

Exposing Russell Brand: Navigating allegations of sexual misconduct and appealing to the manosphere.

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Abstract:

On September 16th, 2023, Channel 4's *Russell Brand in Plain Sight: Dispatches* aired allegations of the celebrity comedian's sexual misconduct with women over the course of his career. The documentary, which was dramatically revealed in the schedule only the day before transmission, resulted in significant international press attention, several internal reviews of production company practices, and the opening of an ongoing police investigation (Booth, 2023).

After starting out as a circuit comic in 2000, Russell Brand's 'rebranding' across the 2010s saw him assume the role of political commentator (Arthurs and Little, 2016) before finding an audience as an online addiction recovery/ wellness influencer. His professional transition away from edgy sexually explicit stand-up comic to online wellbeing influencer gave him a platform, underpinned by a narrative of personal development, from which to distance himself from his past behaviour when allegations emerged. The specifics of comic fame, however, limited his ability to 'self-cleave' (McDonnell, 2024) in the way non-comic celebrities have done in order to deny and distract from similar allegations.

This article explores the discourses evoked by Brand and his supporters as part of denying sexual assault allegations outlined in the 2023 documentary. By maintaining his innocence using language reminiscent of the 'anti-woke' manosphere (Lawson, 2023), and positioning himself as an outsider to the mainstream media (despite, at the peak of his fame, being enmeshed in such spaces and discourses), Brand provoked other politically right-leaning public figures and conspiracists (e.g., Elon Musk, Alex Jones, Andrew Tate) to leverage their status to defend him online. This article scrutinises how Brand tried to take control of the exposé narrative by positioning himself as a victim of post-#MeToo cancel culture, and framing his suspension from certain monetized online platforms (without a trial) as a freedom of speech issue. Brand's appeal to online manosphere communities, through his contemporary 'conspiratorial' (Ward and Voas, 2011) persona, is discussed in terms of being symptomatic of a wider crisis of contemporary masculinity.

Keywords: Comedy, Manosphere, #MeToo, Crisis, Conspiracy,

Exposing Russell Brand: Navigating allegations of sexual misconduct and appealing to the manosphere.

On September 16th, 2023, Channel 4's *Russell Brand in Plain Sight: Dispatches* aired allegations of the celebrity comedian's sexual misconduct with women over the course of his career. The documentary, which was dramatically revealed in the UK broadcast schedule only the day before transmission, resulted in significant international press attention, several internal reviews of production company practices (Banijay UK 2024, Johnston 2025), and the opening of a Metropolitan Police investigation (Booth, 2023). This article analyses the documentary, Brand's social media response to the accusations, and the public comments of his celebrity supporters to explore the discourses, especially those connected to the manosphere, evoked as part of denials.

After training as an actor, Brand started out as a live circuit comedian in 2000. His 'rebranding' across the 2010s saw him assume the role of political commentator (Arthurs and Little, 2016) before he found an audience (post-divorce from popstar Katy Perry) as an online addiction recovery and wellness influencer. Brand's professional transition away from edgy sexually explicit stand-up comic to online wellbeing influencer has afforded him a platform, underpinned by a narrative of personal development, from which to distance himself from his past behaviour. His reaction to the allegations and his attempts to take control of the narrative emerging in the mainstream media rely on an insistence that he has changed. In this way we can see an alignment with Andrea McDonnell's (2024) understanding of self-cleaving, which she describes as an attempt by men accused of sexual misconduct to construct a divide between their past behaviours and current selves. McDonnell identifies that in the contemporary moment, many male celebrities, when presented with accusations, create:

'a rhetorical distinction between one's "real" self and one's celebrity image, between one's "true" thoughts and one's public expressions, essentially splitting one's identity into two (or more) parts as a means of denying statements made or actions taken in public view' (2024: p. 1)

Due to the specifics of comedic fame, however, there is added complexity in Brand's attempts to untangle (or cleave) his identity. Much of his comic persona was centred on maintaining the illusion of an authentic and consistent persona off and on-stage. Furthermore, Brand's contemporary status as addiction recovery expert is indeed *reliant* on his lack of denial about his previous (problematic,

though not necessarily illegal) behaviour - behaviour made public through his comic material, with acceptance and accountability as central to the way he frames his sobriety. Thus he cannot easily deploy the same tactics that other non-comic male celebrities have used successfully to 'persuade jurors, maintain their fanbases and evade consequences' (McDonnell, 2024: p. 1). He cannot completely disavow his past, when it is so pivotal to his star text (Dyer, 1979) and his celebrity influencer image as a 'changed man'.

Alongside his live comedy work and being awarded *Time Out's* 'Comedian of the Year' in 2006, Brand presented reality show *Big Brother's* various spin-off shows for Channel 4, including *Big Brother's Big Mouth* (2004). He also established himself in national radio during the 2000s, before making a move into Hollywood films in the 2010s. His persona during this time (the time to which the allegations pertain) was presented as in alignment with his live comic material: associated with edginess, saying the unsayable (especially sexually explicit content) and playing up to his well-known promiscuity and sex-addiction. As Oliver Double notes in his analysis of stand-up comedians working across the personality spectrum:

'Truth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is about authentic self-expression. The boundary between offstage and onstage is blurred, and in many cases, the audience believes that the person they see onstage is more or less the same as the person they might meet offstage' (Double, 2014: p. 160)

Where some comedians explicitly separate themselves from their stage persona, especially those who perform sketch or character comedy, others performing in a more traditional mode use observational comedy to reinforce the idea that what they are saying on stage is consistent with their real-life experiences and identities. Brand was firmly in the latter category, and this idea of him 'being himself' was reinforced through his employment as a presenter, where his explicitly comic material/ joke work was interspersed with interviewing guests and discussing topics in less overtly comic ways.

Brand in his early pre-Hollywood career lent into this blurred reading of himself. He was awarded *The Sun* newspaper's 'Shagger of the Year' title annually between 2006 and 2008 and again in 2012 (much to his seeming delight), and this helped maintain a consistent link between his onstage persona and wider celebrity identity. His subversive positioning enabled him to articulate explicitly sexist material, and as such Brand contributed to the rise of popular misogyny, which Sarah

Banet-Weiser refers to as 'a structural force' that 'functions to shore up hegemonic masculinity whilst also creating new ways to objectify and devalue women' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: xi).

In 2008 his 'edginess' caused problems for his media career, when he was involved in a high-profile scandal on his BBC Radio 2 show. As part of a prank with presenter Jonathan Ross, Brand telephoned actor Andrew Sachs and made claims on his voicemail about sleeping with his granddaughter. As Lisa Kelly observed of this scandal, popularly termed 'Sachsgate', it was precisely 'Brand's willingness to discuss his sexual exploits in public' (Kelly, 2010: p. 115) for comic purposes that led to the controversy. It is notable then, in the context of the current scandal engulfing Brand, that he and his representatives are familiar with negative media attention, especially that involving his sexual behaviour, and the relevant public relations strategies for weathering such storms.

After leaving the BBC and his Hollywood success, he adapted his persona as part of his *Messiah Complex* tour, recorded in 2013, and migrated into the space of speaking for the common man, presenting as someone disgusted at the material world, and wanting to make a difference. As a result of this significant change in approach he was invited into some long-running and high-profile political discussion spaces, such as the BBC's *Newsnight* (1980-present) and *Question Time* (1979-present) to comment on political events. In this way, as Jane Arthurs and Sylvia Shaw (2016) and Ellen Watts (2020) observe, he used his celebrity capital as well as his outsider status as a comedian to become a voice for disenfranchised, left-leaning youth. It would not have been possible for Brand to operate within these 'serious' spaces without a change in the tone of his comedy (which started to engage openly with politics and spirituality) due to the way he delivered his material as an extension of his off-stage self and drew on his own lived experiences. His past was used to anchor him to the 'common man' status he claimed.

During this period Brand also declared that he had renounced his former sexism. He posed for the press in a 'No More Page 3' T-shirt which, along with the 'this is what a feminist looks like' T-Shirt, became a hallmark of male celebrity feminism (MCF) of that era (Cobb, 2015). His feminist awakening was met with skepticism by many who had seen his more sexually explicit material and the way he interacted with women in these political commentary spaces (see, for example, Stavri, 2014). As Cobb observes in relation to other UK political figures' adoption of feminism at that time, equality for the MCF is often framed as

‘a form of meritocracy. It is not about dismantling the institutional sexism, the rape culture, and the male privileges that particularly harm working-class, ethnic minority, lesbian, queer, and trans women’ (Cobb, 2015: p. 138).

Brand’s comments on feminism and equality during this period were often undermined by his celebrity status as he continued to position himself, a cisgender White man, as the expert on inequality, whilst taking up space that could have been used to platform marginalised voices.

In his contemporary incarnation, evident from around 2020, audiences have seen Brand transform into a wellness/addiction recovery influencer on social media (across YouTube, Twitter/ X, Instagram and Rumble). His wellness work combines the conspiracy belief that a powerful elite ‘covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order’ (Ward and Voas, 2011: p. 103) and that in order to counter this control people must focus on their own spiritual lives. As such Brand’s output aligns with what Charlotte Ward and David Voas define as ‘conspirituallity’ (2011), a ‘hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality’ (2011: p. 103) that is central to much contemporary wellness culture and has become increasingly enmeshed in online influencer content further to the Covid-19 pandemic (Demuru, 2022). In this way Brand has now become associated with discourses of fatherhood, anti-establishment ideologies and spirituality. All of these discourses, as this article will explore, are key to his position as a recovery expert, and are regularly evoked as markers of how far he has evolved away from his comedic persona.

His positioning as a wellbeing influencer and media conspiracist also aligns with the manosphere, a collection of online spaces that Robert Lawson identifies as ‘for men to pursue some degree of self-improvement, against a backdrop of antifeminist and misogynistic discourses’ (Lawson, 2023: p. 129). Brand’s wellness content (e.g. meditation and yoga videos) sits alongside his Covid sceptic and conspiracy-driven health posts during the pandemic (such as @russellbrand 2022) and his more recent male-centric pro-life stance on abortion (@russellbrand 2024a) which foreground science (immunisation and abortion as health care) as anti-life and anti (male) freedom. As a result of his conspiracy-driven appeal to the manosphere, Brand was already in a position from which to deploy certain arguments in his defence, and had an existing audience primed ready to defend him when the allegations came to light.

In order to critically analyse *Russell Brand in Plain Sight: Dispatches*, the denials and defences provoked by allegations made therein, and the ensuing media crisis, a textual analysis approach has been undertaken to address the following research questions: What discourses are invoked by Brand,

and his supporters, on social media, when responding to allegations of sexual assault? How does Brand's approach to addressing the allegations further align him with manosphere actors and spaces?

Alongside the documentary, materials were selected for analysis based on their discursive and temporal relationship to this original text. Texts that directly referenced, responded, or alluded to the allegations found in the documentary, and that were posted to social media by Brand, or in response to him, within one week on either side of the broadcast were considered in scope for detailed analysis. Brand's wider social media profile (specifically Instagram and X) was critically reviewed across a longer period (from October 2022 to November 2024) to provide contextual information and concrete examples of his wider ideological positioning and engagement with specific audiences in line with discourse analysis approaches (van Dijk, 1997, 2017). The extended timeframe includes his public declaration of Christian faith around eight months after the allegations, at a time when investigations were ongoing. Wider contextual consideration of the discourses included in the texts was undertaken to examine the social and celebrity context of this scandal, the way other public figures defended Brand, and how this relates to wider manosphere and right-wing ideologies.

The Documentary: A Special Investigation

Despite this kind of investigative journalism not normally being shown by this broadcaster in a primetime slot, the 90minute documentary *Russell Brand in Plain Sight: Dispatches* was aired by Channel 4 in the UK at 9pm on Saturday 16th September 2023. Public suspicions were raised about the content of the documentary due to its odd scheduling, and the way that it had been placed in schedules titled only as *Dispatches: Dispatches Special*. This vague title created widespread online speculation the day before transmission – including from comedians who had ideas about what the documentary could be focusing on (having been approached to contribute, or with an awareness that an investigation was taking place). The programme's inclusion within the respected *Dispatches* series brand of investigative reporting, as well as it being made in collaboration with broadsheet newspaper *The Sunday Times*, lent credence and a sense of rigor to the show, making the allegations harder to dismiss as simply scandalous gossip. As such, the context of the broadcast played into wider media scrutiny of the programme and heightened interest in the accusations.

During transmission the term 'allegations' was used by the channel's continuity announcer twice at the start of the programme, and then again in every announcement returning from

advertising breaks. It was clear, through this repetition, as well as the late-stage inclusion in the schedules, that the programme had been heavily scrutinised from a legal standpoint. The allegations related to various times in Brand's career (both in the UK and then America) and referenced specific productions he worked on. As such the accusations related not only to Brand's behaviour, but the failures of his employers (including the BBC and Endemol, now controlled by Banijay UK), who were alleged to have ignored concerns about these behaviours or, in some instances, facilitated occasions where Brand could abuse his power. Therefore, legally, the repercussions on organisational reputations would also have required careful consideration when clearing the programme for broadcast. Arguably, Channel 4 and *The Sunday Times*' relative distance from the described behaviours enabled, for them, a more detached position from which to set out these allegations to the public. This was in contrast to the BBC (a public service broadcaster) who were more entangled with the alleged behaviour as they had employed Brand directly to work on sites that the organisation owned.

The documentary itself presented investigative findings in a familiar format, switching between the present-day testimonies of five women who were colleagues and former partners of Brand, and existing footage from the early 2000s when the alleged behaviour being described occurred. The events detailed in these testimonies include rape, sexual assault and grooming. Alongside the direct delivery to camera from his accusers (anonymised through use of actors and shooting techniques such as obscuring through shadow and backlighting) the programme included archive footage of Brand's comic performances and public appearances, talking head testimony of former colleagues, and expert commentators.

The opening of the documentary made clear the problematic connection between Brand's on and offstage personas during the early and mid 2000s. Footage from the recorded *Russell Brand Live* tour (2006) was included, specifically a section where Brand is describing his preference for oral sex that results in his female partner crying. Within the clip the sexually explicit story is presented with Brand's signature flowery renaissance-esq language and stylistic flourishes, as he prances about the stage. We see and hear his live audience (from 2006) roar with laughter. He describes in this routine his enjoyment of pushing his penis so far into a woman's throat that it makes her gag and her 'mascara run'. The routine is intercut with contemporary footage of one of his accusers describing an extremely similar sexual assault.

The original performance, and the laughter of the live audience within it, takes on a new eeriness in this repackaging. The volume of the crowd enjoying Brand's stories is juxtaposed by the emotional stillness and silences of his accuser's recollection. The audience on screen become representative through this intercutting of a wider early 2000s culture that, as part of a 'postfeminist' moment and the rise of lad culture, routinely normalised the disrespect and abuse of women (Phipps et. al, 2017).

Laughter implies that the featured audience, and by extension those who found Brand funny when watching the recording, are complicit in this culture. Just as laughter tracks are used to unify live and televised audiences for mutual enjoyment (Mills, 2009), here the sound of the audience's laughter is used to imply mutual culpability for the culture that enabled Brand's misogyny to thrive. The opening sequence is especially significant as it becomes clear that many of the alleged behaviours described by accusers were not taken seriously, or tolerated, precisely because of Brand's popularity and success – his power and celebrity too great to be challenged. As such the public who engaged with his material or persona are (inadvertently) connected to the described abuses. The enjoyment or consumption of Brand's material or performances facilitated his star status, which he used as protection from consequence to (allegedly) abuse others.

Despite Brand's more recent repackaging of his persona after the recording of this archive footage, and the shifting boundaries of social acceptability post-#MeToo, the inclusion of these clips demonstrates that Brand was very much aligned with and, due to his popularity, arguably a contributory factor in, the rise of popular misogyny across this period. His comic material is held up within the documentary, alongside his media persona, as indicative of the culture of the time as it pertains to the treatment of women.

In order to provide context for the accusations, the documentary included testimonies from Brand's former Personal Assistant, who had directly witnessed some of the contexts being described, former BBC One controller (2000-2005) Lorraine Heggessey, who commented on expectations of behaviour in BBC workplaces, and comedian Daniel Sloss who spoke to the wider issues for the live comedy sector and the whisper networks in operation to protect women entering the industry. The programme had contacted the relevant broadcasters and production companies for comment and on-screen statements from Channel 4, BBC, and Endemol (now Banijay Entertainment) as well as Brand's former writing partner Matt Morgan, were included on screen.

As part of providing a right of reply, Brand had been approached for comment in relation to the allegations before transmission. In a post entitled 'This is happening', released across his social media channels the day before the documentary aired, he refuted the accusations, distanced himself from his past behaviour and argued he was being set up (@russellbrand, 2023). Sections of his response were included in the programme evidencing that it was edited right up to transmission.

Discourses of change – Brand's initial response video

The wider public and media response to the documentary was significant and immediate. Brand's initial response video, posted on Instagram on 15th September 2023 (@russellbrand, 2023), evidences his use of several key discourses to distance himself (and his new 'media critical' work) from his past. Whilst, prior to the documentary and allegations, Brand had often used fatherhood as a means of separating his former promiscuous self from his current incarnation, and this tendency was central to his addiction recovery narrative, the majority of his initial defense centred on his disconnection from certain media spaces. His career movement from mainstream broadcast media spaces to online fringe or alternative spaces was foregrounded in his speech and immediately attempted to reframe the accusations contained in the documentary as a conspiracy against him.

Aside from the tired-looking expression on his face, Brand visually presents himself in a way consistent with his normal output: his patterned shirt unbuttoned, exposing some of his chest, and a long gold pendant. From the very start of his response video, however, Brand is on the attack. Staring down the barrel of the lens, he commences by stating that this post would deviate from his normal missives which 'critique, attack and undermine the news and all its corruption' as he has become the news himself. By starting in this way, he is reaffirming his outsider stance to his audience and laying the groundwork from which to argue he is being silenced for his views about mainstream media organisations. The conventions of the celebrity confessional post (Redmond, 2011) are leveraged here - not to take ownership of an action or to apologise, but to reframe the allegations which are about to be made public as a Trumpian 'witch-hunt'.

Brand speaks of a 'coordinated attack', with an emphasis on the 'legacy media' status of the investigating organisations. This language positioned his situation as interwoven with free speech issues, as he argues within the video that these (in his telling, unfounded) allegations are an attempt to censor his radical dissent, as we have seen before in attempts to 'control these kind of spaces and these kinds of voices'. Use of this strategy clearly aligns Brand with the techniques employed by

Donald Trump as part of his (multiple) election campaigns, in decrying the mainstream media as ‘fake news’ when reporting unfavourable stories, and undermining public trust in media organisations and government institutions alike (Rose, 2017). It is not surprising that Brand openly supported Trump (himself convicted of falsifying business records, and also found liable by a New York civil trial jury in 2023 for sexually assaulting and defaming E. Jean Carroll in the 1990s) for re-election in 2024.

Brand speaks of the way his former promiscuity has been leveraged against him and that he has been a victim of his own openness about his past. In the video he comments that he has been transparent about his past, written in detail about it, and is now distressed and disappointed ‘to see that transparency metastasised into something criminal’. His language use here implies that his transparency (in and of itself) was an act of pure selflessness, an attempt to help others (rather than, say, profit from the lurid details of sexual encounters in his biographies), and this has been maliciously twisted to bring him down.

As a comedian, Brand is highly aware of the rhetorical devices needed to align with an audience and create a sense of community. As Double observes, one of the most important functions of a live comic’s persona and material is to ‘impose a temporary bonding on an audience’ (2014: p. 244) in order to create a space where humour can be experienced. The most animated and assertive Brand gets in the video is when he emphatically denies the allegations (which he does not detail beyond stating that all his many past relationships were consensual, implying that the accusations relate to non-consensual acts). He then switches his tone back to that of the educated everyman by posing his ideas as more tentative questions for the audience, for example ‘Makes me question is there another agenda at play, especially when we have seen this happen before’, and ‘seems to me there is an agenda’. Throughout the video his language use is consistent with a (toned down) version of his comedic persona (the excitable dandy). He uses his distinctly wordy sentences (including word choices such as ‘litany’ ‘pertains’ and ‘baroque attacks’) to present himself as intellectually rigorous.

Thus, rather than directly telling the audience what he thinks (and therefore what they should think) he says he is questioning the agenda here, the implication being that as part of his fan base and aligning with him, viewers should undertake this questioning too. He draws upon comments that his followers have previously made on his posts to further situate his current predicament as being a result of ‘getting too close to the truth’. By using the words of others (these unidentified individuals from within his wide fan community), he unites them in a collective project,

of uncovering the truth and critiquing the mainstream media, and as such, attempts to strengthen a connection and identification with him, as an outsider.

Discourses of religion – Brand’s wider response

In the months that followed the documentary’s revelations, despite Brand famously exploring spirituality widely as part of his addiction recovery process, he more publicly announced his Christian faith and underwent baptism in May 2024. His decision to publicly declare his faith in this way and to lean heavily into the ideologies of being cleansed and reborn, is allied to his attempt to put a clear separation between his persona and behaviour now, and who he was in the early 2000s. In an Instagram post explaining why he decided to be baptised, Brand asks ‘How can the sins of the past be washed away?’ (@russellbrand, 2024b), and more recently in a post on X, he contends that ‘Lord alone knows that forgiveness is the ultimate role we must all play’ (@rustyrocks, 2024a). This repeated evoking of Christian forgiveness and absolution from God is deeply problematic in the context of these allegations and the wider ongoing investigations. The implication here is that God has forgiven Brand, and that ultimate forgiveness means that the earth-bound investigations (or potential consequences) mean nothing to him.

As noted above, Andrea McDonell refers to an attempt to separate ‘celebrity image’ from ‘real’ self during times of crisis as ‘self-cleaving’ (2024), identifying how those accused of sexual assault post-#MeToo (such as Trump) have attempted this demarcation when under scrutiny. Brand, in a way notably different from McDonell’s (non-comic) examples, is in a complex position in terms of discursive self-cleaving as, originally, he was known for his stand-up comedy work, which relied upon the blurring of self and performance, and traded in ideas of authenticity and personal experience. His entangled onstage and offstage persona in the early and mid 2000s means that his radical evolution in terms of ideology and religious affiliation is harder to understand as authentic. This is because everything that came before his religious awakening (the sexist jokes, the misogynist pranks etc.) were also delivered in a way audiences were led to believe was faithful to Brand’s ‘real’ self. His attempt to self-cleave is therefore less about attempting a demarcation of an offstage and onstage self and more about establishing a temporal boundary either side of sobriety and spiritual awakening. Arguably, in order for his transition to wellbeing influencer to be viewed as authentic, Brand needed to move into spaces far removed from the mainstream. In the unique digital space where temporal and geographical barriers are broken down, he could speak to people, in the

conspiracy primed areas of the Internet, who were less aware of the details of his past persona. As Karen Boyle observes this can also be 'read an insurance policy to protect his career against the possibility of these allegations which had bubbled below the surface of mainstream commentary for some time' (Boyle, 2024; p. 150).

The evoking of a Christian God as part of celebrities denying allegations of sexual assault or violence against women is not a new technique. A concurrent example of similar rhetoric can be found within rapper and producer Sean 'Diddy' Combs' push back against accusations of assaulting, sex trafficking, and drugging former girlfriend, singer Cassie (Cassandra Ventura). Diddy repeatedly denied these accusations in the strongest possible terms (see Anguiano, 2023). Only when CCTV footage was released publicly corroborating Cassie's version of events and evidencing the kind of abuse she had alleged, did the (now disgraced) artist put out a statement apologizing. As part of the apologetic statement, he commented that 'I went and I sought out professional help. I got into going to therapy, going to rehab. I had to ask God for his mercy and grace. I'm so sorry' (BBC News, 2024). Thus, we see here the Christian faith being used as part of a public relations attempt to mitigate against allegations of extreme abuse and sexual assault. Additionally, we can see this as an attempt to regain trust from the public, when his previous emphatic denials have been proven untrue.

It is not only within popular music or acting celebrity circles that this occurs. In fact, this could be read as an extension of the success of religious rhetoric in political arenas, where a candidate's faith is seen as fundamental to their suitability for office (Haynes, 2021). Both Brett Kavanaugh's public questioning by the Senate Judiciary Committee prior to his appointment to the Supreme Court of the United States in 2018, and the election (and re-election campaigns) of Donald Trump leant hard into the Christian faith and values of these men, as part of distraction from (or diminishment of) their treatment of women.¹

It is also through Christianity that other celebrities started to be drawn into the reporting of the scandal. In May 2024 celebrity survivalist and (at the time) UK Chief Scout, Bear Grylls, was reported to have participated in the baptism of Russell Brand in the River Thames (Hilton, 2024). As this was not necessarily a well-publicised friendship prior to the scandal, and one that commenced due to Brand appearing on one of Grylls' survival shows, many expressed confusion as to how these seemingly very different men were connected. Grylls, a former SAS operative turned public figure,

¹ Brand released a video of himself praying the night before the US election in 2024 asking that 'God's will be done' (@Rustyrockets, 2024b).

with a public persona rooted in paternalism and a modern reconciliation of traditional masculinity with more spiritual and emotional expression, had a long-standing alignment to Christian faith, reflected in his connection to organisations with significant roots in the Church of England (i.e. the British military and UK Scouting). Brand seemingly shares ideological ground with Grylls in terms of spirituality, a personal narrative of overcoming difficulty, and fatherhood. Grylls journey to faith was facilitated by the well-known evangelical immersion programme the Alpha course, which he now actively promotes.² The Alpha course was also undertaken by Brand and, as such, he is affiliated with the same evangelical ideology. The significant media scrutiny of Brand, coupled with Grylls' decision to publicly back him and participate in his baptism, despite the controversy, was reported as a contributory factor in Grylls' standing down as Chief Scout in July 2024, after 15 years in the role (Davis, 2024).

Shifting media coverage to freedom of speech and speaking to the manosphere.

The Channel 4 exposé and the resulting public relations crisis for Brand deviates from previous celebrity sexual abuse accusations in that almost instantly the media companies associated felt compelled to act – both those who employed Brand during the period under scrutiny, but also those platforming his conspiracy-laden material in the context of 2023. Most notably, YouTube acted swiftly to block revenue streams from Brand's channels (where he had 6.6 million subscribers), stating that 'If a creator's off-platform behaviour harms our users, employees or ecosystem, we take action' (quoted in Glynn and Gerken, 2023). YouTube's actions moved public discourse into a different arena – one of cancel culture and freedom of speech (both contexts analysed by Ng, 2022) which was arguably advantageous to Brand, as it shifted focus from the accusations themselves onto wider discursive territory not associated with him as an individual.

YouTube's decision brought further public figures out of the shadows into the discussion surrounding Brand and his deplatforming. Technology investor Elon Musk posting on his own social media platform, X, in response to Brand's video statement said 'Of course. They don't like competition' (@elonmusk, 2023). The 'they' being referred to here is Brand's perceived 'mainstream media'. Musk has perpetuated conspiracy before and is known for not exercising critical thinking

² <https://alpha.org.uk> (accessed 13 the November 2024).

before reposting inaccuracies (Robins-Early, 2024). Other right-wing figures were also quick to dismiss the allegations as politically motivated, condemning YouTube's actions as silencing an important critical voice. These included US Broadcaster and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (who was found guilty of defaming the families of victims of the Sandy Hook mass shooting, as he repeatedly claimed the event to be a hoax), who shared a video on social media backing Brand, stating that 'suddenly allegations are happening [because Brand had] come out against Big Pharma [...] and the globalists' (Rissman, 2023).

Even without explicitly coming to the defence of Brand, examining the list of celebrity and political actors who have happily continued to work with him helps situate his celebrity amongst some of the most notable populists and right-wing conspiracists of the contemporary moment. After the allegations (and unresolved investigations) were made public, the *Stay Free with Russell Brand* podcast has hosted: reactionary British presenter Neil Oliver (GBNews) who is known for his anti-vax stance; controversial psychologist Jordan Peterson; (then serving, now former) Conservative member of UK parliament Andrew Bridgen, who compared the Covid-19 vaccination programme to the Holocaust (Walker, 2023); and writer turned conspiracy theorist Naomi Wolf (BBC News, 2021). Due to the content of many of his daily online videos and his Covid-sceptic anti-vax stance during the pandemic, Brand now has strong links to conspiracy theorists and right-wing political commentators and this association has deepened further following these allegations. His right-wing affiliation is in direct contrast to his time in the media spotlight in the mid 2010s, when he was heralded as a way of speaking to (and in some ways speaking for) disaffected left-leaning British youth (Arthurs and Shaw, 2016).

Brand's association with right-wing, anti-woke, anti-feminist celebrities make him an influential and well-connected contributor to online cultures – most notably the manosphere. The manosphere has been defined as:

'a loosely affiliated network of mostly online communities [...] which typically share a central interpretation that, in contemporary society, men and masculinity are threatened by a feminist ideology which has been absorbed into all major vectors of power' (Price, 2023: p. 38).

As such the actors and discourses of these spaces are inextricably linked with contemporary misogyny and a range of problematic behaviours symptomatic of what is often termed 'toxic masculinity' (McGlashan and Mercer, 2023). Andrew Tate, an influencer synonymous with popular

misogyny, the manosphere and toxic masculinity, posted on X 'welcome to the club', along with an image of a cartoon knight and the words 'on my way to fight the crazy bitch allegations' in response to Brand's video denial (@cobratate, 2023). In this way, Tate was aligning his own legal fight, currently awaiting trial in Romania for rape and human trafficking, and facing allegations in the UK of sexual assault, with Brand's predicament and implying Brand is just another casualty of vindictive women.

Stand-up comedy, a context where Brand started his career, has long been a space where sexism and misogyny has been tolerated, both in the content of comic material and in the behaviour of comics themselves (Tomsett, 2023). Ironically, years later, post-reinvention as influencer, Brand finds himself again working within a context (in this case online) where women are actively excluded, and misogyny is rampant. Sites within the manosphere, which is deeply connected to White supremacy and heteronormativity, involve various factions including: Pick-Up artists (PUAs), who teach men how to game sex from women; Redpill conspiracy theorists, who see every aspect of society working against men; involuntary celibate groups (Incels), who are angry that they cannot access sex from women; male separatists, who believe society needs to start again without women and equality measures in order to re-establish male-dominance; and men's rights organisations, which have a range of concerns including the difficulty of achieving justice within a system biased towards women and mothers (for example, father's rights issues and false rape allegations), (McGlashan and Krendel, 2023).

Brand's social media posts, in response to these allegations, position him as outside the mainstream, and as against the system that seeks to disenfranchise or control the working man, therefore appealing to 'the contemporary men's rights movement', which can be considered 'a reaction to diminishing social status of cisgender white men, and the emergence of feminist and multicultural activism as a mainstream political force' (Marwick and Caplan, 2018: p. 546). Prior to the exposé, Brand's audience had been primed to seek out conflicting agendas, to look for conspiracy which Brand claims is evident in media reporting, judicial contexts, and government policies that infringe on people's rights and freedoms. For many within the online manosphere, especially within the Redpill, incel and men's rights factions, the driving force for societal conspiracy is easy to identify – it's women and more specifically feminism that is powering their disenfranchisement. Brand's decision to call 'conspiracy' played directly into the narratives of some men's rights organisations, who claim that rape allegations are often spurious and malicious, an assertion commonly made on manosphere discussion boards, on platforms such as Reddit (McGlashan and Krendel, 2023, Gotell

and Dutton, 2016). Brand's further entrenchment in the manosphere subsequent to the allegations can be seen as an inevitable evolution of his conspiracist/ wellbeing influencer status, and he is now regularly in the media orbit of key conspiracist and populist figures such as Tucker Carlson and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Alongside his direct appeal to his manosphere-connected audiences, in his initial and then wider response to the accusations, Brand appealed to the general public's himpathy (defined by Kate Manne in 2018 as inappropriate levels of sympathy for powerful men when accused of sexual assault) through framing the malicious nature of the accusations as aligned with 'wider forces'. Post #MeToo claims of false rape allegations have taken on a particular discursive significance in male celebrities defenses against accusations. As Karen Boyle observes, considering the online support for now United States Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, when he was accused (before appointment) of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford:

A himpathetic perspective is utterly normalised. At the same time, this means that the most privileged can be re-presented as the most vulnerable, the most prone to malicious victimization, *precisely because they have the most to lose*. (Boyle, 2024: p. 143 [original italics]).

Brand's rejection of the accusations hinges on the position that as a powerful public figure, one who has been very attractive to women, he is uniquely susceptible to false accusations. He states directly, in his initial response video, that he has been too open and honest about his past sexual encounters (as part of an attempt to help others overcome their addictive behaviours too) and as such has made himself vulnerable to these accusations. In his telling, his success and willingness to use his own experiences to help others has been his downfall.

Brand implies that by not coming forward at the time of the alleged offences (although the BBC's internal report does make clear that people did complain but nothing was actioned or formalised, Johnston 2025) these women's allegations are simply a way of discrediting his alternative voice and destroying his reputation. There is a temporal quality to himpathy, in that it is often leveraged to protect men at the height of their careers, when they are (within this ideological framing) most 'vulnerable' to malicious attacks (Boyle, 2024). In Brand's case, in comparison to the time to which the allegations relate, his career has already significantly decreased in visibility and credibility. Brand therefore does not explicitly articulate the defence that women are simply out to bring him down (knowing that his supporters within the manosphere are more than happy to do that

defensive work for him), but focuses more on how this is an attempt at silencing his dissenting voice facilitated by the media organisations he critiques. Brand's appeal to himpathy aligns with misogynist ideologies that believe women have gone too far to rebalance gender inequality, to the point where men are now being treated unjustly and discriminated against. Thus, just as other accused public figures have done before, by presenting 'accusations as threatening not only *their own* reputation but those they are deemed to represent' (Boyle, 2024: p. 143) Brand is implying from his conspiracist standpoint that if accusers are coming for him and his dissenting opinions now, they will come for his male supporters next.

Conclusion

Brand's response, and those of his celebrity defenders, demonstrate how in the current context of Western 'free speech' debates claims of conspiracy can be leveraged as part of a defence against sexual assault accusations. Claims of 'unfair cancellation' can easily dominate in media reporting of scandals such as the one engulfing Brand, and this can obscure the voices of women coming forward.

In many ways this scandal could, in the eyes of Brand's existing and subsequent manosphere-aligned fanbase, cement his celebrity status within this group. In their consideration of Brand's previous scandals, Mills et. al. observe that scandal can be turned into a way of increasing exposure and fan base. They state that 'fans of scandalous celebrities could be enthused by vicariously living through such bad behaviour, especially when the dominant moral sensibilities of the wider public are offended' (Mills et. al, 2015: p. 602). Online manosphere cultures certainly contain people who want to have sexual control over women and see them as nothing more than objects for men's pleasure, as well as people who completely disagree with the dominant moral sensibilities as they relate to gender equality. Depressingly, as 'morally transgressive scandals can prove beneficial, even foundational, to the careers of some celebrities' (Mills et. al., 2015: p. 611) Brand is already positioned to build on this scandal to cement his anti-establishment credentials. This will be facilitated through his alignment with very powerful populist actors, such as Donald Trump and Elon Musk (both of whom have themselves seemingly bounced back from what would have been career-ending scandals for others). Brand's anti-establishment position is thus ironically propped up and enabled by men such as Musk and Trump, who are absolutely the epitome of modern political power within late-stage capitalism.

Brand's social media work when denying the accusations outlined in *Russell Brand in Plain Sight: Dispatches* engaged with discourses of personal growth, Christian religion, free speech and conspiracy. Many of these discourses, especially that of conspiracy, further connect him with manosphere actors and spaces, for whom feminism is the ultimate conspiracy that has resulted in a crisis of (and for) masculinity. Brand's use of rhetorical defences allied to the manosphere, as well as being publicly defended by key players in the populist and right-wing public sphere, further entrench him as a significant and enduring voice within men's rights groups online.

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