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Negotiating Voice: Gendered Marginalization and Co-Cultural Performance in American Talk Shows

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines female marginalization on American talk shows, focusing on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert through the interviews of Nicki Minaj (2018) and Lady Gaga (2021). Integrating Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) with Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), the research investigates how female guests navigate dominant conversational norms to achieve assimilation, maintain visibility, and assert agency within male-dominated media spaces. FCDA exposes the gendered and ideological framing embedded in the interviews, while CA captures micro-level interactional dynamics, including interruptions, topic shifts, and humor that reinforce the host's discursive authority. Findings reveal that, despite moments of apparent empowerment, female guests operate within structurally constrained arenas that privilege male authority and entertainment-driven agendas, necessitating strategic negotiation to sustain presence and voice. The study underscores talk shows as highly controlled public spheres that normalize gendered marginalization while highlighting the nuanced strategies women employ to resist erasure. Future research could examine how gender, ethnicity, and other co-cultural identities are navigated across diverse talk-show formats, further illuminating subtle discursive practices that shape visibility, power, and agency in mediated spaces.

Introduction

Television talk shows have long functioned as influential cultural sites for the construction, circulation, and contestation of social identities. In the contemporary media landscape, talk shows serve as a powerful platform for public discourse, shaping societal attitudes and beliefs. However, these platforms often reflect and perpetuate existing gender biases and inequalities. Originally conceived as spaces for conversational exchange and democratic debate (Timberg, 2002), American talk shows have gradually evolved into highly institutionalised, commercially driven

media performances that both reflect and reinforce broader gendered hierarchies (Perez, 2020). What began as a liberal platform for public dialogue has increasingly shifted toward a masculinised genre dominated by male hosts, where humour, satire, and audience appeal often take precedence over inclusivity and balanced representation (Timberg, 2002; Tuchman, 2000).

Timberg (2002) divided American talk shows into three major subgenres: the late-night entertainment talk show, the audience-participation show, and the magazine-format show. He further identified five historical cycles from 1948 to 2000. Talk shows originated as early as 1948 in the form of daytime programs that served as educational and public service forums for discussing home, family, and women's issues, eventually evolving into corporate media entities engaged in "publicity wars" for ratings. In its earliest form, the talk show blended radio traditions such as news, variety talk, humor, disc jockeying, interviews, stand-up, and sketch comedy. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the promotion of feminism and youth culture, while the following two decades marked an era of technological advancement and the introduction of infotainment, reality programming, sensationalism, and "trash talk," giving rise to notable hosts like Ted Koppel, David Letterman, Joan Rivers, Oprah Winfrey, and Geraldo Rivera. From 1995 to 2000, the talk show became a critically acclaimed and highly commercialized genre, utilizing information as entertainment (Timberg, 2002, p.148). Shows such as *The Ricki Lake Show* and *The Jerry Springer Show* pushed television talk toward spectacle through stage frolic, fight scenes, graphic discussions of sex, and highly abusive language to achieve the "money shot" (Timberg, 2002).

Another popular genre, the late-night show, emerged in the 1990s and has undergone multiple transformations. Known for its urbane and elite audience of celebrities and politicians, it incorporates features such as the opening monologue, musical performances, and comedic sketches, which have contributed to its enduring popularity. The late show in its current form is "the product of years of evolution and different contributions from several hosts and production teams" (Perez, 2020, p.61). However, with the proliferation of media and technology, talk shows became increasingly institutionalized, media-controlled, and gender-biased.

Historically, the marginalization of women in talk shows is grounded in broader social systems and beliefs. In the United States, the rise of broadcast media in the early 20th century coincided with rigid gender expectations and roles. Despite the feminist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, politics, academia, and mainstream media largely ignored female experiences. Women were often portrayed as men's silent and unopinionated consorts, with media representations aimed at symbolic annihilation through condemnation, trivialization, or absence (Tuchman, 2000, pp.152,154). Daytime talk show topics frequently focused on "women's issues" in the form of gossip or storytelling, targeting housewives. Although seemingly participatory, talk shows were excessively gendered, redefining the public-private relationship and "transforming the political towards a reliance on the circulation of discursive practices [rather] than on formal political agendas" (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994, pp.42-43). Late-night talk shows perpetuate gender imbalances through inequitable representation of women, relegation to less dominant roles, and stereotypical assumptions about women as poor comedians. These imbalances are reinforced by the selection and administration of content, where political and public affairs are presented by quick-witted male hosts in a humorous, laid-back style that poses hegemonic challenges for female participants (Perez, 2020).

Building on this understanding, the present study examines two episodes of the famous American talk show, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* featuring Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, to explore the structural and discursive mechanisms through which women are marginalised in American talk shows. It seeks to contribute to broader discussions on gender and media by revealing the deep-

rooted influences that sustain patriarchal ideologies, advocating for more inclusivity and equity in talk show representations, and promoting a gender-sensitive media environment. Employing a qualitative methodology and robust research design, the study analyzes selected talk show clips to provide an in-depth examination of both verbal and non-verbal elements of discourse, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of female marginalization in media.

Literature Review

Television talk shows have long attracted scholarly attention for the ways in which they reflect and reproduce broader socio-cultural power relations. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) has been particularly influential in exposing how humor, performance, visual framing, and interactional control are used within talk-show discourse to marginalize women and sustain patriarchal positioning (Lazar, 2005; Mills & Mullany, 2011; Holmes, 2005). Although FCDA powerfully critiques the ideological reproduction of sexism in media, it offers only a limited account of how marginalized participants themselves *strategically respond* within such communicative environments. Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) therefore provides a complementary lens by focusing on the communicative strategies women use to negotiate access, acceptance and legitimacy under conditions of discursive inequality.

Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) has been widely used to examine how marginalized groups navigate and negotiate with dominant structures, often under conditions of power asymmetry. Parker (2002) shows how African American executives adapt, resist, and transform workplace challenges, while Allison and Hibbler (2004) identify structural barriers restricting minorities' access to leisure programs. Burnett et al. (2009) reveal how rape culture on U.S. college campuses coerces victims into silence, and Cohen and Avanzino (2010) highlight strategies used by people with disabilities to assimilate in professional contexts. Camara and Orbe (2010) extend this to discriminatory communication rooted in race, sex, age, sexual orientation, and disability.

Recent studies have turned to dominant group discourse. Orbe and Batten (2017) analyze identity politics during the Trump era, while Razzante (2018) examines dominant-group communicators, mapping how their responses can either sustain or challenge communicative power imbalances.

In education, Suyono (2021) uncovers inequities disadvantaging locally educated EFL instructors. Ibrahim, Windels, and Lu (2023) document racial binaries in U.S. advertising, and Aksoy and Heuman (2024) introduce 'blending and co-cultural networking' to explain how U.S.-born children of Turkish immigrants navigate intercultural tension.

Brown and Chevrette (2021) apply Co-Cultural theory in an academic context, using it to explore normativity and difference in the classroom demonstrating how CCT can guide critical reflection on power and marginalization in educational settings.

Intersectional applications include Han and Price's (2018) study of immigrant wives in rural Korea, Zirulnik and Orbe's (2019) research on Black female pilots in a white male profession, and Bie and Tang's (2016) exploration of Chinese gay men's coming-out narratives under traditional cultural constraints.

Despite the extensive use of Co-Cultural Theory across a range of institutional contexts: from workplaces and education to online and intercultural communication, existing scholarship has yet to fully explore how co-cultural strategies manifest within the performance-driven, entertainment-oriented context of television talk shows. Prior studies foreground interactional dominance and discursive marginalization in these programs but seldom examine how female guests deploy

communicative strategies to manage their co-cultural status in real time. This analytical gap warrants an application of CCT to talk show discourse, thereby extending the theory into a unique media setting where humor, performance and host control intensify pressures for assimilation.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- How do male hosts frame and control talk show interaction to sustain gendered power relations in American late-night shows?
- How do female guests mediate and negotiate their co-cultural status through strategies of assimilation?

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative approach using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), Conversation Analysis (CA), and Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) to investigate gendered dynamics in American talk shows. These frameworks are selected for their capacity to reveal the subtle ways power, gender ideologies, and conversational control intersect within media discourse. To this end, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* was deliberately chosen as the site of analysis because of its status as a prominent and influential platform within U.S. political comedy, one that routinely deploys satire and conversational authority to shape public opinion, while providing a fertile ground for observing power asymmetries and the discursive marginalization of female guests under the guise of entertainment.

Data were drawn from selected clips from two episodes aired in 2018 and 2021. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure relevance to the research aims. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) note, qualitative studies rely on "small samples which are nested in their context, theory driven and purposive rather than random," while Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) maintain that purposive sampling enables researchers to "select a robust sample that will provide understanding and diverse perspectives on the study issues" (p.92). This approach was therefore most appropriate for examining gendered communicative practices and co-cultural strategies in specific interview interactions.

FCDA offers a political critique of the gendered and hegemonic ideologies that underpin social injustices against women and minorities, aiming to "demystify the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse" (Lazar, 2007, p.144) and to raise critical consciousness about the discursive dimensions of dominance (Lazar, 2018). CA, meanwhile, enables a fine-grained examination of interactional dynamics, focusing on turn taking, conversational sequencing, and face management, making it well suited to broadcast talk, which, as Hutchby (2006) notes, is organized through similar sequential structures. Finally, Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1996) provides a lens to examine how underrepresented group members (female guests) communicate within power structures dominated by privileged group members (male hosts), with attention to assimilation strategies that reveal gendered asymmetries in interaction such as nonassertive, assertive and aggressive assimilation. FCDA and CCT are thus paired for their shared emancipatory commitment to exposing structural inequalities embedded in text and talk.

Talk Show 1

Guest: Lady Gaga

Year: 2021

Duration: 8 minutes and thirty seconds

URL: https://youtu.be/-uh_PmXtjpQ?si=aSZotjIOgAawWzim

Structure of the interview

This interview, like other Stephen Colbert hosted talk shows, has a predetermined and well-defined structure with discussion focusing on two main topics

- Lady Gaga's performance at President Biden's inaugural
- Her social activism for the LGBTQ community

Although the discussion revolves around these two topics, there are subtopics that emanate from the original topics such as the flag movement, Lady Gaga's bullet proof dress and her therapy for reducing work pressure. All these topics are directed towards enfeebling and disempowering Lady Gaga, and putting her at a disadvantage. The interview is structured around two central topics: her performance at President Biden's inauguration and her ongoing activism for the LGBTQ+ community. However, beneath this surface-level celebration of a female celebrity's political engagement and public artistry lies a layered discursive pattern that reveals the subtle yet persistent marginalization of the female guest. This marginalization occurs not through overt hostility but through the rhetorical and structural maneuvers of the host, Stephen Colbert, whose topic control and humor dilute and destabilize Gaga's assertions of professionalism, patriotism, and political voice.

The interview opens with Colbert giving Gaga a ceremonious introduction, referring to her as an 'award-winning musical artist, philanthropist, fashion icon, and movie star'. However, this performative act of flattery, typical of Colbert's introductions for female guests, is almost immediately undermined as the show progresses.

Stephen Colbert (00:01): Folks, my guest tonight is an award-winning musical artist, philanthropist, fashion icon, and movie star. Please welcome back to the late show, Lady Gaga.

Lady Gaga, by contrast, responds with deference, aligning with dominant conversational norms through her acceptance of titles, expressions of appreciation, and affable tone.This early accommodation reflects a measured form of assimilation within the dominant cultural frame. When Colbert introduces the first topic, her performance of the national anthem at the inauguration, Gaga responds with an altruistic speech that casts her as a unifying figure. She emphasizes her desire to sing for "everybody," not merely for Biden's supporters. This moment foregrounds her effort to highlight shared values and sidestep political division. She presents her performance as a unifying gesture of inclusion and healing in a politically fractured climate.This strategic depoliticization signals a deliberate assimilation into dominant cultural norms, which frequently expect politically engaged female celebrities to remain palatable, non-confrontational, and broadly acceptable to mainstream audiences.

Stephen Colbert (01:24): Listen, you had this extraordinary year, starting with singing the national anthem at President Biden's inaugural. What was this-- what was this moment like for you? (Shows a photographic image of a scene from the ceremony at the Capitol with Lady Gaga in a long, puffy and red flowing dress. The picture shows Gaga from the rear)

Lady Gaga (01:42): You know, it was one of the proudest moments I've ever had as a musician and a performer. It's a.. every performer has something that's meaningful to them about why they do what they do. For me, its I love to make the public smile. And I had two minutes and thirty seconds to talk to the whole world. And I thought it might be a good opportunity to sing to

everybody, you know, not just to President Biden's fans and to the people that voted for him, but to the whole world. Because the world has been on fire, and everybody deserves love.

At this point, Colbert attempts to deflate Gaga's emotional speech by first shifting to a lighthearted anecdote about a misplaced flag, and then pivoting to the more politically fraught topic of the Capitol insurrection. Rather than engaging with the political implications of the reference, Gaga diverts the discussion by praising her musical director and her musical arrangements. This move reflects a conscious effort to avoid controversy, as she distances herself from politically divisive themes and grounds the exchange in professional discourse, emphasizing shared values such as musical excellence and collaboration.

Stephen Colbert (02:37): I love you finding the flag at that moment, that our flag was still there. That was a very emotional moment.

Lady Gaga (02:42): Thank you.

Stephen Colbert: (02:43): How did you get through that moment yourself? I much imagine that particular moment is so resonant to that spot where you were standing, where the insurrection had been.

Lady Gaga (02:51): Well, I had the privilege of working with Michael Bearden, he is my musical director. He is also the conductor for my show in Las Vegas, for our jazz show. He does both pop and jazz. He's brilliant and he did that arrangement with me, with the marine corp band. And we decided to hold on that our flag was still there. And what is funny about this moment, in addition to its being emotional and powerful for me as a singer was that [Chuckles] believe it or not, they actually moved the flag.

Moreover, while recounting the incident of the missing flag, Lady Gaga emphasizes her professionalism, noting that she proceeded with her rehearsal at the Capitol despite the surrounding political unrest. She gives a vivid account of the insurrection, effectively infusing her narrative with patriotic undertones and reinforcing her authority. However, this moment of narrative control is short-lived, as she is once again repositioned when Colbert questions her about the bulletproof dress.

Stephen Colbert (04:29): I—I had I had heard that this, again, this beautiful dress that you were wearing, that that was bulletproof, that it had fabric sewn into it.

Lady Gaga (04:43): Yeah, there was a bulletproof vest sewn into the dress. And you know it was-- it was a scary time in this country. And I care a lot about my family. And as a performer, I understand that I put myself in all types of dangerous situations in order to do what I love. And so, I did that for myself, but for my family as well, so that my mom and dad and my sister would feel confident. (05:09) But that dress, you know, is a Schiaparelli dress, an Italian designer, and everything about what I wore that day was inspired by the Italian and the French revolution. Because in a lot of ways, I felt like that day was a revolution for this country, and a real opportunity for us to look look past the resistance and look forward into a time when we can be kinder and we can be braver as a nation, as people.

In this segment, Gaga continues to navigate the interview space through deliberate acts of assimilation. When a previous moment of vulnerability is recalled: her admission that she used to "drink and cry" to cope with work stress, she does not reject the reference. Instead, she lightens the mood with a measured response: "Just with tequila now." This humorous turn demonstrates her

effort to maintain positive face and to mirror the host's informal and irreverent tone. When offered tequila on set, a gesture that could further reduce her public persona to entertainment value, Gaga accepts without resistance, adopting a tone of participation and familiarity. In doing so, she stays within the dominant discourse using humor, composure, and cooperation to sustain her legitimacy within the mainstream space.

Stephen Colbert (05:41): Now the last time we were together, I asked you how, with all the pressures of your work and all the things you take on, the things you care about, how you are relaxed at the end of the day. And you said a glass of wine and and crying.

Lady Gaga (05:46): A cry.

Stephen Colbert (05:56): A cry. Is that still how you do it?

Lady Gaga (05:58): Just with tequila now.

Stephen Colbert (06:00): Would you like—I have a little bar-- would you like a little tequila?

Lady Gaga (06:04): Yeah, for sure. I wish this is really full service over here! [Laughter]

Toward the end of the interview, Colbert introduces the topic of Gaga's LGBTQ+ activism implying that Gaga's public advocacy is not a political or moral commitment but a therapeutic outlet. Gaga, in turn, avoids challenging this framing. Instead, she speaks about voice, kindness, and destiny, concepts that are individually empowering but stripped of direct political critique. This response, too, reveals the assimilation imperative: Gaga aligns her activism with broad, non-confrontational themes that resonate with a general audience and ensure her acceptability within dominant norms. Her final flourish: a personal compliment to Colbert, cements this strategy of positive face reinforcement. Even as she discusses serious subjects, she remains deferential, respectful, and careful to leave the host and audience feeling comfortable.

Stephen Colbert (06:59): You have been an outspoken activist for young people and the L.G.B.T.Q community for for years. What do you do, does that activism itself help ward off despair, give you hope?

Lady Gaga (07:14): You know, I don't know that it wards off despair as much as it reminds me that we all have a voice. And it's just how you use it. That's our weapon. That's the-- that's the kindest weapon that we have, if we choose to wield it kindly. For me, I I understand and I understood when I was young, around maybe 21 years old, that I had a platform where I could speak and talk to the world. (07:42) And, look, we all have access to social media. I have a lot of people that watch what I do when I decide to be in the public eye. And how I choose to use that space and time is something that I care about. So, for me, speaking about L.G.B.T.Q.-plus rights is part of my destiny and a part of what I believe makes it possible for me to have this work matter (08:10). To me, realness and relationships and the the reality of the world, if you don't look at it dead in the eye, then all of this is an illusion, and it makes the art matter less. But this is also why I love you so much. You've always put heart into your work. You always put what matters into your work. so, I'm happy to be here because, like, I really respect him, (looking at the audience) and I know that you do, too (08:24).

Lady Gaga's presence throughout the interview is defined by her ongoing efforts to navigate and respond to the dominant conversational dynamics; her assimilation is thus not co incidental, it is strategic, necessary, and deeply gendered.Her efforts to avert conflict, emphasize sameness, and

align with the host's affective tone demonstrate how co-cultural subjects often must renegotiate their authority through accommodation rather than resistance.

FCDA: host power and the performance of female denigration

Late-night talk shows often reinforce gendered hierarchies by subtly undermining female guests through humor, framing, and selective disclosure. In Stephen Colbert's interview with Lady Gaga, these strategies emerge in ways that diminish her public image while allowing the host to retain conversational control. Lady Gaga is greeted with a standing ovation and huge applause from a very jubilant audience which reflect her fame and popularity. The interview begins with a grand introduction to the guest which also serves to frame the discourse around specific aspects of her work and personality: such as her singing and her philanthropism. Later, the host picks on these very aspects to disempower her through oblique criticism. He begins by displaying a carefully selected image from the ceremony, which immediately draws attention to Lady Gaga's sprawling red dress. Her face is barely visible from the rear-view shot, while the other prominent figures in the frame remain indistinct behind COVID masks. Thus, the dress becomes the singular focal point. This strategic visual cue appears designed to foreground Gaga's appearance and prepare the audience for later critique. The speech that follows reinforces her introduction as a philanthropist, in which Gaga employs elevated and emotional expressions such as 'I love to make the public smile', ' I had two minutes and thirty seconds to talk to the whole world' and 'Because the world has been on fire and everybody deserves love'. The aura created through her eloquent rhetoric is punctured when Colbert interjects with a remark about 'finding the flag'. By transforming the solemnity of a national moment into a humorous anecdote about locating a misplaced flag, Colbert undermines the gravity of the occasion and Gaga's performance.

He further digresses by referring to the insurrection and ensuing violence , strategically shifting attention away from Gaga's stardom in a bid to trivialise her moment of national pride. Colbert subsequently employs more overt disempowering strategies such as disclosure and revelation to expose the fact that Gaga's dress had a bulletproof lining , a disclosure timed immediately after her altruistic speech about love and hope. Having already primed the audience with an image of the dress, Colbert repositions Gaga not as a national icon of trust and bravery, but as a performer fearful of her own country, sceptical of her safety, and mistrustful of the public. The symbolism of a bulletproof vest , danger, violence and fear stands in stark contrast to that of the national anthem, peace and unity. By juxtaposing the two, Colbert attempts to expose the "irony" of Gaga's performance. Furthermore, her fashion image is tarnished as he insinuates that she manipulated her beautiful gown by "sewing in a bulletproof vest" (04:29). Lady Gaga attempts to redeem herself through a lengthy improvised explanation, claiming it was a "scary time," that she risked her life for her passion, and that the vest was worn for her family (04:43). The effect, however, leaves her appearing vulnerable and defensive.

A second moment of overt denigration follows when Colbert stereotypes Gaga as an emotionally unstable woman prone to crying and drinking. He theatrically unveils a miniature bar and pours drinks for her, encouraging the audience to watch Gaga consume alcohol and laugh unguardedly, a display that contradicts the serious, intellectual persona she initially projected. The third instance of humiliation takes place during this drinking sequence. Colbert casually refers to Gaga's LGBTQ activism but in a sardonic tone, implying that her advocacy was driven by self-interest rather than genuine philanthropy. Once again, Gaga defends herself, delivering a motivational speech in a bid to reaffirm her identity as a principled, substantive woman. Thus, the interview illustrates a strategic pattern of male-hosted discourse in which a powerful female guest is successively disarmed, mocked, and forced into self-justification.

Talk Show 2

Guest: Nicki Minaj

Year: 2018

Duration: 10 minutes and 49 seconds

URL: https://youtu.be/8s9joL_AGfo?si=DTBLQBJzwxBHS6NW

Structure of the interview

This interview clip is divided into three main topics.

- Nicki Minaj's latest album 'Queen'
- Her new song 'Barbie Dreams'
- Her song 'Anaconda' which she sang at the 2016 Time 100 Gala

Conversation Analysis

The interview takes a traditional start, with Colbert warmly welcoming Nicki Minaj as 'one of the best-selling musical artists in the world'. Minaj, visibly flustered and delighted by the invitation, goes overboard in flattering Colbert. In her opening remarks, she employs a series of exuberant adjectives and interjections to convey her excitement and fondness for Colbert and his show. Colbert, however, refrains from responding with equal enthusiasm; he appears skeptical of her professed affection and withholds the customary 'I love you too' when she says, 'I love you so much'. Instead, he refers to her as 'fast and funny', a description that carries subtly belittling and dismissive undertones.

Stephen Colbert (00:00): My first guest tonight is one of the best-selling musical artists in the world. Her latest album, *Queen*, dropped on Friday. Please welcome Nicki Minaj. [Applause]

Nicki Minaj (00:34): Oh my God.

Stephen Colbert (00:35): Oh my gosh. So nice to have you on.

Nicki Minaj (00:37): It's so exciting to be here. I watch you all the time. I'm obsessed with you.

Stephen Colbert (00:42): Wow. [Smiles]

Nicki Minaj (00:42): I love you so much.

Stephen Colbert (00:42): I'm so glad. I, I don't, I don't know why that comes as a surprise to me. You're—

Nicki Minaj (00:47): I know.

Stephen Colbert (00:47): You're, you're funny.

Nicki Minaj (00:48): Thank you.

Stephen Colbert (00:49): Yeah. You're fast and you're funny.

Nicki Minaj (00:52): Thank you.

The first segment opens with Colbert displaying a semi-nude promotional image of Minaj from her album *Queen*. A closer view of the photograph shows Minaj in an erotic posture, styled as a seductive Oriental queen, with her chest area blurred. In the discussion that ensues, Colbert deploys covert strategies to both satirize and sexualize Minaj, asking about the inspiration behind the cover. Minaj responds by describing the image as that of a warfare goddess and characterizes it as 'angelic'. Colbert feigns agreement, repeatedly calling the image 'regal'. Although seemingly complimentary, his focus remains on underscoring its obscenity and impropriety. He notes that CBS is likely to censor the image heavily and instructs the cameraman to display it again. Colbert continues to employ satire under the guise of praise, insisting that the image ought not to be blurred because it constitutes a 'piece of art'. He then compares Minaj's voluptuous image to the *Venus de Milo*; the ancient Greek sculpture celebrated for its craftsmanship. While ostensibly admiring, the analogy functions as mockery, a tone amplified when Minaj likens her cover to the *Mona Lisa*. The comparison falls flat: the *Mona Lisa*, celebrated for its modesty, is neither comparable to the *Venus de Milo* nor Minaj's provocative photograph. Colbert's subsequent remark that he would prefer to blur the *Mona Lisa* (as it offers no sensual pleasure) serves to reinforce his emphasis on Minaj's overt sexuality, which he suggests ought to remain unblurred.

Stephen Colbert (01:33): Very regal. Now, here's the thing. We are on CBS right now, and I am unclear [Laughter] as to how much of this cover will make it—

Nicki Minaj (01:43): [Chuckles] [Hand over mouth]

Stephen Colbert (01:43): —to air. [Laughter] and I'm not sure. Can you see that one more time, Jim?

Nicki Minaj (01:48): [Laughs]

Stephen Colbert (01:48): Let's go here. [Laughter] I'm not sure what will be blurred, [Laughter] but I believe none of it should.

Nicki Minaj (01:53): Amen! [Exclaims] [Claps hands]

Stephen Colbert (01:54): This is what this is. [Applause] This is beautiful. You're an artist.

Nicki Minaj (01:59): That's right.

Stephen Colbert (01:59): This is your art.

Nicki Minaj (01:59): That's right.

Stephen Colbert (02:00): Exactly. Would you, would you blur the Venus de Milo? No!

Nicki Minaj (02:03):Right. Would you blur the Mona Lisa?

Stephen Colbert (02:07):Yeah, I would.

Nicki Minaj (02:07):Oh, okay. [Laughter] [Mona Lisa expression]

Colbert then moves towards the next segment: the discussion on her new song 'Barbie Dreams'. While a lot goes on in the form of comedy, information and controversy, the main objective of the host is to denigrate and sexualize Minaj. He uses the elicitation technique for information about the song and how she had called out so many famous men and the reactions she got in return.

Stephen Colbert (02:22): Well, you've got, one of your songs, *Barbie Dreams*, okay—

Nicki Minaj (02:27): Okay. [Sighs]

Stephen Colbert (02:22):—is getting a lot of attention.

Nicki Minaj (02:29): Yeah.

Stephen Colbert (02:29): Okay. Which is as a song should get a lot of attention.

Nicki Minaj (02:32): Yeah.

Stephen Colbert (02:32): This one's getting a lot of attention for some of the famous men you call out in this.

Moving on, Colbert points out that he didn't make it to the list of men and proceeds to ask that if he had done so 'how might you inform me?' This question is posed as a challenge, and Minaj immediately indulges in impromptu singing and tapping. The lyrics of her song create an uproar with the censor beeping, the audience and the orchestra members rolling with laughter, Colbert with his head down on the desk and Minaj fanning him with a card. Thus, a spectacle is created within moments.

Stephen Colbert (03:13): And I'm just curious that if I were to make the list, what, how might, how might you inform me?

Nicki Minaj (03:18): Oh my God. Oh my God. Well—

Stephen Colbert (03:20): What signs might you drop about me?

Nicki Minaj (03:22): I would say, [Pauses] okay, I would say [sings]I might [Censored] Stephen after the show. He gonna come back to work with a magical glow. But— [Applause]

This is followed by an incoherent exchange full of repetition, faltering, interruptions, insinuations, and sexual connotations. There is also a lot of physical activity: facial expressions, gestures, laughter. Most of the humor created in this segment is through sexual innuendos and suggestive language. This is further enhanced by Colbert's playful responses to Minaj's bold lyrics. He pretends to lose direction when he says, 'It's all downhill from here'. He also stutters when Minaj asks him if he is married. Moving on, he uses lewd expressions like 'I just wanna linger— for so long'. Thus, Colbert succeeds in creating an erotic spectacle which is fully supported by Minaj.

Nicki Minaj (04:08): And, and then the ending says, [sings] but when you see us, please [Censored] don't stare, just address me as Queen Nicki Colbert. [Applause]

Stephen Colbert (04:23):[Shakes hand] [Claps hands] [Bows again twice]

Nicki Minaj (04:29) :Thank you. [Applause]

Stephen Colbert (04:33): It's all downhill from here. [Laughter] [Laughs]

Nicki Minaj (04:40):Are you married?

Stephen Colbert (04:41):What?

Nicki Minaj (04:41):Are you married?

Stephen Colbert (04:41):[Speechless] [Laughter] Why, why, [Stutters] yes, yes, I am.

Nicki Minaj (04:50):Oh.

Stephen Colbert (04:59):Yes, I am. I'm married. Yes, I am. I'm married, yeah.

Nicki Minaj (04:52):Okay. Shout out to her. [Laughter]

Stephen Colbert (04:53):Okay. Absolutely. Shout out to you, darling!

Nicki Minaj (04:57):[Chuckles]

Stephen Colbert (04:58): It's all show business. [Laughter]. Now, don't you, is there, is there a form? I don't know where to go from here, actually.

Nicki Minaj (05:06):[Chuckles]

Stephen Colbert (05:07):I, I just don't know what to do. I just don't want to pass this moment.

Nicki Minaj (05:10):I know.

Stephen Colbert (05:11):I just wanna linger—

Nicki Minaj (05:11):It's so good.

Stephen Colbert (05:12):—for so long.

Nicki Minaj (05:12): It's such a good moment. It feels right.

The final segment shows Colbert making another topic shift: 2016 Time 100 Gala. Here humor is evoked through more sexually explicit language and imagery when Colbert highlights an incident where Minaj asks the audience if they knew which of the American presidents (Trump or Biden) liked 'a bigger butt'. He also mentions 'an important thing' which he had been wanting to ask her for a couple of years: whether she had found the answer to her question.The conversation degenerates into crude juxtapositions of fleshy food and the human body: 'I love lobster." All the best meat in the tail' and 'a good big butt'. The sexual undertones of the comparisons take Minaj by surprise, and she prefers to respond with chuckles, claps, laughter, dance moves and even silences. Colbert then targets her with direct questions like 'do you know a good big butt when you see one?'and 'do you like a juicy butt?'. This is followed by Colbert showing her an image of a tennis player in the act of striking a ball. Apparently, the player had what Colbert described as a 'big butt'. Colbert then cajoles Minaj to confess that she is attracted to 'big butts'.

Stephen Colbert (10:16): Yeah. Yeah. Now, do you know, do you know a good big butt when you see one?

Nicki Minaj (10:25): Yes.

Stephen Colbert (10:25): Do you like a juicy butt?

Nicki Minaj (10:26): Yes.

Stephen Colbert (10:27): [Chuckles] [Displays image] Do you, have you, [Laughter] have you seen this one? Have you seen that one?

Nicki Minaj (10:31): [Speechless]

Stephen Colbert (10:33): Girl, give into it. Girl, give into it. [Laughter] Don't fight it.

Nicki Minaj (10:38): Oh.

Stephen Colbert (10:38): Don't fight the feeling.

Nicki Minaj (10:40): [Sighs]

Stephen Colbert (10:42): Okay. [Laughter] All right.

Nicki Minaj (10:45): [Chuckles] Did you just say girl give in to it?

Stephen Colbert (10:47): Yes.

Nicki Minaj (10:48): Yeah. [Snaps fingers]

The conversation analysis shows how the female guest is made an object of derisive humor through overt and covert sexism. She is projected as a bold and erogenous woman and is made to maintain this identity through performance and spectacle.

Feminist critical discourse analysis: comedy as control

Late-night talk shows frequently reduce female guests to sources of playful provocation, sidelining substantive engagement with their work. In Stephen Colbert's exchange with Nicki Minaj, this tendency emerges in the form of sexually charged humor and host-driven detours that undercut her professional presence. Late shows also promote gender asymmetries and sexist and racist discourse through topic selection, connotative language, visual aids, and host control. Since it is highly structured and easily accessible, the talk show can justifiably be called a form of media discourse which in turn refers to a 'public, manufactured, on-record, form of interaction' that takes place through a broadcast platform (Keefe, 2012, p.441). The selected talk show is also an example of manufactured interaction in that it is strategically structured to put the female guest in a disadvantageous position through racist and sexist elements. As pointed earlier the interview begins with Minaj's sexy image flashing on the screen. The image is used as a faucet for more aggressive sexualization. Minaj's cover photo depicts her as an Oriental queen, lounging on a tree branch with an Egyptian style head gear and jewels sewn into her underwear and her pasties. Although the image is spectacular, its most notable trait is its primitivity and Minaj's brown sexuality. Thus, the host's mock glorification of Minaj's cover art has racist streaks in that he makes her body a subject of scrutiny and eroticization. As observed by Lazar (2014) even though women are structurally disadvantaged as a social category in the patriarchal gender order, "the intersection of gender with other systems of power based on race, social class, sexuality and so on means that gender oppression is neither materially experienced nor discursively enacted in the same way for women everywhere" (p.189). Thus, Minaj being a woman of color is subjected to racist sexism whereby she is stereotyped as a loud-mouthed spitfire (05:13) and portrayed as a lecherous woman who cannot resist 'big butts'. Moreover, Colbert makes condescending references to her nudity, calling it 'art' and comparing it to Greek sculpture. Her body is made an object of sexual degradation with remarks such as "I'm not sure what will be blurred, but I believe none of it should". The host also uses a mock pompous tone to glorify the picture. "Would you, would you blur the Venus de Milo? No!". Thus, Minaj is stigmatized for licentious behavior in the very first segment and the rest of the interview builds upon this to target her further. This is apparent when Colbert questions her about her new song 'Barbie dreams' and initiates a spectacle

of mock seduction with Minaj playing the seductress and Colbert the object of her seduction. In this segment, both Minaj and Colbert make use of lewd vocabulary for comedy and sensation, but its lasting impact is not that of audience entertainment but that of commodifying and sexualizing the female guest. The last segment shows the host employing overt sexism for the marginalization effect. Here, the female guest's sexualization is done by exaggerating her carnal desires and portraying her has a lecherous woman who cannot resist 'big butts'. Although, the male host is the main force behind the sexualized talk, Minaj also lends to her own sexualization through self-effacing humor and sociability. Her flirtatious behavior with Colbert, the bold lyrics of her song which are cut by censor beeps, and which imply that Colbert will return to work with a 'magical glow' (after being sexually intimate with her) and when she calls on the audience to address her as 'Queen Nicki Colbert' are all attempts at self-sexualization and humor for the sake of acceptance and assimilation.

Performing belonging: assimilation in a gendered media stage

Aggressive assimilation, unlike other forms of assimilation, involves a determined and at times belligerent effort to 'fit in,' even if it requires distancing oneself from fellow co-cultural group members (Orbe, 2017, p. 8). Individuals who pursue this form of assimilation seek acceptance within the dominant society and mainstream culture by eliminating or downplaying their own cultural differences and distinctive traits. To achieve this, they commonly employ communication strategies such as mirroring, strategic distancing, and ridiculing self (Orbe, 1998). The following interview is therefore analyzed considering these aggressive assimilation strategies to identify how co-cultural agency is negotiated in interaction with the dominant group.

From the outset, Minaj is introduced through descriptors such as 'fast and funny', ostensibly complimentary but subtly reductive, positioning her as primarily a source of entertainment rather than as an artist with intellectual or creative depth. This rhetorical move aligns with a common talk-show practice in which female guests particularly women of color are celebrated through personality-based superlatives that simultaneously constrain their public persona. Minaj's immediate response, characterized by exaggerated declarations of admiration for Colbert, demonstrates mirroring and ridiculing self. Orbe (1998) defines 'mirroring' as adopting dominant group codes to make one's co-cultural identity less visible, and 'ridiculing self' as passively or actively participating in discourse that demeans one's own group. By embracing the host's playful tone and imposed persona, Minaj performs a form of adaptive compliance that maintains rapport while signaling her willingness to conform to the dominant interactional style.

The discussion of Minaj's *Queen* album cover becomes a focal point for the interplay between sexualization and artistic agency. While Minaj describes the image as a symbolic representation of feminine power and divinity, Colbert redirects the interpretation through humor and parody, invoking the *Venus de Milo* in a satirical manner. This deflection undermines Minaj's interpretive authority, reframing the visual as a site of spectacle rather than artistic intent. Furthermore, Minaj's laughter, and other ways of contributing to the comedic flow rather than challenging the redirection reflects both mirrorring and strategic distancing, the latter being a strategy driven by the desire to avoid association with fellow co-cultural members in order to be perceived as a distinct individual (Orbe, 1998).

When conversation shifts to her track 'Barbie Dreams', Colbert bypasses the song's critical engagement with male dominance in hip-hop, instead drawing attention to his own absence from its lyrics. The exchange evolves into an improvised erotic scenario in which Minaj offers flirtatious, sexually suggestive lines, and Colbert responds with exaggerated physical comedy.

Similarly, the recollection of Minaj's 2016 *Time 100* Gala performance situates Minaj within a racialized and gendered stereotype that hypersexualizes Black women's bodies. Here, Minaj's reaction shifts toward strategic distancing: rather than verbally engaging with the crude humor, she resorts to non-verbal cues : laughter, gestures, and light participation that maintain the host–guest rapport without directly endorsing the comments. This measured withdrawal avoids direct confrontation while ensuring continued alignment with the expected talk-show dynamic.

Across the interview, Minaj's participation reflects the ongoing negotiation required to remain visible and accepted within a white, male-dominated media space. Each exchange reveals the calculated balancing act of aggressive assimilation , wherein mirroring, strategic distancing, ridiculing self serve as adaptive tools for navigating an environment that imposes both explicit and implicit constraints on self-representation.

Conclusion

This paper interrogates how American late-night talk shows, particularly *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, stage women's participation under the guise of democratic, inclusive public discourse. Using an integrated methodological framework that combines Conversation Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), and Co-Cultural Theory, the study examined Stephen Colbert's interviews with Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj to trace how gendered power dynamics are enacted at the micro-interactional level. The analysis revealed that even when female guests appear confident, witty, and culturally powerful, their contributions remain tightly managed through host dominance, comedic framing, and an interactional logic that privileges masculine communicative styles. Their strategies often couched in humour, self-effacement, and adaptive playfulness reflect forms of aggressive or non-assertive assimilation rather than genuine discursive parity.

By foregrounding the mechanisms through which the late-night format regulates women's presence, this study enriches feminist critiques of mediated public spheres and extends Co-Cultural Theory into the domain of broadcast media and celebrity discourse. It demonstrates that talk shows provide visibility without affording equal discursive power, thereby rehearsing normative gender hierarchies under the veneer of empowerment. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of developing media environments that do not simply showcase women, but meaningfully transform the interactional structures that continue to delimit their agency and voice.

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