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An examination of the rhetoric surrounding gun violence in the United States through the voices of student activists

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**An examination of the rhetoric surrounding gun violence in the United States through the
voices of student activists**

by

Danielle Giles

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2020

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ABSTRACT

Gun violence in the United States is a fiercely contested issue among politicians and citizens alike. The underlying issues surrounding gun violence, such as weapon access, mental health, and racism, plague debates in Congress that further stall legislative gun bills to advance past incubation stages. Within the past two years, student activists have pushed back against political talking points and crafted a message that has propelled the gun violence conversation forward. I argue that student activist's rhetoric about the gun violence debate should be listened to and studied. Through my three chosen artifacts, I examine how student rhetoric disrupts previously set rules of decorum, how silence rhetoric can and should be utilized in public address, and how irony establishes a purposeful dichotomy between humor and horror to persuade effectively in divisive discourse.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States' history with violence is a complex and complicated matter to explain. When a country is born through war and strife, the need to protect one's rights is paramount for the infantile nation moving forward. This protection comes in many forms: freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech. Those freedoms and liberties that protect our way of life are quickly backed up by a physical, more commanding presence in our legal system: the right that allows citizens to bear arms. The Second Amendment of the United States' Constitution has been a topic of debate in recent decades due to its wording and historical versus modern context. What does it mean to bear arms? Does this pertain to any and all weapons? Does a citizen have to be trained to use said weapon in order to bear it? Does a citizen have to be a law-abiding member of society in order to bear arms? Does a citizen have to pass a mental health examination before being able to purchase a firearm? While all of these questions have been talked around in circles within our legal system, the inability of our law makers to provide consensus answers have left a body count in their wake. Whether experts chalk it up to violent pop cultural outlets, increasing mental health cases, or outside terrorist infiltration, the fact remains that the United States is one of the only first-world countries that deals with mass shootings at such a high frequency compared to other countries of its size. According to a 2015 study done by Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, "The US firearm homicide rate is 24.9 times higher than in other high-income countries". Conclusively, this study states that "83.7% of all firearm deaths occurred in the US" in the year 2015.

Now is a time in history where lines of communication between political parties have dissolved into screaming matches and petty Twitter rants. Following our officials' lead, we live in a nation where citizens choose to stick their heads into echo chambers in order to justify and

validate that their opinions are the only that matter. With all of the instability of our nation's communication from our elected officials, we have been looking for citizens to climb a ladder out of the chaos and lead us in a direction of civil discourse and sensibility. Which group of individuals can break through the noise and steer us into a more hopeful future? Young voices have banded together throughout history to express outrage and protest, like the Vietnam protests or the Occupy Wall Street movement. As history tends to repeat itself, it should come to no surprise that the reasonable voices we were waiting for belong to our youngest citizens: students.

The phrase "student activist" has multiple meanings that could encompass a multitude of global citizens. I will be using "student activists" throughout my thesis to distinguish my desired group of young rhetors. I am choosing not to use the words "children" or "teenaged" activists due to the negative connotations that accompany those groups. "Children activists" invokes a sense of innocence and ignorance based on the lack of life experiences lived. "Teenaged activists" would also struggle with ethos due to age; however, that phrase also accompanies preconceived notions of rebelliousness and lack of respect to authority. Therefore, while talking about my desired group of rhetors, I will refer to them as "student activists." Student activists allows for a wider age range of orators, for the word "student" can mean anyone that attends an institution of learning. This is imperative to my thesis as some rhetors I analyze were teenagers during their first speaking engagement but have since become adults in the eyes of the law. Due to the fact that these rhetors continued their education into the collegiate level, the phrase "student activist" still applies to their rhetoric. In addition to the phrase "student activist" spanning multiple age ranges, this phrase also establishes an implied ethos to the group. Students are in the process of learning. When one is a student, they are furthering themselves in their education to gain more knowledge—recent and historical. By stating that this group of orators

are continuing to advance their knowledge through the means of education allows them credibility to those critics who state that their inexperience of a life well-lived should be a deterrent from others listening to them. Finally, the phrase “student activists” allows me to analyze a wide range of global citizens. While most of my analysis will focus on gun control legislation in the United States, student activists are making waves across the world. Therefore, the following analysis could apply to cases of student activism universally.

What is different about today’s student activists are the tools at their disposal. Social media platforms have the ability to give voice to the voiceless; furthermore, that voice can be transmitted globally with the push of a button. Student activists in today’s society have a large online presence and backing from others with similar viewpoints around the world. This allows for their messages of outrage and frustration to be shared and supported by the world at large. However, the debate remains over whether or not these voices should be listened to or ignored. While some point out that students at this age have not experienced enough life, gained enough education, or fully grasp what it is like in the “real world” to have a say in the way our country is run, student activists are pushing back against this notion. The question remains: should we listen to the voices of children in the gun control debate? What are they saying that is worth analyzing? How might their rhetoric change the course of our country?

In the next three chapters, I will dive into three case studies that deal with students speaking out about gun violence in the United States. In the project, I argue that through their timely and nuanced persuasive tactics, student rhetors not only have the credibility to effect legal change in our gun control laws, but they are creating lasting rhetorical change in the way we talk about the gun control debate. In chapter 2, I focus my analysis on student speakers’ rhetoric at the CNN Town Hall Forum that occurred one week after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High

School Shooting in Parkland, Florida. This artifact is important to analyze due to the backlash these speakers received for their lack of decorum in the presence of elected officials. This lack of decorum is important to the overall gun violence debate for it highlights the differences in rhetorical strategies student activists are willing to use to be heard. In chapter 3, I analyze Emma González's 2018 March for Our Lives Speech. This is an important text to explore for her use of silence rhetoric throughout. The successful implementation of silence in a time of rhetorical noise makes this speech an example of how student activists are using rhetoric to their advantage. In chapter 4, I analyze the 2019 Sandy Hook Promise advertisement entitled "Back-to-School Essentials." This artifact is unlike the previous two in that I am analyzing an organization's rhetoric through the use of student speakers. This advertisement is important to analyze because it shows non-profit organizations use student voices to amplify their pro-gun messages. The use of these strategies provides evidence that student activists are having an impact on the overall gun violence conversation if organizations are opting to use student voices instead of their own for recognition. Overall, the following three artifacts allow further examination into how student activist's rhetoric disrupts decorum for the better, how silence rhetoric can and should be utilized in public address, and how irony establishes a purposeful dichotomy between humor and horror to persuade effectively in divisive discourse.

CHAPTER 2. “IT IS TOO LATE FOR THE 17 LIVES THAT ARE LOST”: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT’S LACK OF DECORUM AT CNN TOWN HALL

In heated debates surrounding polarizing topics, it is easy for one to become so impassionate that they lose sense of what is the proper decorum in a situation. Decorum is the rhetorical method for fulfilling a speaker’s audience’s expectations in order to achieve greater success with a speaker’s message by reaching the standard of what is fitting in public address (Enos 168). Decorum acts as “the guardian of moderation and common sense” (Enos 168) in which arguments are stylistically designed to fit proper levels of appropriateness in order to appeal to the desired audience. Lacking decorum in a traditional rhetorical setting places the speaker at the proverbial “kid’s table.” If you cannot control your emotions and adhere to the traditions of rhetorical civility, you will not be allowed to sit at the “adult table” with the decision makers. However, rhetorical refusals are sometimes necessary for marginalized voices to break through traditional modes of communication in order to be heard. Rhetorical refusal is “an act of writing or speaking in which the rhetor pointedly refuses to do what the audience considers rhetorically normal” (Schilb 3). Therefore, it is sometimes necessary for a speaker to disrupt what is considered “normal” to get a seat at the table. This chapter will explore how breaking rules of decorum during a CNN town hall forum allowed student activists an opportunity to express rhetorical refusal in the context of gun control reform.

Decorum and Student Activism

Decorum has been an integral part of rhetorical history, as it is evident in writings of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Quintilian. The need to create and maintain order of “a good man speaking well” to his audience has been of paramount importance throughout rhetorical theory. Without decorum, philosophers believed the moral integrity of

rhetoric will be called into question. Scholars, such as Roberts-Miller, have pondered the question “If rhetorical theory promotes decorum, what is the place of principled dissent and sincere outrage?” (23). However, scholars have argued that decorum—or what is sometimes called, *prepon*, or appropriateness—can be subverted in situations where the opportune moment—*kairos*—outweighs the need for appropriateness.

In a sense, *kairos* and *prepon* enact a dialectic between freedom and formal restraint; stated rhetorically, *kairos* and *prepon* pit an individual’s powers of invention against the formidable constraints of social convention and audience expectations (Baumlin 159). Although there is a need for respect to the rhetorical tradition, the subversion of said tradition is valid if the time for deviation from the norm is now (Schilb 7). Scholarship is moving towards the idea that decorum can be challenged at opportune moments; however, can decorum be destabilized by any orator or just those with power?

Student activism has gained momentum in recent years through the accessibility of communicative outlets, like social media. It is easier now than ever before to share one’s beliefs with others across the world. With such immediacy and availability to such technology, our society is more in tune with the inner most thoughts of our youngest citizens; thusly, creating the sense that students have a greater interest in the political intricacies of our nation than ever before. Critics of these activists state that due to their age students should be unable to impact policies until they are of legal voting age. Scholars, such as Risa Applegarth, have looked into the ethos surrounding a child’s ability to speak in public discourse. The field of rhetorical studies has a difficult time perceiving children as rhetorical agents due to the labels of “innocence” we place upon them unintentionally.

“Adult opponents [...] [resist] engaging with children as speaking agents, figuring the children instead (at best) innocent idealists and (at worst) puppets being maneuvered by adults into arguments and agendas they were incapable of understanding” (Applegarth 54).

Any rebellion against authority and tradition will label the speaker as a radical, and thusly destabilizes the portrayal of an “innocent” member of society (Applegarth 56). Without the protection of a mask of innocence, young orators that break decorum open themselves up to fierce scrutiny and unearned dismissal. This was the case for some students who asked questions at CNN’s town hall forum that took place after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting of 2018. Student’s questions, use of frank vocabulary, and exceedingly passionate tone during this time was an act of rhetorical refusal to adhere to decorum; thusly, this act catapulted their cause of gun control reform into a movement that would change the course of rhetoric on this issue forever.

Case Study: CNN Town Hall Forum

On February 22, 2018, one week after a gunman took the lives of seventeen members of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School community, CNN hosted a televised town hall where survivors of the mass shooting and family members of those deceased could ask their elected officials questions about gun control reform in the United States. Florida Senators Marco Rubio and Bill Nelson were in attendance, along with Florida Congressmen Representative Ted Deutch. Broward County’s Sheriff—where the shooting took place—Scott Israel was also present, along with the National Rifle Association’s spokeswoman Dana Loesch. With CNN’s news correspondent Jake Tapper as the moderator of the night’s event, what took place was an evening full of mourning the loss of life, questions about the future of the country, and most importantly strong rhetoric voiced by student activists ready to speak their minds. Although these

students had just experienced a tragedy not eight days before, they were asked to speak to those in power whom they believed had failed them and their dead classmates. Unsurprisingly, the discourse that evolved throughout the near two-hour televised programming was filled with emotion and outrage. Pro-gun rights supporters and political commentators scoffed at the lack of decorum the students displayed, implying that students lacked the maturity to speak on such argumentative topics.

First, it is important to establish what decorum of town hall forums are. The format that CNN uses consistently for their town halls is made up of a stage in which an important member of society—in this case senators, congressmen, a sheriff and spokeswoman—is situated on a stage at the center of the room. There is a crowd that is allowed to stand up and ask those on stage a question. To ensure that no one is taking too long asking a question or giving their response, a moderator—Jake Tapper—is present to keep the pace moving. It is expected that the members of the audience have previously prepared questions that allows for a thoughtful response from those on stage. While the questions asked may be in relation to an emotional experience, it is not normal to evoke an abundance of emotion and verbally attack the answerer. It is customary to tailor one's emotions to the rhetorical situation. The questioner is usually an average citizen, with no political or social power; thusly, the questioner must treat the answerer, the one with power, with respect and dignity. This is where CNN's town hall on the 22 of February 2018 went astray. The set up for this town hall strayed from the previously established norms. The town hall took place in an arena. Both the questioners and the answerers were on a stage at the center of said arena. Physically, this placed both sets of people on the same level with one another. No longer were those without power sitting at a lower level, having to look up at their elected officials, CNN decided to raise both groups up on a platform. This shift already

stated to the audience that the elected officials were willing to hear the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas out as equals; however, this physical shift also opened up students to equate a shift in decorum as well.

The first clear instance of decorum breakdown happens at the 45-minute mark of the town hall. Cameron Kasky, a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, has a chance to ask a question to Rubio, Nelson, and Deutch. Kasky strides across the stage to shake the hand of each man. While doing so, Kasky explains how students were expressly told not to do said act, but Kasky claimed “I know I’m not supposed to do this, but I’m not going to listen to that.” This act seemed good natured and appropriate at the time; however, the proximity of where Kasky and the elected officials stood during his following statement were now mere feet apart instead of being across the entire stage like the rest of the questioners. Kasky asked a member of the audience, Chris Grady, to stand up so Senator Rubio could see him. Kasky went on to explain that Grady wants to serve in the military in the future and asked Rubio to look at Grady and tell him he will live long enough to serve our country. After a quick exchange between Grady and Rubio, Kasky asked Senator Rubio another question: “can you tell me right now that you will not accept a single donation from the NRA in the future?” The following exchange between Kasky and Rubio shows a clear lack of decorum on Kasky’s part. As Senator Rubio was attempting to explain how campaign funding and political backing works, Kasky continued to disrupt Rubio in his attempts to answer the question with a yes or no response:

RUBIO: So, number one, the positions I hold on these issues of the second amendment—I’ve held since the day entered office in the city of West Miami as an elected official. Number two—no. The answer to the question is that people buy into my agenda. And I do support the Second Amendment. And I also support the right of you and everyone

here to be able to go to school and be safe. And I do support any law that would keep guns out of the hands of a deranged killer. And that's why I support the things that I have stood for and fought for—

KASKY: No more—no more NRA money?

RUBIO: —during my time here.

KASKY: More NRA money?

RUBIO: I—there—that is the wrong way to look—first of all, the answer is, people buy into my agenda.

KASKY: You can say no.

RUBIO: Well—I—I—the influence of any group—

Kasky's interruptions of Rubio throughout questioning breaks decorum of a town hall forum. By not allowing Rubio to respond fully to his question, continuously interjecting more questions, and ultimately eating up time of other's waiting to ask their questions to the men on stage, Kasky deliberately broke decorum in hopes to receive an answer he was looking for. Although this act of defiance may be dismissed by some as immature and overly emotional, the break in decorum allowed for a more robust and prolonged conversation on the issue of campaign funding from the NRA. For in their last exchange with one another, Kasky came to the conclusion he was waiting for:

RUBIO: Well, I'll give you an example, this very evening. I have told you that I support lifting the age from 18 to 21 of buying a rifle. My understanding, before I walked out here, is that that organization is not in favor of that. But I think that's the right thing to do. I don't know what their position is, on teachers being armed. But I don't think they should be. Because that's what I think the right thing to do is. When I offered my bill to

restrict people on the terrorist watch list, or that have been on the list for the last 10 years from purchasing a weapon, they didn't take a stand. I don't think they—they certainly didn't support my—but I offered it. I will do what I think is right. And if people want to support my agenda, they're welcome to do so. But they buy into my ideas. I don't buy into theirs.

KASKY: OK. So, I knew that was gonna happen. NRA, please just keep the money out of Rubio, OK? If he wants to run again, you guys can...(mic cuts off).

It is unclear if the audience would have received the same answers from Senator Rubio without the break of decorum from Kasky. Whether the ends justified the means, instead of dancing around a response to the initial question, Kasky was able to illustrate that Rubio would not turn down receiving money from the NRA in the future. If Kasky were to have followed decorum in this situation and not constantly interrupted Rubio's lengthy responses in order to condense them into simple yes or no answers, the result of his line of questioning would have not produced the same answer. Thusly, I conclude that decorum breakdown in this instance worked in the audience's and student activist's behalf as it uncovered a previously unknown truth surrounding Rubio's future funding intent.

The second instance where the audience can see a lack of decorum comes from a question in the audience from freshman Michelle Lapidot. Tapper told Senator Nelson that Lapidot's following question would be for him, instead Lapidot directed her question at Dana Loesch, spokeswoman for the NRA. Loesch was intended to be present at the town hall forum but was noticeably absent from the stage during this line of questioning. Loesch would show up during the second half of the televised event. However, this did not stop Lapidot from asking:

“So, I had a question for Ms. Loesch but she's not here yet. So, for her and the NRA—

she's probably watching—and all of you puppet politicians that they are backing. Was the blood of my classmates and my teachers worth your blood money?”

Lapidot’s use of words such as “puppet politicians” and “blood money” directly breaks the preconceived notions of decorum at the townhall. While Lapidot did not explicitly state her political affiliations or current set of emotions surrounding this situation, it is clear from her tone that she is upset with Loesch and any politicians who take money from the NRA. Critics of this exchange can state that Lapidot could have more respectfully and eloquently discussed her frustration with the NRA without blaming Loesch and politicians who take NRA money, such as Rubio, for the death of her classmates. However, the blatant remarks from Lapidot opens up a conversation about rhetorical refusals in times of crisis. While it is not customary to tell politicians to their faces that their support of an organization led to the murder of seventeen members of the community, the act of refusing to speak with decorum states a shift in generational rhetorical divide. Concluding from the use of vocabulary and delivery tone, Lapidot weighed the importance of her words against the traditional use of decorum; thusly, she concluded that the emotional impact behind her words outweighed the need for decorum. Tapper asked Lapidot to redirect her question to someone who was physically there in order to move the conversation along. Other than the interjection of redirecting the question to someone else, Tapper did not push back against Lapidot’s lack of decorum. This signaled to the audience that similar forms of questions were acceptable to ask. Therefore, a newly established decorum was used for the duration of the night. This rhetorical refusal by Lapidot opened the door for other students, like Emma González, to state their questions in the same disruptive and passionate tone.

The third instance where the audience can see a lack of decorum comes from a question

asked by Emma González. González was a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School at the time of the shooting. González was thrust into the spotlight shortly after the shooting when she gave a viral speech to local and national media sources about her frustration with the United States lack of gun control legislation. Her statement and question at the town hall forum were related to those statements. When González spoke at the town hall forum, she directed her remarks at the newly arrived NRA spokeswoman, Dana Loesch.

GONZÁLEZ: First of all, I want to thank Mr. Foster for teaching us everything we learned. I could not have written that speech without you. Half of you was like directly from notes and I want to thank you for that. Second of all, oh, I had a thing I was going to say. Happens to the best of us. All right. Dana Loesch, I want you to know that we will support your two children in the way that we will not—you will not. The shooter at our school obtained weapons that he used on us legally. Do you believe that it should be harder to obtain the semi-automatic and—weapons and the modifications for these weapons to make them fully automatic like bump stocks?

González's lack of decorum comes from her message being directed at Loesch and Loesch's two children. By González implying that herself and her classmates are doing a better job at protecting Loesch's children than Loesch herself, González is actively breaking decorum. Not only is González now speaking for Loesch's children herself—of which it is unknown if González has ever interacted with either—she is also stating that Loesch's political backings are placing her children in harm's way. The implied message of this exchange depicts Loesch and the NRA as the problem of mass shootings and González and her classmates as the solution to said problem. This directly defies the norms of a town hall forum. Not only is González implying that Loesch inadequately protects her own children, she is implying that Loesch's lack of

parenting skills is contributing to the body count of dead children across America. This exchange can be viewed as immature and overly emotional due to the fact that Loesch's children cannot speak for themselves. Additionally, González's implications can be viewed as far-fetched and reaching for some sort of emotional outburst from Loesch. Purposely using excessively responsive rhetoric to stir a retort from one's adversary is not a new concept, but the act of doing so in this setting shows an abundant lack of decorum on González's part. The act of doing so then became the story of the next news cycle. The students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas were seen to most as petulant teenagers who wandered into a political argument without having the proper education to back their opinions. However, the rhetorical refusal to conform to the standards set at a town hall forum launched these voices into our 24/7 news cycle that amplified and gave credibility to their voices.

Usefulness of Decorum in Gun Control Debate

Did lacking decorum help student activist's messages to be heard? Yes. Within two weeks of the Parkland shooting, Dick's Sporting Goods—one of the United States' leading outdoor recreation retailer—decided to ban all assault-style weapons sales in all of their stores. In addition, Dick's raised the minimum age to buy guns and ammunition from 18 years old to 21 years old in their stores. Seeing the positive publicity Dick's acquired with that specific addition to their company's policy, in September of 2019 Walmart passed identical company policies. Whether or not these two companies decided to change their policies directly due to the town hall forum is unimportant. The simple fact that their policies changed based on mass shootings becoming a central topic of societal importance in the United States is significant. By students breaking decorum and thusly having their rhetoric be replayed in the news, the issue of gun control reform did not die along with this single instance. It kept the pressure on major retailers to do their part in ensuring that assault-weapons are kept out of the wrong hands. Not only did

this forum have an impact on major retailers, but it also impacted the lives of the students asking the tough questions.

In the month following the CNN town hall, survivors of this shooting created an organization called Never Again MSD. This organization went on to host the largest student-led protest for gun control reform globally. Looking back at what makes this moment in time different from other outcries after mass shootings, the lack of decorum students displayed was the catalysis that started this trend of student activism gun control rhetoric. By intentionally breaking the norms created by society in a town hall setting—like pushing back against politicians and using discourteous vocabulary—the voices of those frustrated and frightened were amplified more than before. The news story became more about the rhetoric students are using to talk about gun control; therefore, in order to run the story, their rhetoric was repeated over and over again. Thusly, this amplification led to a spread of ideas that it is okay to push back against authority if that push back is for the greater good, like gun control reform. This backing from others allowed movement away from this isolated incident and propelled gun control reform into the national spotlight for an extended period of time. Consistently highlighting what students said during this exchange with authority—however uncivil the innuendos and vocabulary were—illustrated to a country in mourning that young citizens are demanding change from their elected officials. This refusal to submit to decorum instilled the same defiance in students around the country watching the town hall from home. With the encouragement from the student activists at the forum, countless tweets were sent to elected officials who take money from the NRA. These tweets encouraged those officials to stop said funding. The CNN town hall forum allowed for students to speak plainly what they felt needed to be said, in the way that it needed to be said. The decorum standards in which politicians had

used up until this point had let them down, so it was time to break that decorum and try something new. This shift in decorum and outright rhetorical refusal, if continued, will be an interest of study in years to come.

Further Research into Decorum Importance

As Craig Rood discusses in his book *After Gun Violence*, a mass shooting that continuously makes headlines in our news cycle is “unusual” (143). It is unusual in our current country’s climate because after initial thoughts and prayers, political debates, and inevitable memorial services, the issue of gun control reform tends to run its course. While those in power have “talking points and [talk] past one another”, others that feel powerless “disengage and keep silent” on the topic of mass shootings (5). This sequence of stalemate makes it seem like there is no hope that mass shootings will disappear or even diminish in frequency. Rood poses the question “What hope is there, if any, for breaking the cycle of violence and gridlock?” (5). I do not know a definitive answer to that question; however, I do know that breaking decorum and refusing to adhere to rhetorical norms is currently working for student activists.

While student activists are subverting the rhetorical theories surrounding decorum—thusly alienating the current generations in power—they are igniting a movement of their peers to rebel alongside them. Although the implications of this rhetorical move are to further push for generational divide, it is important to see the good in this trend. The publicity these student activists are exposed to is getting more young people involved in political efforts. I infer that we will see a trend of more young voters, young campaigners, and young elected officials play a major role in our legislative moves in the upcoming years. Therefore, it is important as rhetorical scholars to be aware of this breakdown of decorum. I propose that the field of rhetoric needs to analyze the rhetorical moves of student activists, especially activists from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This group of students embraced scrutiny from the media after witnessing

a tragedy. Even while they faced fierce backlash from pro-gun rights organizations, they have chosen to remain outspoken and fight for tougher gun control legislation. We as rhetoricians need to know how these young leaders use rhetoric to reach their means, because they are so young and have so many more years to advocate for their causes. Through the constant media attention, speaking arrangements, and organized marches, our country has unknowingly opened the door for a generation of professional protesters to march through. This activist generation only has time to grow stronger in their rhetoric due to their age. Through further analysis of their rhetoric and the trends that are associated with those results, it will be easier for our field to infer and analyze future rhetorical artifacts created by those in Generation Z.

It is clear from this artifact alone that students are not afraid to speak their minds and express raw emotions to get their points across. Decorum is not the only thing that matters in political conversations to them. The act of complete submission to preconceived rules of communication is not of vital importance to students who feel silenced and dismissed. What matters to these student activists is that their voices are heard and echoed throughout the world. It is important that their messages of heartache and frustration are amplified to those with the power to change our laws. Student activists are using kairos to their advantage through the various modes of social media at their disposal. With the press of a button, these speakers can send a message across the globe and inspire others to take part in their cause. Unlike other rhetors who follow decorum, student activists do not need to set up a town hall forum to have their messages heard. There is no time for decorum in their minds—students are getting shot dead in their classrooms due to a lack of action. Due to student activist's rhetorical refusal to roll over and accept current political norms, breaking rhetorical tradition is becoming the norm surrounding the issue of gun control legislation. Because of the success and news coverage

students received after the CNN town hall, Never Again MSD members had a larger platform to speak from on the issue of gun control reform. This allowed their March for Our Lives rally the previous month to gain traction.

In my next chapter, I will analyze a speech performed at the March for Our Lives rally by one of the founding members of Never Again MSD, Emma González. This chapter will explore González's use of rhetorical silence to express grief while simultaneously speaking for those who no longer can.

CHAPTER 3. SILENCE CAN BE GOLDEN: AN EXAMINATION OF SILENCE RHETORIC THROUGH A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF EMMA GONZÁLEZ'S 2018 MARCH FOR OUR LIVES SPEECH

On February 14, 2018, a lone gunman entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Within six minutes and twenty seconds, the assailant killed seventeen students and faculty members while injuring seventeen more. What was thought to be just another black mark in the ledger of our country's mass shooting violence, turned into a movement that caught the attention of onlookers in the United States and the international community at large. Student survivors of this shooting remained outspoken concerning America's gun violence in the media after this tragedy, spreading the hashtags #NeverAgain and #EnoughIsEnough throughout social media in hopes of gaining support for tougher gun control regulations to prevent mass shootings. Those students banded together to create a political action committee called Never Again MSD. This committee was formed by twenty students who attended Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who made it their goal to influence the 2018 U.S. election. The first large event put on by Never Again MSD was called March for Our Lives (MFOL), a student-led protest to raise awareness of gun violence. One of the founding members of Never Again MSD, Emma González, gave a speech that dominated headlines surrounding the march for the next news cycle. While many a passionate speech was given that day, González's use of combining oratory and silence broke through the rhetorical chaos of the rally and captivated audiences around the globe.

Within this chapter, I will argue that student activists are successful in using silence rhetoric to amplify their outcries for gun control reform. As seen through the proceeding textual analysis of Emma González's March for Our Lives speech, silence can be used to convey more meaning than choruses of words are able to. Through analyzing the historical use of silence in

rhetoric, the field of rhetorical criticism can observe the lasting impact of silence in oratory in hopes to expand the scope of what is considered effective in public address.

Silence Rhetoric Throughout History

Silence is known as being the absence of noise in all walks of life. In the field of rhetoric, silence means more than that. Silence can be referred to as noiseless communication or it can mean the avoidance of disclosing certain information. Silence is not exclusive to the rhetorical world; however, the world of rhetoric is built upon the very existence of silence. The ability to speak and be understood must be coupled with time to contemplate the presence of speech itself. Robert L. Scott wrote about the relationship between rhetoric and silence in his 1972 article entitled “Rhetoric and Silence”. Within this article, Scott elaborates on the bedrock of the rhetorical tradition—the choice to say something verses the choice to be quiet. “Every decision to say something is a decision not to say something else, that is, if the utterance is a *choice*. In speaking we remain silent. And in remaining silent, we speak” (Scott146). Without the existence of silence, the ability to communicate effectively through rhetorical means would be moot. Silence gives the rhetor the ability to create meaning through oratory by allowing the dialogue to be accurately contemplated by the audience because there is an absence of noise. “Rhetoric is not the counterpart of dialectic. Rather it is the antithesis of silence making a dialectic with which to resolve, momentarily, some perplexity we face, preparing for civilized activity if validated by mutual respect” (Scott 158). Silence has the capability of allowing meaning without words being spoken, but silence can also mean choosing not to acknowledge certain amounts of information.

In Cheryl Glenn’s 2004 book entitled *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Glenn expands upon the average definition of silence to include information that is left out of speech. She cites the absence of words used in scenarios as making rhetorical choices to silence marginalized groups of people. For example, Glenn states that rhetorical studies have decided what history of

their field they share with the world. Many teachers and academics alike think about the beginning of rhetoric starting off in Ancient Greece with famous orators and philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. This may be true that Plato and Aristotle played a significant role in the creation of what we now know as the field of rhetoric; however, by focusing on this small group of people and telling their stories, Glenn states that we are leaving other stories out of our history books. By not mentioning the contributions of others, we are silencing their voices to be heard. Specifically, Glenn claims that female voices have been silenced in rhetorical history:

Since rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said), canonical rhetorical history has represented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision of allowance for females (Glenn 1).

Through focusing our history on the rulers of the world, we tend to focus on male stories over females, simply because the rights of women were not considered equal to a male up until the past few centuries—some can even argue decades. Glenn also states that racially marginalized group's stories have been silenced and continue to be silenced in modern day life. There have been many examples of this racial inequality in many aspects of rhetorical history; however, the silencing of these groups has required them to think of other ways to be heard other than uttering words.

Silence in rhetoric does not always involve pauses of oratory in which silence creates dialogue. Dialogue does not even need to take place for rhetoric to occur. Silent protests have been used over the past centuries to express messages of anger and disenchantment towards an establishment in power through body language alone. Actions can speak louder than words if the meaning behind those actions are known to the intended audience. During the 1968 Olympic

gold medal ceremony, Tommie Smith and John Carlos chose this moment to hold up their fists to the sky in the Black Panther salute to silently protest racial discrimination in America (Figure 1).

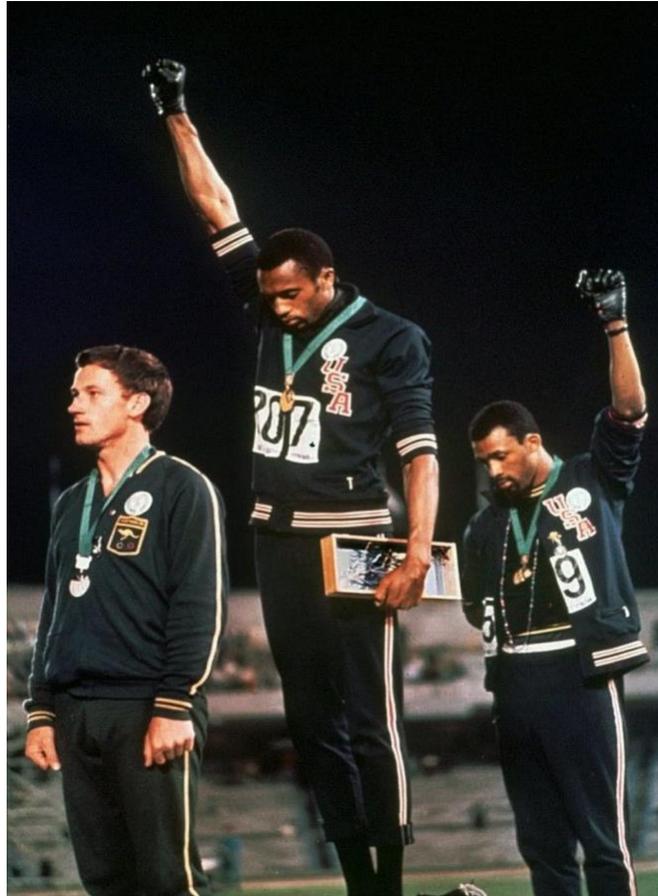


Figure 1: Getty Images, Tommie Smith, John Carlos and the 1968 Black Power protest during Olympic gold medal ceremony, 1968 [t.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/09/24/they-didnt-takeaknee-the-black-power-protest-salute-that-shook-the-world-in-1968/?utm_term=.25](https://www.t.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/09/24/they-didnt-takeaknee-the-black-power-protest-salute-that-shook-the-world-in-1968/?utm_term=.25)

Without saying a word, the audience was able to interpret the rhetorical meaning from body language alone, thus allowing conversation to occur by using their platform effectively. Not all Olympians give speeches after medaling, but all medaled Olympians can take their place on the podium. Both Smith and Carlos used their moment in the spotlight to enact rhetorical discussion without uttering a word.

A modern example of silent protest being implemented is Colin Kaepernick's choice to

kneel during the National Anthem on live television before playing an NFL game in 2016 (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Henderson, Thearon W./Getty Images. Photograph of Colin Kaepernick taking a knee, New York Magazine, 13 Sep. 2016 <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/colin-kaepernick-and-protest-as-a-leap-of-faith.html>

Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem to protest police brutality in the United States. By choosing not to stand, Kaepernick states that he will not acknowledge a flag that does not treat people in marginalized communities with equal respect and dignity. All of this was said through a singular silent action.

Whether silence rhetoric is performed through pauses in oral communication, the choice to not talk about certain groups and information, or simply letting your body's actions speak for themselves, silence has been used effectively throughout history in various capacities. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze whether or not the use of silence can be effective in rhetoric surrounding gun control regulation in the United States. Numerous mass shootings occur every year in the U.S. with little to no change in legislative action by the government; however, a new

movement led by younger generations has asserted itself into the rhetorical conversation and are demanding that the voices of student activists are heard. I will examine whether or not student activist's use of rhetorical silence is effectively cutting through the empty rhetoric produced by those in power.

Case Study: Silence Rhetoric used during March for Our Lives Speech

On March 24, 2018, citizens of the United States joined a student-led protest to raise support for tougher gun violence prevention processes called The March for Our Lives. The organizers of this event were Never Again MSD and the nonprofit organization Everytown for Gun Safety. With the financial backing of notable celebrities, like George Clooney, Steven Spielberg, and Oprah Winfrey, this protest took place in Washington, D.C. with over eight hundred more similar protests taking place worldwide. During a day full of demonstrations and speeches by prominent members of United States' Senate, cultural icons, and survivors of mass shootings, an estimated 1.2-2 million marchers attended making this one of the largest protests in American history.

Focusing on the Washington, D.C. protest, all speakers were of high school aged or younger. The following are speakers from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School: Cameron Kasky, David Hogg, Delaney Tarr, Sarah Chadwick, Alex Wind, Jaclyn Corin, Ryan Deitsch, Aalayah Eastmond, Samantha Fuentes, and Emma González. Other speakers came from around the country to share their personal stories with gun violence, like Trevon Bosley whose brother was shot and killed leaving a church in Chicago. The most prominent non-MSD student speaker was Yolanda Renee King, granddaughter of Martin Luther King Jr. Also, in attendance were celebrity singers, including Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, who performed songs during the protest in support of the efforts being made for legislative change. Although their expansive platform helped to raise awareness and credibility to the march, no

celebrity took the stage to speak on behalf of the marchers. The choice to have only students speak was a necessity. The phrase “March for Our Lives” encapsulates the emotions of students who believe that the stalemate occurring in the United States government regarding gun legislation is intentionally risking millions of student’s lives including their own, it is important to have student’s voices amplified other than celebrities who do not have to face the same threat of school shootings daily. According to the Los Angeles Times, Emma González’s speech was one of the most powerful of the day (L.A. Times Staff, 2018). Through her use of silence, González is able to express the grief her classmate’s deaths have caused her and memorialize the impact their deaths have left on the nation.

The beginning of González’s speech followed the traditional format of public address. González set the scene by addressing the amount of time the shooter took to take the lives of her fellow classmates and faculty members. She then launched into a repetitive anaphora of “No one [..]” that depicted the confusion, desperation, and inability to comprehend what occurred the Parkland community felt on that fateful February day. “No one could comprehend the devastating aftermath, or how far this would reach, or where this would go,” stated González. This led González into another round of repetition that narrated the activities those slain classmates “would never” be able to do again:

[...] my friend Carmen would never complain to me about piano practice. Aaron Feis would never call Kyra "miss sunshine," Alex Schachter would never walk into school with his brother Ryan, Scott Beigel would never joke around with Cameron at camp, Helena Ramsay would never hang around after school with Max, Gina Montalto would never wave to her friend Liam at lunch, Joaquin Oliver would never play basketball with Sam or Dylan. Alaina Petty would never, Cara Loughren would never, Chris

Hixon would never, Luke Hoyer would never, Martin Duque Anguiano would never, Peter Wang would never, Alyssa Alhadeff would never, Jamie Guttenberg would never, Jamie Pollack would never (González 2018).

Then after about one minute and fifty-three seconds of speaking, González then fell silent on stage. It wasn't until a beep over the sound system occurred that González started speaking again. That beep indicated that González had taken the stage for six minutes and twenty seconds, the same amount of time the shooter took the lives of her classmates and faculty members at MSD. Through the absence of words that the four minutes and twenty seconds ensued, silence rhetoric transformed the space of oral muteness into a space of symbolic meaning.

The significance of the placement of silence within González's speech is strategically important to the emotional impact of the audience members in attendance. As she reads the names of her murdered peers, González speeds up her delivery pace and in doing so, she changes the inflection of emotion in her vocals. By the time González reaches the moment of silence, it is clear to the audience that she is holding back tears. Placing the moment of silence after narratively describing and naming her classmates, the audience is forced to reflect on the lives of those who are no longer with them and use the loss they feel to change current gun legislation. This idea follows the rhetorical move of "the warrant of the dead" phenomena that occurs in gun control public arguments. According to Rood (2018), the warrant of the dead is the argument that "the living are called on to act and the dead are invoked as justification for that action: since they died, we should do X," (47). As González speaks in detail about her classmate's lives, she attempts to make them present in the minds of her audience. They are not dead to her; they are as present in the current conversation of gun control as the living are. Their deaths are to be used as a reminder of all that was lost and all that can be gained through tougher gun control legislation.

Because they died, we have a chance to change laws to live. The silence allows for the audience to think through this unspoken argument in order to instill in them the importance of this day and all the change that is required to ensure a shooting of this magnitude does not happen again.

Therefore, the significance of location in González's speech for the moment of silence was rhetorically effective in steering audience's minds towards the warrant of the dead and the public argument surrounding gun control legislature. The effectiveness of this argument can be seen through the audience's reaction to González's moment of silence—they did not remain silent.

For four minutes and twenty-seven seconds, the audience at the MFOL event was intended to remain silent during Emma González's speech; however, they took the opportunity to shout words of support to the speaker, chant encouraging phrases, and invoke visual protest rhetoric practices to propel the movement. In Carole Blair's 2001 article "Reflections on criticism and bodies Parables from public places", she states the importance rhetorical critics need to put on analyzing rhetorical artifacts in person to fully experience the significance of the artifact. When it comes to speech analysis, the way audiences react to speeches is normally analyzed after the speech is over through the amount of applause and conversations that occur in news stories. In the case of the Emma González speech, rhetorical critics do not have to imagine the response of the audience because the crowd themselves became speakers and add to the speech's transcription in the very moment it was spoken. For the first twenty or so seconds into the moment of silence, the crowd remained silent. There was no indication that the moment of silence was going to occur or what the meaning behind it was. Naturally, the audience waited for González to continue speaking. When it became clear that she was not going to say more, singular voices in the audience can be heard encouraging González to continue through shouts of "Go, Emma!" and spiritic clapping. With the purpose of the silence still unknown to the

audience, cheers of “Go Emma, you can do it!” and more waves of clapping continue to arise. The only audible noise González makes are sniffles that attempt to hold back her tears that inevitably flow. Due to this, the audience then launches into chanting “Never Again!” repeatedly, then falls back into silence. The last outburst from the audience during the moment of silence can be heard as “We all love you, Emma”. When a timer goes off, González speaks again saying:

Since the time that I came out here, it has been six minutes and 20 seconds. The shooter has ceased shooting, and will soon abandon his rifle, blend in with the students as they escape, and walk free for an hour before arrest. Fight for your lives before it's someone else's job (González, 2018).

With this, the conclusion of her speech, the audience erupts into applause and chants “Emma!” and “Never Again!” until the next speaker arrives at the podium. The silence allowed the audience to become a part of González’s speech. Not only was her voice heard, but the voices of those in the crowd. One can argue that the cheers from the crowd were meant to encourage González to continue for fear she had stopped speaking to try and control her emotions. However, once the reason behind the moment of silence was revealed to them, the audience embraced their agency to continue to share the speech’s platform with González by chanting their opinions of “Never Again!” while the rest of the country watched on television. González’s silence allowed the voices of the many to break through the silence and be heard. She shared her platform with those who had none to show that it truly is the march for *our* lives. This could have only been accomplished through the act of remaining orally silent. Although no audible words were spoken, González’s body language throughout the moment of silence was able to create dialogue all its own.

During the moment of silence in her speech, González did not say one word. The only

audible noise that resonates from the speaker are her constant sniffles in her attempt to hold back tears. As shown below (Figure 3) González stares straight ahead, tears flowing down her face, with a serious and solemn expression throughout her silence. The only change to this expression is when González closes her eyes to allow for more tears to stream down her face.

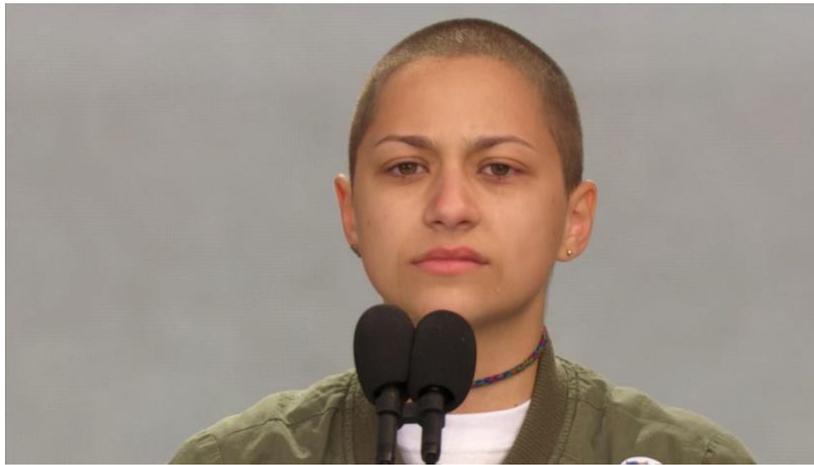


Figure 3: NBC News, 24 Mar. 2018, [nbcnews.com/video/march-for-our-lives-stoneman-douglas-student-emma-gonzalez-leads-emotional-moment-of-silence-during-speech](https://www.nbcnews.com/video/march-for-our-lives-stoneman-douglas-student-emma-gonzalez-leads-emotional-moment-of-silence-during-speech)

This level of vulnerability and strength in González's body language is rhetorically dynamic and essential for the purpose of the speech. Permitting herself to cry in front of millions to show the emotional impact this shooting has on her allows the onlooking audience the opportunity to empathize with González. Not everyone in the audience has experienced a school shooting for themselves, but they can now imagine what it feels like to lose a loved-one to a shooting through González's body language. By not allowing her facial expression to crumble under the grief that she feels, González's stern façade is able to express her frustration and unequivocal anger towards the events that occurred at her school and the ambivalence the U.S. government has towards gun control legislation. If she had decided to openly sob or let a smile break through during this time, the atmosphere of a united and strong group of students would have faltered. It is important to the MFOL cause to be seen as a resilient organization that is willing to continue

fighting for gun control reform even in the face of adversity. González is a prominent figure of this movement. It was her job to show defenselessness but power to inspire others to continue to fight for this cause. She accomplished this through her resolve during this emotional moment of silence. Silence up until this point has represented just the absence of words in González's speech; however, the replacement of another word allowed for a new use of "silence" rhetorically in her speech.

The last aspect of González's discourse that remained "silent" was the use of the word "shooter" instead of the assailant's name. By not acknowledging the shooter's actual name, González is able to have his identity and importance silenced in the rhetorical conversation. The very act of identifying a shooter by their name creates a platform for that person's story to be told. In the case of a mass shooting, keeping the shooter's identity from the media allows the stories of the deceased to rise to the top of importance compared to the shooter. González does not allow the shooter to steal any of the spotlight from the lives he took away. Silence, in this case, is not the absence of words but the replacement of one identifying, personal word with one of commonality and unimportance. This rhetorical strategy silences the shooter's story and therefore amplifies the stories of the lives he took instead.

González's speech was not the only one given at the March for Our Lives event that day; however, it is one of the most powerful and memorable because of her use of rhetorical silence. Using silence to give warrant to the dead, present a voice to those without a platform, allow her body language to speak for itself, and amplify the stories of the dead, González's speech is a perfect example of how the use of silence rhetoric can expand the scope of what is considered effective in public address.

Further Research into Silence Rhetoric used in Gun Control Debate

The use of silence in rhetorical practice is not a new concept; however, the field of rhetoric should expand its acknowledgment and understanding of the effects silence has on controversial conversations. Gun control reform in the United States is non-existent due to the divisive nature of the topic. Both sides of the dispute, anti-gun control organizations and pro-gun control organizations, are entering into a values-based persuasive argument in hopes that their narratives and rhetorical know-how will squander the opposing side's chance for change. Despite their best efforts, neither side has acquired any footing on this subject. After the event of a mass shooting a cycle begins within our country. Anti-gun control organizations push back on those who oppose them in saying that it is disrespectful to talk about legislative change in the wake of a shooting. They call for an appropriate amount of mourning time to allow for "thoughts and prayers" before bringing politics into the situation. The pro-gun control organizations push back against the opposing side by claiming that the opportune moment—*kairos*—to speak about gun control legislation is immediately after lives have been lost in a shooting. They call for legislative change to occur by using the event of a mass shooting to propel their agenda forward in the Senate. With both sides pushing against each other and giving no room for deliberation over party-line politics, the rhetoric around gun control becomes a screaming match: the winner is the loudest in the room, while the loser is the American people. This constant push back continues until the mass shooting is forgotten by the nightly news cycles and is replaced with fresher news, and the conversations surrounding gun control cease. That is until another mass shooting occurs, and we start the cycle all over again. Instead of continuing this cycle indefinitely, there must be a way of disrupting the status quo. Using Gonzalez's speech as example, it is clear that the use of silence in rhetoric is memorable and impactful. I propose further research into the impact silence in rhetorical practice, like public address, has on

controversial conversations. If shouting matches and political propaganda has not worked in making the world safer for our students, maybe silence will be able to break through the noise. It is too soon to tell how effective the Never Again MSD committee and the March for Our Lives protest will have in the long run; however, the impact they had on the 2018 U.S. election should be of interest to researchers. The age of registered young voters (ages 18-29) rose exponentially from 21% voting in the 2014 midterms to 31% voting in 2018. Additionally, the Democrats (known for being more in favor of gun control reform than Republicans) managed to regain majority control over the House of Representatives. To chalk this movement in favor of gun control up to just González's speech would be naïve to say the least; however, there deserves to be further research into the impact moments of silence in speeches has on their level of impactedness.

The term “rhetoric” has become synonymous with oratory since its inception in Ancient Greece, yet over the years it has evolved into something more complex than spoken word. Rhetoric has lent itself to various aspects of communication not even dreamt of by ancient philosophers: visual rhetoric and digital rhetoric to name a few. It is time that the field of rhetoric embraces the need to analyze and understand how new forms of rhetoric can be used. Through research and application, academics should look into silence rhetoric and its ability to save lives—“before it's someone else's job.”

In my next chapter, I will analyze an artifact by a non-profit organization called Sandy Hook Promise. This artifact is an online advertisement that attempts to blur the lines of humor and horror in order to establish rhetorical irony of sending our students back to school without laws to protect their lives.

**CHAPTER 4. “THESE NEW SOCKS, THEY CAN BE A REAL LIFESAVER”:
TEXTUAL AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE 2019 SANDY HOOK PROMISE
ADVERTISEMENT**

How do you know when it is time to start shopping for the back-to-school essentials to help your child start off their year right? Beginning in late July, companies start spamming our television screens, emails, and practically anywhere an ad can exist in our daily lives to advertising back-to-school sales. These advertisements are riddled with students happily smiling at the camera, telling their parents what the “cool, new” things to buy them are. However, in September of 2019, one non-profit organization subverted the norms of advertising genres to leave a lasting impact on their audience. The organization Sandy Hook Promise released a “back-to-school” ad with imagery of smiling students looking into a camera and thanking their parents for buying them cool, new stuff for school—all while a school shooting is occurring in the background. This advertisement used satire and irony to both create humor and horror simultaneously for the viewer—the combination of which has yet to be done on mainstream media platform in modern day, tackling the issue of gun control. Through this chapter, I argue that Sandy Hook Promise effectively used satire and irony to comment on our lack of gun control in America.

Irony in Rhetoric

Through studies of irony, the gun control debate, back-to-school advertisements, and student ethos, the Sandy Hook Promise advertisement combines these different disciplines unlike any artifact in the gun control debate has done before. By bringing these subjects together in an unlikely way, the scholarship surrounding them becomes more robust.

Throughout its history in rhetoric, irony has been seen as both a tool to gain wisdom and a measure of deceit that must be used sparingly. Aristotle and other ancient philosophers

believed that the “characterization [of irony] reveals the Greek suspicion of irony as an abusive and deceptive use of language; anyone who practices *eironeia* was an *eiron*—a dissembler.” (Enos, p. 355) Wayne Booth defined stable irony as “an intentional act of an author, covertly expressed in the text, which is recovered through a stable reconstructive act, resulting in the reader’s reconstructing a new local and finite meaning.” (Booth, 357) Also according to Booth, “authorial intention is the necessary element for judging a text to be ironic (or not); the reader’s ironic interpretation of a text is limited to the extent that the author intended a specific textual feature to induce an ironic reading” (Enos, p. 357) Ultimately, whether or not irony reaches its full potential depends on if the receiver of the irony is aware of the “double negation” (Sloane, p. 404). “Accordingly, irony conveys meaning by indirect reference rather than by direct statement. Irony plays with the possibilities of extreme otherness of speech, of life, or of existence” (Sloane, p. 404) In his work, “Four Master Tropes” Kenneth Burke remarks that irony is one of the four master tropes that preconfigured mankind’s conceptual worldview (Burke, p. 432). Burke was concerned with the dramatization that accompanied irony; however, if used correctly, will lead to “law and justice” (437). Therefore, irony has not only been a rhetorical tool from the inception of rhetoric itself, but it also has been proven to be an effective persuasive tactic that has the potential to create lasting change in the bedrock of our justice system. Although this is known to be true, before the Sandy Hook Promise advertisement, irony has yet to work itself into discourse of the gun control debate in the United States.

Persuasion used in Gun Control Rhetoric

The gun control debate in the United States has been a topic of discussion and dispute for the past three decades; however, there is also an internal debate within the argument itself: should each side use any means necessary to persuade the public to their side? In particular, what images should be allowed for viewing of mass shootings and the dead bodies they produce? Jens

E. Kjeldsen argues that while images of mass shooting victim's bodies and the damage done to them does not necessarily mean that gun laws need to change, he states that "the type and degree of injury is surely both a relevant and weighty argument, and this argument is especially well performed through the use of images" (p. 212). While one side of the debate claims that images are merely a deceptive instrument to horrify and corrupt the minds of onlookers, Kjeldsen explains how "[images] make us feel the gravity. Unless we feel the gravity of the issue, we really do not understand the nature of the crime, and are not truly capable of evaluating the severity of the sentence" (p. 212). One of the best ways to experience a serious crimes and offense comes through vivid and accurate visual representation. Where words fail us, visuals can assist in meaning. Kjeldsen uses emotional argumentation (e.g. Macano and Walton 2014; Tindale 2004; Damasio 1994) to situate his research within. These prominent works allow proof that emotions are not only to be considered as useful and concrete as logic, they prove that emotions are sparked through visuals. "Since emotions are now generally accepted as an inevitable, acceptable, and beneficial part of rational thought and argumentation in verbal communication, there is no reason not to accept it in visual communication" (Kjeldsen, 213). The argument for whether or not the gun control debate should use images of shooting victim's dead bodies was raised after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. After the shooting occurred, online trolls decided to deny any evidence that the massacre took place. Outraged, pro-gun control advocacy groups discussed releasing those graphic images to the media in hopes to rally support and stop any further shooting denier's false claims.

Sandy Hook Promise (SHP) is a non-profit organization whose namesake is based on the December 14, 2012 school shooting that occurred in Newtown, Connecticut at Sandy Hook Elementary School. A lone gunman entered the school and took the lives of twenty-six people,

twenty of which were students between the ages of six and seven years old. Six adult staff members also lost their lives that day attempting to protect the students. The gunman, Adam Lanza, then took his own life once first responders arrived at the scene. To this day, the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting is the second-deadliest United States school shooting, and fourth-deadliest shooting in U.S. history. At the time, responses to this shooting gained more outrage and pushes for stricter gun control laws than any other shooting that took place in the twenty-first century. In 2013, the United States Senate had the opportunity to pass the Assault Weapons Ban and the Manchin-Toomey Amendment, which would have enforced all states to enact a universal background check on all firearm sales (Keneally). These bills failed to pass the Senate. Instead of giving up hope that the gun control debates would end with the killing of these bills, activist groups formed to ensure that the issue of gun control was not overlooked again. Groups such as Moms Demand Action and Sandy Hook Promise made it their mission to continue recruiting volunteers and fighting for stricter gun laws in America.

Background of Sandy Hook Promise

The co-founders of Sandy Hook Promise, Mark Barden and Nicole Hockley, are parents who lost their children in the 2012 shooting. The goal of SHP taken from their website is to create a culture engaged in preventing shootings, violence, and other harmful acts in schools. SHP is a moderate, above-the-politics organization that supports sensible program and policy solutions that address the “human side” of gun violence by preventing individuals from ever getting to the point of picking up a firearm to hurt themselves or others. Our words, actions, and impact nationwide are intended to honor all victims of gun violence by turning our tragedy into a moment of transformation (SHP Website).

According to them, SHP has trained over six million students and educators the signs of a school shooter. It is also their goal to have trained twelve million people by 2026. This, in their words,

will allow them to have an impact on two separate generations. In addition to school shooter training, SHP offers multiple counseling services that are available for students and parents after experiencing a school shooting. Lastly, SHP is enthusiastically involved in various advocacy campaigns aimed to persuade Congress to pass stricter gun control legislation. Currently, one bill they are championing is the Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) that empowers law enforcement and family members of at-risk individuals to take action before that person hurts themselves or others. In short, SHP is actively working to prevent school shootings through training and awareness, helping those who have already been impacted by events of school shootings, and they are actively championing laws to help stop future shootings. Due to their important and timely work, SHP needs raise funds to continue their non-profit work. The organization has broken through the noise of multiple non-profit organizations asking for donations primarily from their ingenious use of provocative advertisement campaigns.

Multiple SHP advertisements have gone viral in the past few years based around their aggressive and explicit advertisements. Their video entitled “Evan” has been viewed over twelve million times. The purpose behind this advertisement was to encourage the viewer to pay attention to those around you. In doing so, you will be able to see the signs of a school shooter and report them before the shooting occurs. While the reception of “Evan” was split evenly at expected party lines, the viral nature of this ad showed that shock and bold visuals will lead to massive circulation. This circulation allows for the debate surrounding gun control to continue gaining traction without an actual mass shooting having to occur to do so. In his book entitled *After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock*, Craig Rood describes the monotonous phenomenon that proceeds political debate after the event of a mass shooting. Rood states that we enter into a cycle of horror, debate, and stalemate in the wake of a

shooting. This cycle is then repeated when another shooting transpires. SHP’s advertisements allow for the cycle to begin again without having to be enacted by a shooting itself; therefore, SHP advertisements need to be studied and circulated.

“Evan” is not the only SHP ad to reach viral status online. In September of 2019, SHP released a new advertisement about students going back to school entitled, “Back-To-School Essentials.” This is the advertisement I will be analyzing in this paper. The purpose of this ad was to shock and disturb the viewer through satire and irony. Opting out of showing this in the normative television advertisement format, SHP chose to release this purely online—selecting Youtube.com as the platform of their choosing. In addition to the YouTube website, the video circulated on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This format allowed the video to amass over 6.2 million views and counting. Using digital media platforms as a vehicle for distribution, the video circulated the world at a faster rate that allowed viewers to comment and interact with the video in real time. Although the video accumulated a variety of responses, both positive and negative, it is clear that something is rhetorically happening here that must be discussed. The SHP advertisement shows through use of irony what the phrase “back-to-school” means for children in America. This advertisement shows how children are preparing to do whatever it takes to survive a school shooting. Most importantly, it is stating that the most important back-to-school essential is stricter gun control laws in the United States.

Case Study: Sandy Hook Back-to-School Ad

Just like in literature or rhetoric, there are different genres in the world of advertising. These genres include different formats in which the ad can take—for example, television ads, web ads, or bus bench ads. These genres also are classified into subgenres by specific ways companies sell a product in a particular category—like perfume ads being overly sexualized and mysterious. However, advertisements are also sorted into genres based on a particular time of

year that they are produced and circulated—like humorous ads playing during the Super Bowl or heartfelt messaging around the Christmas holiday season. The genre of advertisement that the SHP ad falls into is commonly known as a “Back-to-School” (BTS) ad. An abundance of images may come to your mind when I say “Back-to-School” advertisement, perhaps a particular ad or just the overall storyline that plays throughout. What BTS ads commonly show are kids talking to their parents about all of the new things they are going to need for the beginning of a new school year. This normally includes asking for new clothes with popular television show characters or a teen heartthrob screened onto them, asking for new shoes to show off to their friends, and of course the need for new school supplies to ensure they are equipped to learn. The overall tonality of the children’s voices in these sorts of ads are important to note as well. In order to persuade parents into physically purchasing new things, the children are always on their best behaviors. For instance, children will be smiling at the camera and asking—instead of demanding—new things. Their persuasive techniques are also on display, normally ending with a satisfactory phrase of praise to said parent like “I’m going to be the coolest kid in school because you bought me (x). Thanks Mom/Dad!” Another norm that is found within BTS ads is where the attention of the speaker falls upon. Commonly, the child in the advertisement is talking directly at the camera. This signifies that the viewer of the ad is the authority figure that the student is trying to appeal to. And in typical capitalistic fashion, the company paying for the ad will have a tagline showing how much money parents save when they shop at their particular store. Thus, sealing the deal that shopping for those back-to-school essentials will not only make your children happy, it will also make your wallet happy. Additionally, the color schemes of BTS ads are always vibrant and bright. These colors are strategically selected to draw your attention to the product that is being sold. The reason highlighting the commonality in BTS ads is to illuminate

how SHP does not break from the norms established in this genre of advertisement. The SHP ad embraces these standards in order to show the irony and actual “cost” sending your children back to school without the proper essentials—gun control reform—will be your child’s life.

This analysis contains two important parts. First, I will analyze the transcription of what is said throughout the advertisement. This includes not only what the students are saying during, but also the ending tagline that SHP displays to frame their advertisement in the gun control debate itself. Second, I will analyze the visuals that are shown throughout the ad. I will focus on the scene that plays out in both the foreground and background of each frame. It is important to my overall argument to treat the transcript and the visuals of this advertisement as separate entities. Due to the ad’s heavy use of irony to make its point, the only way to prove the complex dichotomy that exists between what is said and what is happening is to separate them initially. Then when they are put together, the meaning becomes revealed and strengthened for the viewer.

If one were to strictly look at the transcript for this ad, they could infer that it is a normal back-to-school advertisement. There is no indication in the text itself that anything of life-changing significance is happening to the boys and girls speaking. The following is the transcript of what is said verbally within the advertisement:

Boy #1: *This year, my mom got me the perfect bag for back to school.*

Girl #1: *These colorful binders help me stay organized.*

Boy #2: *These headphones are just what I need for studying.*

Boy #3: *These new sneakers are just what I need for the new year.*

Girl #2: *This jacket is a real must have.*

Boy #4: *My parents got me this skateboard I wanted, it’s pretty cool.*

Girl #3: *These scissors really come in handy in art class.*

Boy #5: *These colored pencils too.*

Girl #4: *These new socks, they can be a real lifesaver.*

Girl #5: *(in tears) And I finally got my own phone to stay in touch with my mom.*

Tagline: *It's back to school time and you know what that means. School shootings are preventable when you know the signs.*

Not only are the words themselves unquestionable, the inflection in which they are stated do not lead the viewer into assuming anything out of the ordinary may be occurring until the last speaker talks. From the words alone, a purely textual analysis of this artifact would produce confusion as to why it is important enough to write a paper on, and why the tagline is so morbid for a simple BTS ad about kids getting supplies. However, the words and inflections of the students throughout this ad do not match the visuals of the events occurring in the background of each frame. By the time Boy #2 is speaking, the viewer can hear gunshots and see students running in every direction behind our speaker. To see how irony of what is being said is juxtaposed with the visuals being shown, I will now describe what the viewer is seeing with the audio. I will be referring to the viewpoint of the camera as the “audience” or “viewer” from now on. This will help illustrate where the viewer of the ad is positioned compared to where the speakers in the ad are and who they are talking to. All speakers start their lines looking straight at the camera. By doing so, this makes the viewer of this advertisement feel present and responsible for the lives of the speakers unfolding in front of them.

Boy #1: *This year, my mom got me the perfect bag for back to school.* The advertisement starts off with the viewer looking out of an open locker, to a boy smiling and holding his new backpack for the new year. The colors of both of his clothes and the smiles of his classmates

behind him are vibrant and bright. Everything seems very in line with what a typical BTS ad is. We transition to our next speaker by the boy closing his locker on the viewpoint of the audience.

Girl #1: These colorful binders help me stay organized. We, the audience, have transitioned to looking at a girl, sitting in a classroom, and holding up her dynamically colored binders. She is looking at the camera and giving a large smile. This also stays true to the BTS genre ad. However, upon closer inspection, you can see her out-of-focus teacher running to the door of the classroom and locking it shut. None of the students behind our speaker look up from their work and see this action taking place. It is also so fast and blurred that the audience likely does not see this action happen either. Our focus is supposed to be on the smiling girl with brightly colored binders.

Boy #2: These headphones are just what I need for studying. Our next speaker is sitting in a library set. He is facing the camera with an open book and notepad in front of him. His new headphones are around his neck, but after letting the audience know he is happy about being able to study with music playing, he places the headphones around his ears—just as the viewer sees the first instance of scrambling students and hears distant screaming.

Boy #3: These new sneakers are just what I need for the new year. We transition to the viewer facing the ground and seeing the shoes of someone running at top speed. The camera pans up to reveal our speaker. He is still adhering to the BTS ad norms of smiling into the camera; however, now the audience has a better sense of the gravity of the situation unfolding in front of them. You see students running out of classroom doors behind our speaker. The most prominent change in this frame is that the viewer finally hears the gun shots ring out and clear screams of terror from students. You see one student fall to the ground behind our speaker. Due to the audience's point of view, it is difficult to see whether that student simply tripped to the

ground or fell after being shot. But because we are following our smiling, running boy, our attention is meant to be on him and his new shoes.

Girl #2: *This jacket is a real must have.* The viewer has now transitioned into a gym setting. The girl in this frame is in a brightly colored volleyball uniform and is smiling at the camera while tying her jacket around the handles of the door leading to the hallway outside. Because we as an audience now understand that a school shooting is occurring, it is understandable that the girl in the frame is barricading the door; however, her unwavering smile does not match the actions she is partaking in and her steadfast calmness. In the background, we can see her teammates running towards another gym door and using their jackets to tie around the handles.

Boy #4: *My parents got me this skateboard I wanted, it's pretty cool.* The viewer transitions into a classroom where we see the first slight sign that the BTS genre is being subverted. While our speaker is still looking directly at the viewer, there is not a large smile on this student's face. While the speaker does not show any signs of sadness or panic, his face and tone match that of someone who has been running to get to this point in the school. You can hear a slight wheeze in his voice, indicating that he ran to this position. After letting the viewers know how cool his skateboard is, the speaker heaves it over his head and uses the skateboard to smash open a glass window. In the background of this frame, you can see other students breaking down windows with various objects and helping each other out the newly open windows.

Next, a transitional scene takes place that completely breaks the BTS ad genre norms. The viewers are no longer looking a central speaker who demands their focus. There is no one smiling and talking about the cool outfits their parents bought them for school. The viewer is

now outside of the building, looking at students jumping out windows and running out of the frame. Therefore, this is the turning point of the advertisement where if the audience does not realize this is not a normal BTS ad, they are about to realize it with our next set of speakers.

Girl #3: *These scissors really come in handy in art class.* The viewer transitions back into the school where the lighting and color scheme has changed drastically. No longer are we looking at bright colors of clothing and sunlight pouring into classroom. We now see the speaker in a darkened classroom, hiding behind a doorframe, with a pair of scissors clenched in her hands. The way in which she is holding the scissors gives her the proper leverage and power to plunge them into whomever walks through the door. Our speaker is whispering to us, to ensure her hiding place remains a secret to the shooter. After hearing two loud gun shots and more screams, the viewer pivots to the other side of the door frame to reveal our next speaker as he responds to the girl. Boy #5: *These colored pencils too.* The colored pencils this speaker is taking about are also being held in a firm grip in his hands, ready to strike any person who enters the room. Both of these speakers, while still acknowledging the audience, are no longer smiling. They look scared but prepared to stab an attacker if they walk through the door. While both speakers looked at the audience briefly, both of their attentions were pulled back to the situation at hand. This is the first time in the ad that speakers have broken eye contact while talking. This is also the first instance in the ad where both speakers are whispering to ensure their voices are not overheard to give away their location to the shooter. This frame ends with both speakers looking at the window in the door—waiting to strike.

Girl #4: *These new socks, they can be a real lifesaver.* The viewer is then transported to the bloodiest scene they have witnessed thus far. There are two young girls on the floor. One girl is holding her leg with a look of agony on her face. Again, gone are the bright colors and sunlit

hallways. There is blood running down her leg, and the white floor she is sitting on is pooled with her blood. The girl sitting next to her is our speaker. The speaker has taken off one of her knee-length socks and is using it as a tourniquet around the other girl's leg to stop the bleeding. From the viewpoint of the audience, we can see the two girls on the floor behind a corner of a hallway; however, we can see down the adjacent hallway as well. This view is blocked from the girls. As a viewer, we can see discarded notebooks, backpacks, and a large silhouette laying horizontally across the floor. From far away, it looks like the outline of an unconscious body. Also as a viewer, we can see in the silhouette of someone walking towards the girls, slowly, with something that looks like a rifle in their hand.

Girl #5: *(in tears) And I finally got my own phone to stay in touch with my mom.* Lastly, the viewer transitions to a darkened bathroom scene. Our speaker has tears running down her face, as she pulls her legs up onto the top of the toilet seat to ensure that it looks like no one is hiding in her stall. In the background, you can hear a fire alarm going off and more screaming. This is also the first instance where the audience can hear ominous music playing while our speaker is talking. You see her texting on her phone "I love you mom" and sending it before she looks up to acknowledge the audience's attention on her. While saying her lines, Girl #5 is crying and has tears constantly running down her face. However, after delivering her lines, she smiles to the camera. That is when we hear the door to the bathroom open, and two large footsteps are heard walking in. The smile immediately disappears from our speaker's face. She shuts her eyes to await whatever event unfolds next. Then, the screen goes black. The viewers hear our last speaker's almost silent sobs and then the following message arrives on the screen: *It's back to school time and you know what that means. School shootings are preventable when you know the signs.* The advertisement ends with the SHP logo and a link to their website.

This advertisement has a run time of one minute and seven seconds. Within this short amount of time, SHP has been able to capture the trauma and terror children in America feel about going to school every day with the potential of a school shooting looming over their heads through the use of rhetorical irony. By comparing the normative aspects found in the back to school advertisement genre to the Sandy Hook Promise ad, we are able to see the stark contrast of what is being said and what is being shown. Through color changes, music changes, and the evolution of the student's reactions to the shooting, it is clear to see the deviation this ad takes from the typical BTS ad.

First, the color scheme of the advertisement changes throughout its runtime. The SHP ad starts off adhering to the norms of BTS ads. All colors of clothing, backgrounds, and lighting is vibrant and bright. These colors are commented on by the speakers themselves, exclaiming things like "these colorful binders will help me stay organized." The colors of the objects are drawing the audiences' attention to them in order to distract from the first signs of danger occurring in the blurred background. This same bright, happy color scheme is prominent throughout half of the advertisement. However, once the transitional frame that takes the viewers outside of this back-to-school false advertisement bubble, once the viewers arrive back in the school, the color scheme changes. The remaining frames in the ad take a darker, more ominous tone that matches the events taking place. The lights are dimmed in rooms to signify that students are hiding from the shooter. The clothes are thusly muted and not drawing the audience's attention as they once did. Now the viewer's focus can be on the background massacre and less on the products being "sold." The last few speakers in this ad are also more muted in the colors they are already wearing. I believe this is to let the pools of blood being shown stand out more colorfully. Comparing the beginning of this advertisement's color scheme

to the end is dramatic. Looking at the colors used in this advertisement is crucial to showing the rhetorical irony used throughout this ad. Gone is the typical color pop of innocence that we find in JC Penny ads on TV, the viewers are left with the muted colors of mourning and death.

Another comparison to a typical BTS ad can be found in the upbeat, happy music playing in the background at the beginning of the ad. With its unsuspecting cheerful tempo, the viewer is made to feel at ease and excited to see what is going to happen next in the ad. The music plays throughout the first half of the video. The only other sounds that the viewer can hear are the sound effects associated with schools: locker slamming, doors closing, students talking, etc. However, once the shooting starts taking place, the sounds that accompany this cheerful tempo are screams of students and running feet of those trying to flee the area. These sounds are quickly complemented by the sounds of gun shots reverberating down hallways. Again, until the key transitional sequence of the viewer outside of the school, watching students flee, the cheerful upbeat music plays in the background of smiling children fighting for survival. The transitional frame at 26 seconds signifies the end of the cheerful music and the beginning of an ominous melody. This song heard for the rest of the advertisement is placed to signal the severity of the situation to the viewer. This song immediately is cut off at the 50 second mark when we hear the shooter open the door to the bathroom and step inside. After that, all the audience hears are the sobs of our last speaker. The music and background noises are essential to showing the rhetorical irony in this ad. What is supposed to be the upbeat tempo of a normal BTS ad, becomes mournful melody that lets the audience know that a tragedy has occurred.

The most important aspect of this advertisement are the speakers and their change in facial expressions and vocal tonality from the beginning of the ad to the end. To highlight the rhetorical irony that must take place in this sequence to be effective, all speakers adhere to the

BTS genre requirement of smiling at the viewer. All speakers, up until the transitional turning point, smile at the viewer and sound genuinely pleasure to tell the viewers how excited they are for their back to school essentials. More yet, their smiles and excitement never fade even when it is clear to them that a shooting is taking place. While our first three speakers do not know what is about to occur, Boy #3 is clearly running down the hallway to escape the gunman. However, the smile does not leave his face while exclaiming that he loves his new shoes. The same goes for Girl #2 who is still smiling at the camera and is happy to let the viewers know that her jacket really comes in handy. Our last student before the key tonal transition is Boy #4. This boy does not have as large of a smile as the previous speakers the audience has encountered; however, Boy #4 looks and sounds more surprised than upset.

Then, to keep in step with the other aspects of the ad, the transitional sequence happens, and the expressions and vocal tones of our speakers change. Both Girl #3 and Boy #5 are turning their attention away from the viewers to look out the window. It is clear to the audience that they are both scared and determined to fight their way out of the situation if necessary. These are also the first two speakers to whisper their words to the viewer. This interaction is the first indication that SHP has deviated from the smiling and cheerfully projecting BTS ad images the audience is used to seeing. As the ad transitions into the bloodiest scene, the emotions in both the speaker and the intended emotions of the audience are heightened. Girl #4 states “*These new socks, they can be a real lifesaver*” while she is using her new sock as a tourniquet for her friend who has been shot in the leg. Although this is one of the most visually emotional due to the pained expression on the wounded student’s face and the amount of blood visible to the audience, the speaker’s voice is calm yet determined. It is clear that both she and her friend understand the gravity of the situation they are in; however, the audience can see the shooter walking towards

the girls—they are none the wiser. Lastly, Girl #5 has the most ironic moment in both her expressions and vocal tone while she is interacting with the viewers. We see her send a text that says, *“I love you mom.”* She then looks up to tell the audience with tears streaming down her face *“And I finally got my own phone to stay in touch with my mom.”* The most ironic part about this instance is that she says this with a smile on her face. Thusly, cementing the irony of the situation. This is a back to school ad. This is a genre that the audience knows well. But this was not what was expected. Instead of students talking about all of the great reasons they are happy to return to school, they are fighting to stay alive because gun violence and school shootings are a reality that students in America face every day. This idea is clearly laid out once the screen cuts to black and the tagline reads *“It’s back to school time and you know what that means. School shootings are preventable when you know the signs.”* Going back to school for students in this society means that they need to be prepared to deal with the possibility that they will experience a school shooting. Some of them may be lucky and get out, like the students at the beginning of the ad. For others, the terrifying alternative scenario that the second half of the speakers faced will become fact.

Impact of the Sandy Hook Ad on Viewers

The authenticated Sandy Hook Promise Twitter account tweeted out the “Back to School Essentials” advertisement. Currently, this video has been viewed over 15.5 million times on Twitter alone. Additionally, the tweet itself received 126,000 retweets, 207,000 likes, and over 5,600 replies. The video was captioned “Survive the school year with these must-have #BacktoSchool essentials”. The replies to this tweet were overwhelmingly positive. Most replies indicated that the author agreed with the messages in the ad and supported gun control reform. The “top” reply came from @rundawnrun who wrote, “My daughter’s school held a surprise drill yesterday. They believed it to be real. She was hiding in a closet in the choir room. Her friend,

alone in a bathroom, was texting her that he was hiding but that a man had come in & opened the stall door next to him. This has to stop.” Other positive responses were personal testimonies from parents of school shooting survivors and how they were grateful that SHP is bringing light to what it means for children to go back to school. @Raramonty writes, “When a PSA looks more like a horror film trailer, we truly have lost our way in America...change the gun laws so our kids have a chance to be kids.” (9/18/19). While most of the replies to this tweet were supportive of the work the SHP is doing to inform the public about school shootings, some people replied negatively. The most common negative response to this tweet encompassed credibility issues, with some stating that the ad “was not accurate” and “children don’t fight back.” Another negative reaction came from some who stated that the lack of adults in this ad made it unrealistic—inferring that teachers and school administrators would have been in the hallways, helping survivors and protect students. @HilaryMCurrie writes, “Or perhaps the makers of this video should be more accurate instead of showing children running around a school, not an adult in sight, while they are ready to fight with scissors, bandaging wounds. It’s not realistic, so they need to be credible and do it properly.” Many replies back to this comment highlighted the new ways students are trained to fight back against a gunman. The differing opinions in the replies to the SHP tweet show how divisive a topic gun control is in America. Some people are for it, some are against it; however, numbers do not lie. The video has a combined view total of over 21 million views on Twitter and YouTube alone. Sandy Hook Promise’s goal was to raise awareness of what the phrase “back to school essentials” means to students in a country where guns have more rights than them. By reaching such a wide audience, the Sandy Hook Promise advertisement accomplished one of its goals: awareness. From the success of this ad, they can

continue to place volunteers at schools to train students and faculty of how to respond in the event of a school shooting.

What is clear to me throughout this ad is how prepared the students of America are in knowing what to do if a gunman open fires at their school. When I was in middle school and had our first shooter drill, the only option for us was to lock the door, turn off the lights, sit silent in the corner of the room, and pray that the shooter did not come in. Nowadays, national trainings—like the ALICE method that SHP sponsors on their website—are preparing students on how to flee, fight, or hide. This is evident in the immediate responses of the speakers we follow in the ad. Not only are students barricading themselves against the shooter by using jackets to secure doors, but they are also seen using objects to break down windows to escape. The most telling frame of this is when one speaker is using their sock as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding of a fellow shot classmate. These are wartime medical treatments that have been taught to our students. The clear message in the ad is that the children of America have been trained to expect a school shooting. They live in a world where they have been taught how to save a friend's life from a bullet wound. Heartbreakingly, none of the speakers in this advertisement looked surprised. The students of America have been expecting and preparing for this type of event to occur at their school because gun control laws have not changed to protect them. We send our kids to school every day not knowing if it will be their last.

I would be remiss to not mention the importance of the speakers themselves within this advertisement. SHP is an organization run by adults who clearly have opinions on gun control reform; however, they chose to use elementary and middle school aged student speakers to deliver this message of irony. If we were to replace the students and school background in this advertisement with adults and an office space, I do not believe the overall impact would have

been as great. School-aged children depend on adults in society to take care of them until they are old enough to do so themselves. By showing this traumatic experience through the eyes and voices of innocent children sends a stronger message of urgency and importance for our government to take action. I am not suggesting that our government values one demographic's lives over another; however, our innate need to protect the innocent packs a stronger emotional impact than those who have the means to protect themselves.

Further Research into Rhetorical Irony in Advertisements

The Sandy Hook Promise advertisement entitled "Back to School Essentials" was not the first advertisement to use irony; however, the use of irony through the voices of students impacted the overall debate surrounding gun violence in American schools. The effectiveness it had in circulating the internet, and the millions of views that have prompted discussion amongst the public is worth analyzing and discussing in further research. Because irony has been used in many ways throughout rhetorical history, the technique is not what is fascinating. What is provocative is the emotional dichotomy between humor and horror to show the imbalance of protections between the lives of our country's children and the rights of a semi-automatic weapon. By implying that parents are buying survival essentials that will make the difference between their child's life or death, the SHP ad uses irony in new ways to uncover hidden potential in arguments that are gridlocked. More exploration and experimentation with other rhetorical tools may be fruitful in further gridlocked discussions.

The gun control debate is a divisive topic in American politics. Both sides believe morally that they are correct and the other side is in the wrong; however, if we dismiss each other outright, communication lines fail. With no one coming to the table to talk about this topic, our policies will never change. It is our jobs as rhetoricians to enact change through our

teachings and research about how to properly communicate with one another. Whether you believe that the Sandy Hook Promise ad was necessary or inaccurate, it did bring the divisive opinions to the table in order to have a conversation with one another. The uncommonly used technique of irony helped that happen through humor and horror. With more research and contemplation on effective means of communication, rhetoricians can continue to bring those divisive voices to the table in hopes to one day create positive and lasting change.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

When it comes to gun control reform in the United States, every conversation seems to end with uncertainty for the future. One side of the argument believes that “the right to bear arms” means every citizen has the right to freely own whatever kind of weapon they please, no matter who they are. The other side of the argument believes that “the right to bear arms” means needing intensive background checks on gun owners and purchasers, while limiting what weapons are available to purchase. With such a values-based argument being constantly debated, it is easy for our society to give up hope that anything will change. Student activists have chosen to shake people awake with their rhetorical sense of urgency. Every time our officials have chosen to deliberate based on political affiliation and stall gun control reform, they put our most innocent citizen’s lives at risk. I believe the past three chapters have illuminated reasons to listen to student activists who are using all available means of persuasion to reignite the timely importance surrounding gun control reform. These case studies are important to the field of rhetorical studies because of the impact student activists are having on American politics and the culture surrounding activism and protest movements at large.

What makes students the perfect catalysts to speak on issues of vast importance? Why do we seem to see more of these speakers featured in the news? Why do they seem to have a larger impact on American politics than before? The answers vary; however, it is clear that the world is listening. They may be listening in order to create a counterargument to discredit the students; They may be listening in order to offer insight and support; The fact of the matter is that the world seems to view student activists and youth speakers with a level of interest. This interest leads to further use of this group of speakers. Having young people speak with passionate optimism of change for the future is a refreshing new take. The youth are not yet jaded by the

world, but they embrace it with the knowledge that change can occur when we as global citizens band together. This optimistic and energetic outlook on the world is what sets these speakers apart from established, adult rhetors. Student activists see our society as what it could be, not what is. By believing that they can make a difference, it is refreshing to listen to a speaker that talks with a zeal for life instead of talking points about red tape that will never be cut. Student activists see endless possibilities instead of endless loopholes. If we replaced the student speakers in my three previous case studies with adults, I do not believe audiences would have been left with the same impact. The end results would be more of the same gridlocked arguments about what “side” of the issue you are on rather than “I have the right to live”. The ethos of hearing pleas for life straight from the mouths of those most vulnerable has a larger impact than empty words from adults who could only imagine the horrors of a school shooting. As stated previously by Applegarth, children are viewed as the most “innocent” members of our community (54). The sheer fact that our most innocent voices feel they are not being protected enough by older members of our society and therefore need to speak for themselves should be cause for alarm. Students should be thinking about what they are learning in school, not protesting for the right to survive the school day. We have failed them, but they have chosen not to live with the consequences of our failures. Through harnessing their rhetorical skills, student activists have created a platform for innocent voices to be heard and taken seriously.

There is a momentum behind student activists that spans further than the gun control debate or the United States in general. We are seeing outspoken student activists when it comes to abortion rights, censorship concerns, and climate change. A seventeen-year-old Swedish student activist, Greta Thunberg, has been an outspoken champion of climate change legislation worldwide. Through speeches to the United Nations, globally organized student walkouts, and

social media campaigns, Thunberg has become the face of student activism of the twenty first century. After already becoming the youngest TIME's person of the year, Thunberg has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Although Thunberg is not the only person to be forthright on the issue of climate change, the international impact she is creating in young generations has been labeled the "Greta Effect". This effect depicts school-aged students actively discussing issues of climate change, campaigning for climate change laws, and striking to raise awareness of the need to stop climate change. No longer are young people taking a backseat to decisions that impact their lives, they are actively fighting to have their opinions heard and respected. Student activists, like Thunberg and González, have proven that they not only are eloquent enough speakers to join in conversation at the table of legislators, but they properly invoked rhetorical strategies that made their arguments as strong—if not stronger—than their opposition. While they may not have college degrees yet to back up their beliefs, they have proved through their rhetoric that communication can be tactfully done at any age or education level.

Student activists are demanding to be listened to more than ever before. As rhetorical scholars, it is our job to research the methods in which these students are spreading their beliefs and gaining traction and followers. Students are the future voters and leaders of our world. If we can better understand their communication methods and motivations, we can predict trends in future political, cultural, and academic communication models. Knowing this information will not only bring validity to young citizens and their credibility to speak in adult arenas, but it will also allow scholars to better recognize what modes of communication will be effective with this group of students as they grow to become the future law makers of the United States.

When it comes to student activist surrounding gun control in the U.S.: their bodies are the ones on the line. If they are the ones who have to walk into school every day knowing that our

government has done nothing to protect them from weapons of mass destruction, they have a right to express their frustration and demand that legislative action be taken. These students should have a say in whether or not they will become a statistic. Students have the right to say whether or not they will be just another picture on the nighttime news cycle. Student activists are shouting to be heard—it is time that we as citizens start listening to them.

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