid hails from New York, NY (Brooklyn), and has reached high popularity. Her news shows ratings amassed almost 2 million nightly viewers then (Cable Rankings, 2021, December 3).

Outside the hip-hop scene, the commonalities between these financially successful Black women would normally be a point of departure for bonding. Still, within hip-hop, it makes for an even more anticipated battle among fans. The only caveat is that Reid is a political news analyst, not a hip-hop celebrity; Reid verbally battles Republicans, not rappers. After

Reid’s show ended, Minaj quickly used social media to defend herself by tweeting negative remarks about Reid. After several tweets, she officially marked Reid as her latest female opponent.

Approximately twenty minutes after Reid’s news show ended, Minaj posted the clip of her challenging Minaj to “do better” with her platform. Nicki Minaj (2021d, September 13) played on Reid’s remarks by tweeting, “This is what happens when you’re so thirsty to down another black woman (by the request of the white man), that you didn’t bother to read all my tweets.” Minaj comments of “down another black woman” and “request of the white man” positioned this issue as a racial one.

Minaj referred to several tweets afterward, showing her wider perspective on the vaccine issue. No longer did Minaj tell her followers to “pray on it,” but her tweet earlier that night at 5:50 pm said, “I’d def recommend they get the vaccine. They must feed their families. I’m sure I’ll b(e) vaccinated as well cuz I must go on tour, etcetera” (Nicki Minaj, 2021b, September 13). Her use of the word “def,” short for “definitely,” makes her sound assured that taking the vaccine is the right decision. Her remarks further indicated that she would also take the vaccine (Nicki Minaj, 2021b, September 13). She posted another tweet at 6:27 pm, asking her followers to take a poll on the vaccine they had already chosen, either Pfizer (65%), Moderna (20%), Johnson & Johnson (5%), or other (10%), which had 400,000 respondents, as of this writing (Nicki Minaj, 2021c, September 13). These tweets were made before the start of Reid’s show at 7:00 pm.

Minaj solidified her feud with Reid after her news show ended. Minaj wrote in the quote tweet sent at 8:23 pm, which was the launching point of her beef, “‘My God SISTER do better’ Imagine getting ur dumb @ss on tv a min after a tweet to spread a false narrative about a black woman” (Nicki Minaj, 2021f, September 13). Minaj dismissed Reid’s remarks about “our community” by insinuating she is a sellout who has gone against her community to appease White people. The “White man” symbolizes the mainstream news, MSNBC’s establishment. Nicki Minaj (2021f, September 13) said in another tweet posted at 8:35 pm, “The two white men sittin there nodding their heads cuz this uncle tomiana doing the work chile. How sad.” Therefore, Minaj’s first aim in the battle was for Reid’s reputation by saying that she sided with the Whites to ruin a Black woman, was spreading a “false narrative,” and by calling her “dumb” when in fact, her position is based on her quick wit and understanding of political issues.

The replies to Minaj's tweets criticizing Reid showed how social media complicates these classic rap battles. Observers of this verbal battle became participants by making remarks affirming or denouncing the players.

THE VERBAL BATTLE AT THE "FEUD" TWEET

The battle began at the "feud" tweet, and those who came were some of Reid's two million nightly viewers, Minaj's almost 25 million Twitter followers, and others who played their part. The verbal battles began. In a nonvirtual setting, those who would be considered attendees were now active participants. Reid's side, including those who supported her comments and those who were against Minaj, came into the battle strong in the chain of responses, and her supporters kept their momentum throughout; all the while, Minaj's supporters did their best to vocalize their support for her perspective but were less in number. In fact, 13% of the responses to this tweet were neutral, 35% were supportive of Minaj, and 52% were for Reid.

The side against Minaj operated mostly from a position of fear while showing paternalistic sentiments. They used authoritative language by including phrases in their tweet, such as they were "very disappointed" (User 19, 2021, September 13), telling her what she "needs" to do (User 26, 2021, September 13), and to "go sit down somewhere" (User 25, 2021, September 14).

The fear of death theme was widespread. One user said, "Come on ... how many people do you want to see on a ventilator and die?" (User 20, 2021, September 14). Another said (User 21, 2021, September 14), "Joy is trying to save lives. You're, perhaps unintentionally, encouraging people to endanger they're and the lives of others. Joy is right."

The next two are the *fear of being irresponsible* and *spreading misinformation*. A user said, "You're on Twitter talking about your 'cousin's friend testicals' as if what you're saying is the fact without any evidence. What are his health issues & who diagnosed this? Joy is right. You're putting BS out here with no proof. You must be responsible because people will believe it" (User 18, 2021, September 14).

Third, users spoke about how Reid was *more credible* than Minaj, which Minaj challenged in the content of her "feud" tweet when she called Reid "dumb." One user said, "Do your research—@JoyAnnReid is a champion, not just shakin her money maker" (User 17, 2021, September 14). Another user said, "You have no idea who Joy is; she's incredibly

intelligent and marches to the beat of her own drum. You should tune in to her show, if you had prior-you’d be vaccinated” (User 16, 2021 September 14).

Prevalent themes among those supporting Minaj will be elaborated on. A main theme was that *the bullies tried to censor Minaj* on her own platform. One user told Minaj, “You dropped against the narrative no matter what you’re reasoning they’re coming for ya know, unfortunately” (User 33, 2021, September 14). “These people do not want you to have an opinion different from theirs. Good for you!!” said another user (User 23, 2021, September 14).

A second theme was it’s Nicki’s *personal choice* to do whatever she wants to do. A user said, “Honestly, their problem is they can’t convince enough people to get it. Influence comes from all over, and those with platforms only care about pushing their narrative. She is entitled to her opinion” (User 42, 2021, September 13). A user spoke directly to Reid and said, “Joy Reid, expect individual choices. Stop parroting what you do not know to be true about this vaccine saving lives” (User 34, 2021, September 29).

A third theme was *they’re twisting your words*. Users kept stressing that those against Nicki did not read all her posts to better understand her thoughts on the vaccine. A user said, “Girl I love you! Thank you for being truthful and for not allowing these hypocrites [to] misuse your tweet and twist the meaning of your words” (User 40, 2021, September 15).

The fourth theme was *suspicion for the mainstream news* industry. “This lady is doing this because no one watches the news, so she had to have Nicki’s name in her mouth to get some views; if I were her, I would be ashamed of myself tisk tisk tisk,” said a user (User 39, 2021, September 15). Other users tweeted, “The rent is due” (User 32, 2021, September 13), “Anything for the clicks” (User 30, 2021, September 13), and “There is no news, only rhetoric and biased opinion masquerading as news” (User 31, 2021, September 14).

The last theme was an *enthusiastic fighting spirit*, representing comments one could shout out if engaged in a fight. Users tweeted “clapping back” (User 36, 2021, September 13), “Damn, she wasted ZERO time!” (User 37, 2021, September 13), and derivations of “DRAGGGGG” (User 38, 2021, September 13). Another said, “Freedom to vaccinate! No one can tell you what to do!!!!!! Good for you, Nicki. Free to speak and think whatever you want” (User 2, 2021, September 27). “I was not a fan, Nicki, but I am now!” another user states (User 22, 2021, September 14).

THE VERBAL BATTLE AT THE “IMPOTENT” TWEET

Users responded negatively and challenged Minaj’s “impotent” tweet by attacking her credibility, disseminating medical information, and insulting her by using illogical humor—essentially trying to turn her into a laughingstock on a platform that welcomes humor. The responses to her tweet were centered on misinformation. Days before the health minister of Trinidad and Tobago denied recorded incidences of vaccine-related swollen testicles, one user made a unique response, “Everyone across the Trinidadian diaspora now in the family group chat contacting cousins checking to see if a wedding got canceled recently. It’s a small island. We will find him!” (User 28, 2021, September 13).

The first theme centers around how Twitter users *questioned her authority* to speak on this issue. One user said, “Girl, there are people out there who react to ibuprofen too, but that doesn’t mean people should stop taking painkillers, speak to actual experienced doctors and scientists instead of making your mind up based on things that have a 0.0001 chance of happening. gossip isn’t research” (User 24, 2021, September 13). Another person explained, “Hmm. I could listen to what doctors and other medical professionals say based on data involving millions of people, or I could listen to what Nicki Minaj says her cousin told her about his friend. However, can I reconcile these two nearly equally good choices?” (User 5, 2021, September 13).

The second theme includes how responders *insulted Minaj through the use of illogical humor*. One user explained, “‘My cousin’s friend’ is the start of a story that totally happened” (User 6, 2021, September 13). Users explained stories with illogical connections: “My friend in Chicago had eggs for breakfast and then got in a car accident on the way to work, so do not eat eggs because they cause car accidents” (User 14, 2021, September 14). One tweet was a video clip of a SpongeBob cartoon with altered audio, and the comment on the tweet suggested that SpongeBob was “Nikki explaining why she has not gotten the vaccine yet.” SpongeBob said, “Vaccines are no laughing matter. I once met this guy who knew this guy,” repeated “Who knew this guy” fifteen times and landed on “Who knew this guy’s cousin. Got an STD and lied about it” (User 3, 2021, September 14). Memes were prevalent that humored the swollen testicle image.

The third theme includes *setting the facts straight*. Medical doctors responded to Minaj’s tweet. One responded by posting a graphic of

medical information and said, “As a doctor, this question does come up a lot. The truth is that the COVID-19 vaccine is not associated with infertility. It’s important to know that getting sick with COVID can cause erectile dysfunction though” (User 27, 2021, September 14).

FINDINGS

This critical discourse analysis was conducted to understand Minaj’s series of tweets on that faithful day after she tweeted the “impotent” tweet and to understand the audiences’ reaction to her remarks on COVID-19. The primary research question was: how does the language embedded in the audience’s reaction to Minaj’s negative COVID-19 remarks relate to muted group theory? Muted group theory’s four tenants are dominance, acceptability, subordination, and an option for resistance and change—the Twitter users who opposed Minaj’s comments met all the above factors. They not only came to witness the verbal battle between Minaj and Reid, but users took center stage by participating in it. Both Minaj and Reid pleaded their cases beforehand to the public, it was only a matter of time before the verbal battle would commence in the Twittersphere.

MGT’s first tenant specifies the *dominance of terms* created and defined by those in privileged groups. Twitter users described Minaj’s tweet as spreading “misinformation” on COVID-19. They were unwilling to consider the holistic array of tweets she posted on COVID-19 on that day to obtain a broader understanding of her perspective. Because of the “misinformation” label allotted to one tweet, users felt empowered to criticize Minaj without context. One user even said, “Nicki, do you think you are so relevant that someone should search through all your tweets???? If you[r] tweet does not stand up to reality, it does not stand up to reality. No further research is required” (User 13, 2021, September 16). Responders in support of her “impotent” tweet said Minaj’s words were being twisted and pleaded with the opposition to read her other tweets, to understand her range of ideas and to help others to see that she is a complex person who has a right to her own opinion. After Drake informed her of his positive COVID-19 diagnosis, Minaj even tweeted at 5:14 pm, approximately 20 minutes before her “impotent” tweet, for others to “get vaccinated” (2021e, September 13).

The next MGT tenant is *acceptability*, which means that the opinions of the subdominant groups are less respected and acceptable than those of the dominant group. In opposition to Minaj, the group believed they

were all-knowing ones who could move “the other” into a “correct” way of seeing the world through fear tactics, disregarding her unique experiences as a Black woman, millennial, and celebrity rapper. Her critics believed they were responsible adults and anyone who disagreed with their way of seeing the world was irresponsible and needed chastising and correction. They believed Minaj was risking people’s lives who didn’t know any better than to take medical advice from a rapper. Therefore, they discredited her and gave credit to Reid. Users even insisted that Minaj admit to her wrongdoing so they could move on. One user said, “My God Nicki . . . just take the L. You used your platform to spread misinformation. Now correct yourself so we can all move on” (User 7, 2021, September 16). As mentioned, users tried to turn Minaj into a laughingstock by mentioning illogical cause-and-effect relationships.

The next MGT tenant is *subordination*, which highlights that those in the subdominant group must use the dominant group’s mode of communication by translating their expressions or becoming bilingual. The group on Minaj’s side felt pressure to voice an opinion opposing the public sentiment on COVID-19 “misinformation,” or being skeptical about taking the vaccine. A user explained, “Anyone who posts against the Party political narrative will be crushed, deemed, or silenced. Any black person who opposes the party is put in place. This is a sad fact. We must fight this in America; this system is trying to keep itself in power” (User 8, 2021, September 14). Another user proclaimed, “IM SO happy that you’re at least ONE celeb that will Call out the fake news! Don’t let the fake news make you think any different stay strong & true to your beliefs & your gut!! This just made my whole day! CALL THEM OUT” (User 9, 2021, September 13).

The next MGT tenant is the possibility for *resistance and change*; it gives agency to the marginalized and shows their ability to resist and confront domination. Users exclaimed Minaj had a right to her own “opinion” and that she had “freedom” to make her own “choices.” This is best shown in the quote from one user, “This is so worthy of popcorn. Now, only other celebrities can speak up when this crap happens to them too. We might get some change at that point” (User 29, 2021, September 14). Another user said, “They are puppets, Nicki, Omg” (User 10, 2021, September 13). “I love how Nicki is having this dialog utilizing her platform. She’s showing people it’s safe & ok to have these conversations, to share our questions, experiences, concerns, reassurances, differences, etc. We can all benefit from this discussion. Stay safe y’all,” said another user

(User 1, 2021, September 13). Minaj’s supporters kept encouraging her to fight against those people who were trying to “bully” her. Minaj transgressed from a Black woman celebrity millennial into a person bravely taking on the establishment.

According to MGT, the marginalized are silenced through (1) ridicule, (2) ritual, (3) control, and (4) harassment (West & Turner, 2010), and this was present in the tweet chains under investigation. Minaj was *ridiculed* in her “impotent” tweet, so much that the responses resembled a slapstick comedy and sheer buffoonery. It has become a *ritual* to try to control and cancel celebrities on social media. One user proclaimed, “Well said! How dare someone try to censor you on your own platform! You’re right” (User 11, 2021, September 14). Users tried to *control* Minaj’s discourse, and due to their large numbers, their force met the level of *harassment*, or when it happens online, it can be called digital harassment.

CONCLUSION

When the September 13 airing of *The Reid Out* ended, neither Reid nor the mainstream media outlets had the final word on the “impotent” tweet because a verbal battle ensued for weeks on social media. Minaj lashed out insults against her opponent to jumpstart their feud, just as rappers have traditionally done, and Twitter users who responded to Minaj’s “impotent” and “feud” tweets tried to mute her because of her inaccurate comments on COVID-19. The opposition believed that Minaj—who is a woman, a Black person originally from the Caribbean, a rapper, and a millennial—did not have the authority to participate in a high-stakes politicized discussion. Their anger stemmed from her willingness to spread “misinformation” on COVID-19 and reveal to the public that she had not yet been vaccinated and needed to conduct more research—users assumed she was lying. Users adhered to the tenants and behaviors of the muted group theory, including dominance, acceptability, and subordination via ridicule, ritual, control, and harassment.

COVID-19 is a new virus, but efforts to mute Black celebrities are not new. When people from minoritized groups—such as people of color and women—have a different opinion from the establishment based on their unique set of life experiences, their differences are not considered, and they are simply chastised for thinking differently. For instance, some tried to silence Beyonce, a millennial pop singer, after her visual homage to the Black Panther Party on the group’s 50th anniversary during her half-time

performance at the National Football League's (NFL) Superbowl event (France, 2016, February 24).

Although Minaj's supporters, "the underdogs," were large in number, they were not as numerous as those who sided against Minaj. The underdogs did not agree with Minaj's comment that COVID-19 causes impotence, so the old troupe of the youth being "mindless, obedient objects who passively accept the stark social reality they experience" (Porfilio et al., 2013), was nonexistent in this situation—even though, comments from her opposition centered on a fear of Minaj's influence. Instead of the underdogs siding with Minaj on her impotent comment, they felt she had a right to express her opinion and beliefs. They believed other users misunderstood her because they did not take the time to read her other tweets posted that day. The underdogs felt Minaj was not an irresponsible celebrity, as Reid and her supporters had suggested, but was a misunderstood young person who bravely stood up to the establishment.

The underdogs recognized the effort to mute Minaj was not an isolated incident; subsequently, their participation in a verbal battle on Twitter was on behalf of a larger cause. One user proclaimed, "And then they try to cancel ppl for having questions about the vaccine" (User 15, 2021, September 13). The underdog support for Minaj was in the same vein as those who supported members of the Black Panthers, Collin Kaepernick, and others from marginalized groups who seized the floor by interjecting their perspectives into political discussions. Perhaps, these celebrities believed in the United States Constitution's First Amendment and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19, which expresses the legal right to freedom of expression—the underdogs activated this principle on Twitter, and their comments radiated a youthful enthusiasm.

Users cheered for Minaj while helping her verbally battle Reid and the establishment because if Minaj won, they all won. Accordingly, while Reid won this verbal battle based on the number of supporters, Minaj won in articulating one's right to freedom of speech on social media. As one user remarked with fervor and grit, "Give 'em hell, Nicki. Tell her to come and make you take it" (User 35, 2021, September 14).

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