#OscarsSoWhite: A thematic and visual analysis of Tweets during Chris Rock's

2016 Academy Award Monologue

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Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

In 1940, Hattie McDaniel became the first African-American to receive an Academy Award. More than 75 years later, the #OscarsSoWhite movement protested the fact that for two consecutive years no actor of color was nominated for an Academy Award. In 2016, producers selected prominent African-American comedian Chris Rock to host the award show, presumably to address the lack of diversity among nominees. The purpose of this case study is to explore #OscarsSoWhite tweets during Rock's monologue. The research questions examined reactions on Twitter to the 2016 Oscar's opening monologue and how visual elements added meaning to those reactions. Themes that emerged were Chris Rock, Social/Cultural Commentary, Indifference, and Network Over-Compensation. Visual analysis themes that emerged were Reinforcement, Nuance, and Documentation.

Introduction

In 1940 Hattie McDaniel became the first African-American actress or actor to receive an Oscar from the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for her 1939 role as Scarlet O'Hara's housemaid, "Mammy," in *Gone With the Wind*. McDaniel, who received the award for *Best Supporting Actress,* February 29, 1940, sat in the back of Los Angeles's Cocoanut Grove nightclub in The Ambassador Hotel, segregated from her other white co-stars (Abramovitch, 2015). Legend has it she was almost not allowed in the Club, but the film's producer, David O. Selznick, ultimately persuaded the owners to change their mind about their "No Blacks" policy (Abramovitch, 2015). McDaniel's career post-Academy Award was defined by her role as the sassy maid; she played similar roles as maids and servants repeatedly in nearly 40 films. Despite receiving criticism from the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for maintaining stereotypical roles for black women, McDaniel suggested she would rather play a maid on film than work as one in real life (Abramovitch, 2015).

More than 75 years later, the 2015 Academy Awards drew criticism for its lack of diversity among nominees sparking the #OscarsSoWhite movement. The 2016 Oscars, which also lacked any acting nominees of color, relied on the hashtag to encourage a boycott of the show and to globally discuss the Oscar's absence of diversity. Presumably to address this lack of diversity and the #OscarsSoWhite movement, 2016 Oscar producers called on Chris Rock, a prominent African-American comedian, to host the televised award show. Many believed viewers would tune-in solely to hear his take on the controversy in the show's opening monologue. The significance of the motion picture

industry and subsequent American-obsession with celebrity culture is demonstrated as box-office revenue hit an all-time high of $11.1 billion in North America in 2015, according to the MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics. The purpose of this case study is to explore #OscarsSoWhite tweets during Rock's monologue.

Background and Literature Review

Oscars: A Monochromatic Award History

Since McDaniel's win in 1940, only four other African-Americans have received an Oscar for *Best Supporting Actress*. Halle Berry is the sole African-American actress to ever receive an Oscar for *Best Actress*. In the *Best Actor* and *Best Supporting Actor* categories, Oscars have been award to African-Americans four times respectively (Sangweni, nd). Additionally, according to the Internet Movie Database, Latino actors and actresses are historically underrepresented. Despite Jose Ferrer becoming the first Latino nominee and recipient of the *Best Actor* Oscar in 1948, another Latino did not win this award until Benicio del Toro in 2000. With three total acting nominations, a Latino actress has never won an Oscar for *Best Actress*. Rita Moreno won the first and only *Best Supporting Actress* Oscar for a Latino actress in 1961 for her role in *West Side Story*. No Native American has ever won an acting Oscar.

Demographics of Academy

According to a study by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2012, the Academy membership is 94% white and 77% male (Berman, 2016). The mostly white and predominately male Academy selects Oscar nominees each year based on their individual contribution to film, i.e., actors nominate other actors, film editors nominate other film editors. All members vote for Best Picture. In light of the 2015 and 2016

#OscarsSoWhite criticism, the current Academy board president, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, one of the few female members of color, has vowed to change the makeup of the Academy and actively recruit more members of color. According to *Time Magazine,* "there were plenty of nonwhite performers for Academy members to consider: Will Smith in *Concussion*, Idris Elba in *Beasts of No Nation*, Michael B. Jordan and Tessa Thompson in *Creed*, Teyonah Parris in *Chi-Raq*, Samuel L. Jackson in *The Hateful Eight* and Benicio del Toro in *Sicario*, to name a few. *Creed*, a film by a black director with a black lead actor, got one Oscar nod, for white supporting actor Sylvester Stallone" (Berman, 2016, p. 54).

Hashtag Activism

Hashtags as activism is a relatively new use of social media taking root during the Occupy Wall Street movement. With the start of Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and hashtags taking off in 2007, there is not even a decade of scholarly research about hashtags as activism. Other terms related to this phenomenon include slacktivism or clicktivism (Dewey, 2014). Some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of hashtag activism citing that awareness does not equal action, that is, being aware of a cause on social media does not create sustainable change (Hill & Hayes, 2015). Others suggest that hashtags have in fact created lasting policy change or social movements, e.g., Planned Parenthood supporters created #standwithpp after The Susan G. Komen Foundation's decision to cut funding to the organizations. After more than 100,000 #standwithpp tweets, Komen reversed its decision, reinstating funding for Planned Parenthood in 2012 (Dewey, 2014).

To analyze Tweeter's reactions to #OscarsSoWhite, the researcher asked two questions: RQ1 is "What are tweeters reactions to the 2016 Oscar opening monologue?" and RQ2 is "How do visual elements add meaning to tweets?"

Method

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher analyzed tweets with the hashtag Oscars So White (#OscarsSoWhite) during the opening of the 2016 Academy Awards, which aired on ABC February 28. To collect data, the researcher searched #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter from her account during the final 15 minutes of red-carpet coverage and during the opening Academy Awards montage and monologue. The researcher followed Twitter's "live tweets" category, taking a screenshot each time the "20 new tweets" notification appeared. The researcher then printed screenshots of tweets and compared printed copies with the original digital copies to ensure chronological order. The researcher read through all the tweets once. On second reading, the researcher filtered for foreign languages, incomprehensible tweets, and duplicate tweets. This process resulted in a dataset of 176 tweets including 89 tweets with visual elements. The unit analysis was the individual tweet. The entire dataset was comprised of 31 pages.

The researcher analyzed the data through thematic analysis utilizing pawing, then, cutting and sorting, two techniques outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003). The researcher read the dataset multiple times—*eyeballing*—to get a sense of the text. In the pawing stage, the researcher "marked up" the dataset, making notes and highlighting exemplar tweets. The analysis then moved to cutting and sorting. To address the first research question, the researcher utilized a modified version of Ryan and Bernard's (2003) cutting and sorting technique by using a color-coding system. The researcher then sorted and re-

sorted similar tweets into piles, naming each pile, until all color-coded tweets fit into themes.

Because analysis methods of photographs and visuals in Twitter are not as well established as for textual analysis, the researcher developed procedures of visual analysis to answer the second research question. A previous qualitative visual analysis of Facebook images by Abramson, Keefe, and Chou (2014) did not include a detailed description of methods in stating that images contributed to gender communication in social media. Doveling (2015) used qualitative methods to examine visual communication patterns within chat room conversations to identify functions of emoticons and drawings.

Rather than handling visuals as an "add on" with less meaning than the textual analysis, Doveling (2015) explicitly incorporated symbols and drawings into the qualitative research methods. "Emoticons as simplified visual signals of portrayed emotions as well as the use of symbols and itemized depictions such as drawings were likewise integrated as essential aspects into the analysis" (Doveling, 2015, p. 411). Doveling (2015) found three functions of emoticons: affirmative interpretational, toning, and complementary.

The examination of images in #OscarsSoWhite extended previous methodologies by looking at images as independent items and in relationship to the text. The same rigor that was used in coding the textual analysis was used in identifying visual themes. Textual analysis methods were applied to images. The researcher also considered semiotics, i.e., what a symbol signified and how it related to the text or event.

The researcher asked questions of each photo in light of the text: How is the photo used? Does the photo support the text? Does the photo contradict the text? If so, why? Does the photo provide cultural context for the text? That is, who is in the photo, why, for what purpose? Does the photo add meaning to the tweet? What does the photo imply? What does the photo say that the text does not explicitly state? What are the cultural undertones of the photo, if any? Does the photo say more than the text? What would the photo communicate if it stood alone without text?

The researcher then asked the same questions of each emoji.

The researcher repeatedly examined the visual elements looking for recurring functions, making notes and sorting until categories emerged.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed peer-debriefing techniques advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). A colleague reviewed the Tweets and analysis to verify findings.

Results

In answer to the first research question, (What are tweeters reactions to the 2016 Oscar opening monologue?) four main themes emerged: Chris Rock, Social/Cultural Commentary, Indifference, and Network Over-Compensation.

Theme 1: Chris Rock

Most of the tweets analyzed referenced Chris Rock, the show's host, a successful African-American stand-up comedian. Tweets ranged from support to disgust of the host's monologue. While most tweets generally supported or even encouraged Rock's statements, others thought the comedian did not say enough to address the #OscarsSoWhite movement. As shown in figure 1, one tweeter posted the main reason

he was watching the Oscars was Chris Rock, "I'm most anticipating Chris Rocky's

#OscarsSoWhite monologue." Other examples include, tweets said, "Just here for Chris

Rock," "Chris already going in lmao [laughing my ass off]," and "Go ahead #chrisrock

Calling out #OscarsSoWhite out the gate! Love you."
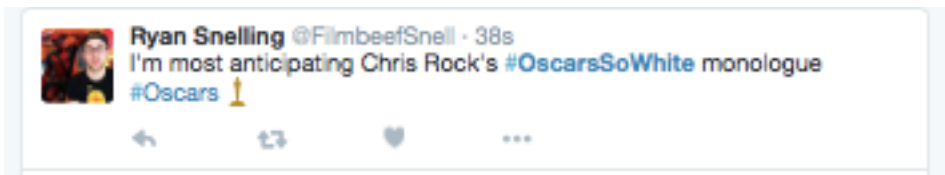
Figure 1.

   Other tweets did not support Rock's monologue. As shown in figure 2, one

tweeter questioned Rock's allegiance in his monologue, "Hmm. Chris being a puppet

right now?" Other examples included, "That monologue was approved by the very

people Chris Rock was talking about," and "Chris kinda makes a statement and says

something sexist." Still others outright disagreed with Rock's comments, saying, "Black

people and all POC [People of Color] not only want opportunity, we want recognition."

Figure 2.

Theme 2: Social/Cultural Commentary

   The second theme that emerged was tweets providing social or cultural

commentary based on Rock's monologue. These tweets sought to move the conversation

beyond the Oscars, focusing rather, on the heart of the #OscarsSoWhite movement—

social inequality and injustice. For example, "The phrase 'these people' should never be

used in the context of #OscarsSoWhite. Ever ever," "My money is on #ChrisRock

coming out in white face," "I hope everyone's having fun & that we'll talk about

America's racial inequity re: things that matter after tonight," "Oprah and Whoopi

Goldberg Are Not the Same Person."

Before the Academy Awards started, a photo of the actress Whoopi Goldberg,

wearing a long black dress at a red-carpet event, appeared on Twitter identified

incorrectly by the fashion Twitter handle, @TotalBeauty, as Oprah Winfrey. Twitter

users were fast to call out the error suggesting this was a good example of why

#OscarsSoWhite was important—that the media could not even distinguish between two

famous black actresses. As shown in figure 3, one tweeter suggested this mix-up is why

black actors and actresses should not have attended the event, "This is the reason we

should have boycott this mess…"

Figure 3.

As seen in figure 4, some tweets urged #OscarsSoWhite supporters to simply

ignore the Academy Awards, rather, encouraging supporters to watch 'counter-

programing', e.g., the BET [Black Entertainment Television] awards for black

filmmakers and actors or *The Woods*, a movie suggested as an Oscar alternative by the

creator of #OscarsSoWhite movement, April Reign.

Figure 4.

Theme 3: Indifference

The third theme that emerged was indifference to #OscarsSoWhite. These tweets found #OscarsSoWhite insignificant or unnecessary to the Academy Awards. As shown in figure 5, one tweeter urged the awards show to move on stating, "I absolutely LOVE the #Oscars but I'm tired of hearing about this #OscarsSoWhite stuff…Can we get to the awards now?" Other examples included, "I'm sorry I can't pay attention to the Oscars. I'm busy tending to the norovirus terrorizing my home & also not giving a shit," and "For fuck sakes move on @chrisrock u are boring the black shot out of us."
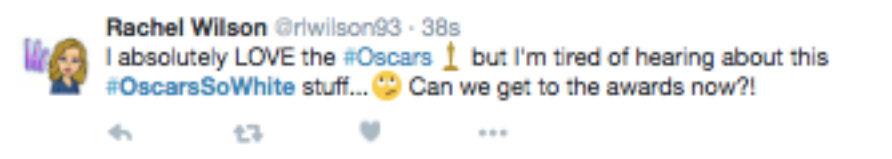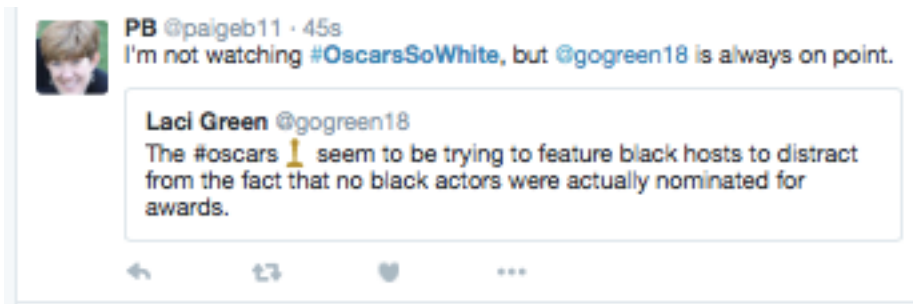

Figure 5.

Theme 4: Network Over-Compensation

The final theme that emerged was ABC's over-compensation in light of #OscarsSoWhite. Many tweets asked if ABC was trying to make-up for the lack of diversity in Oscar nominations by including Rock as the show's host, and including numerous African-American hosts on pre-show red carpet events. Additionally, several tweets referenced the diversity of the opening film montage and the inclusion of other elements, e.g., a rainbow. For example, "They're really trying hard to combat the #OscarsSoWhite," "All these Black pre-hosts though," "ABC seems to be attempting to

compensate for #OscarsSoWhite." As shown in figure 6, one tweeter refused to watch the

awards, but retweeted someone else stating, "The #oscars seem to be trying to feature

black hosts to distract from the fact that no black actors were actually nominated for

awards."

Figure 6.

       To answer the second research question, (How do visual elements add meaning to

tweets?) visual elements included in tweets (photos, emojis, and videos) were analyzed in

relationship to the tweet's text. Three themes emerged: Reinforcement, Nuance, and

Documentation.

Theme 1: **Reinforcement**

       In tweets analyzed the primary theme of visual elements was simply

reinforcement of text. Emojis were often used to provide depth to the sentiment being

communicated. As shown in figure 7, a tweeter said, "Chris rock is killing it! He's

hilarious!" accompanied by a handclapping emoji. Photos accompanying texts often

strengthened the statement offering what words alone could not. As shown in figure 8, a

photo of whitewashed Oscar statue was added to the tweet, "and the white Oscar goes
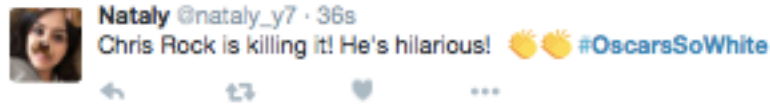
to…#OscarsSoWhite."

Nataly @nataly_y7 · 36s
Chris Rock is killing it! He's hilarious! 👏👏 #OscarsSoWhite

Figure 7.

kcirreD xocaJ @IamDJacox · 39s
and the white Oscar goes to...#OscarsSoWhite

Figure 8.

Theme 2: **Nuance**

The second theme of visual elements was nuance. That is, visual elements were used to provide complex nuances or undertones to the tweet that might be unachievable or lost with words alone. For example, visual elements provided an added layer of humor, irony, or sarcasm. As shown in Figure 9, one tweeter questioned Hollywood's choices of actresses in films, addressing controversy surrounding casting in "God's of Egypt" and suggesting that Hollywood is so whitewashed Scarlett Johansson would play Harriet Tubman, the African-American abolitionist, in a upcoming film, *Freedom*.

Figure 9.

Theme 3: Documentation

      The final theme of visual elements in tweets was documentation. That is, visual elements were used in a straightforward manner to document the event. There was no meaning added beyond recording the event. As shown in figure 10, one tweeter attached a photo of Chris Rock on television likely taken from her cellphone, presumably from her living room. Tweeters used visual elements to show—or prove—that they were actually watching the event.

Figure 10.

Discussion

It's tempting to imagine what Hattie McDaniel would think about #OscarsSoWhite. During her 67-second acceptance speech in 1940, she said, "I sincerely hope I shall always be a credit to my race and to the motion picture industry" (Stone, 2015, p. 1). More than 75 years later, for two consecutive years, no actor of color was nominated for an Academy Award. The purpose of this case study is to explore #OscarsSoWhite tweets during Rock's monologue.

Taken together the research questions looked at reactions on Twitter to the 2016 Oscar's opening monologue and how visual elements added meaning to those reactions. Themes that emerged from RQ1 were: Chris Rock, Social/Cultural Commentary, Indifference, and Network Over-Compensation. Themes that emerged from RQ2 were: Reinforcement, Nuance, and Documentation. Combined, these findings shed light on elements of racial inequity in the Academy Awards and hashtag activism.

The irony of #OscarsSoWhite is that the hashtag was created to start demand change of the racial inequities in Oscar nominations. But with the Academy's demographics—old, white, rich, and male—social media, especially Twitter, seems an unlikely platform to combat racial inequalities in Hollywood. Case in point, #OscarsSoWhite was created after the 2015 Academy Awards failed to include any acting nominees of color, but was not powerful enough for Academy members to nominate any actors of color in 2016. Additionally, while the overall ratings were at an eight-year low, viewership among African Americans was only down 2%, according to Nielsen. Unlike other hashtag activism movements, #OscarsSoWhite supporters truly have no reach behind the wall of Hollywood, as the public has no say in nominees. Box-

office hits and popular movies supported by average moviegoers do not equal nominations. Rather, supporters can simply begin conversations about broader racial inequities in America.

Although #OscarsSoWhite was presumably not successful in achieving more diversity in Oscars 2016, there are still lessons to be learned from studying the Tweets during Rock's monologue. First, even if the Academy does not recognize there is a diversity problem in Hollywood, Tweeters do and they want to be heard. The results of the analysis of tweets during Rock's monologue suggest that Tweeters who watched the Oscars had high expectations of Rock's ability to take on the Hollywood establishment, but viewers were mixed. Some Tweeters thought his comments were too strong, while others thought he was not strong enough. Additionally, the use of Tweets to make social commentary suggests #OscarsSoWhite extends beyond the Academy Awards and is now part of our lexicon. Additionally, the findings of #OscarsSoWhite visual analysis suggests the importance of photos and emojis in communicating meaning. While some photos were stand alone, others reinforced text, added nuance, or documented the event.

Beyond the analysis of Tweets during Rock's monologue, this study makes an important contribution to examining photos and emojis on Twitter in a thematic context. The visual analysis was intentionally parallel to the textual analysis. The visual analysis findings were congruent with Doveling's 2015 findings that image functions include: affirmative interpretational, toning, and complementary. A difference is this paper explicitly outlines procedures that could be replicated by future researchers in studying Twitter or other online images in relationship to text in thematic analysis.

A limitation of this case study is limited generalizability. However, the findings suggest that #OscarsSoWhite can be viewed as part of a large conversation of racial inequality in America.

In addition to qualitative studies on coverage of #OscarsSoWhite, further research based on this study could also build on visual thematic analysis. In particular, researchers could examine semiotics on Twitter and cultural differences in use of emojis across gender and ethnicity. This line of research could also be extended to other social media platforms.

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