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#OSCARSSOWHITE MOVEMENT: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE
CHANGING DIVERSITY OF THE ACADEMY AWARDS?

by

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A Thesis

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Abstract

The social media movement #OscarsSoWhite put a spotlight on racial diversity in the film industry after nominations for the 2016 Academy Awards were announced with no people of color included. This paper uses the agenda setting theory as a theoretical lens to critique the media coverage of the movement and how prominent entertainment publications framed content about racial diversity. It will take research from media studies and implement a qualitative textual analysis of materials from news articles published by *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Root* and media releases by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to determine what issues became salient and how coverage was framed in a three-year period. This paper will also discuss the overall climate of racial diversity in the film industry, social media's role in social change, and how the media make issues salient through agenda setting and agenda building.

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Introduction

In 2019, actors Rami Malek, Regina King, and Mahershala Ali received Academy Awards. This was a milestone achievement for racial justice in the film industry: It was the first time in the history of the Academy Awards that 75% of the ceremony's acting winners were people of color (Nolfi, 2019). In Malek's acceptance speech for "Best Actor" for his role as rock band Queen front man, Freddie Mercury, the Egyptian actor said:

I think about what it would have been like to tell little bubba Rami that one day this might happen to him, and I think his curly haired mind would have been blown. That kid was struggling with his identity...we made a film about a gay man and an immigrant who was unapologetically himself. It's proof we're longing for stories like this. (Huff, 2019, para. 6)

A nomination for an Academy Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) is a high-level career achievement for any film professional (Chattoo, 2017), so the optics of this ceremony were important because three years prior, the major acting categories for "Best Actor," "Best Supporting Actress," and "Best Supporting Actor" lacked a single person of color as a nominee, let alone a winner (Fallon, 2016). This gross negligence was not lost on activists, especially April Reign. Shortly after the nominations were announced in 2016, Reign reignited the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, which called out the Academy Awards for its lack of diversity. This movement's goal was for entertainment companies to be more inclusive when hiring for film production and providing opportunities to talented designers and artists from underrepresented groups of people (Reign, 2018).

This diversity problem was not a new issue in 2016 when Reign started tweeting #OscarsSoWhite, however. From 2007 – 2013, only 15 non-white actors were nominated in the four acting categories of the Academy Awards out of 200 total nominees, and between 2014-2016, not a single person of color was nominated (Berman, 2016). The hashtag brought a focus to the lack of representation and began the mainstream news conversation around racial diversity in Hollywood (Sinha & Trenard, 2017). These conversations included opinion pieces and reports from prominent news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root*, which aimed to shed light on the lack of diversity in the Academy Awards.

In the movement's fourth year in 2019, there have been gradual changes in the film industry, which started under AMPAS President Cheryl Boone Isaacs. This included a vow to double the number of women and people of color in AMPAS' membership by 2020 and change the voting structure so that members who have not voted for more than 10 years may be ineligible to vote for nominees (Reign, 2018).

In response to the calls for a more diverse organization, AMPAS used media releases to highlight and promote its inclusivity, which, combined with the vast coverage of the #OscarsSoWhite movement in major media outlets across the country, have helped cast a spotlight on the topic of racial diversity.

The goal for this study is to explore the salient issues within the news media's coverage of the movement, #OscarsSoWhite. To do so, the paper will use the agenda setting theory to better understand the role of the news media in the changing diversity of the major awards show.

Literature Review

This literature review will explore three theoretical frameworks: first, this literature review discusses research highlighting diversity in the mass media. Then, it will further examine how social media has facilitated conversations and action around diversity. Third, the review will highlight the agenda setting theory, as well as agenda-building theory and framing, and its presence in the news and public relations.

Diversity in Mass Media

Diversity has a variety of definitions, but in broad terms, it refers to any perceived differences among people, such as age, race, functional specialty, profession, sexual preference, geographic origin, lifestyle, or profession (Dobbs, 1996). When it comes to on-screen diversity, representation matters both on a micro and macro level. For example, when viewers who lack exposure to diverse populations of people, what happens onscreen is often one way for viewers to “glean information about the world” (Boboltz & Yam, 2017, para. 22). When this real-world exposure is lacking, those mass mediated representations can often build, reinforce, or reject personally held stereotypes, which are categorical assumptions about people based on their race, gender, age, and/or other identities (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Plant & Devine, 1998).

Researchers have found that depictions of African-Americans as criminal and aggressive in the media help reinforce anti-black prejudices in audiences (Oliver, 1999; Dixon & Lindz, 2000). Audiences, especially those with limited exposure, typically equated these narrow-minded and negative media representations with the real world, which can lead to racial minorities experiencing “less attention from doctors to harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school...” (Bell & Janis, 2011, p. 15).

In another study about black media stereotypes and its relationships to racial identity, researchers build on this reinforcement of stereotypes and how it creates identities, finding that there is a strong relationship between messages being received through media about being black and how people identify as black (Adams-Bass, Stevenson & Kotzin, 2014).

Another prominent fixture in films since the mid-20th century has been “whitewashing,” a term defined as choosing a white male or female to portray a character who is originally of an ethnic background (Bennett, 2015). Another definition notes it as:

A phenomenon in which a person of color/non-white person full integrates into white culture and strips themselves of any non-white cultural affiliations; commonly used to describe individuals who do not fall into their racial identity, but abide by social norms, trends, and tendencies of white communities. (Yang, 2017, p. 5).

In addition to white actors and actresses playing a person of color, including the film “Aloha,” with Emma Stone starring as a native Hawaiian woman, and “The Martian,” with Mackenzie Davis playing a character who was Korean in the original novel (Bennett, 2015), whitewashing is present in other ways. For example, Hollywood will oftentimes promote the white savior complex, reinforcing the notion that only white bodies are able to save an oppressed minority, ultimately emphasizing how “people of color can escape their predicament of marginalization through the guidance and agency of lone white actors” (Cammarota, 2011, p. 243). This type of idea falsely represents people of color as helpless and without the capacity to survive, which further affirms the ideology of white superiority (Yang, 2017).

Representation in media as it relates to identity is the crux of much research, including psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research about children and consumption of media.

In the 1940s, the couple conducted the landmark “Black Doll” experiment. The team took a group of children between the ages of 3 and 7 and gave them two different dolls, which were identifiable except for their skin color. What they found was that majority of the children chose the white doll when asked questions such as “Which doll is good?” and “Which doll is prettier?” (Lacina, 2016, para. 14).

The couple also testified in the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Ed*, which abolished segregation in public schools. Their results revealed that children, both white and Black, internalized stereotypes early on by consuming popular media and entertainment (Lacina, 2016). Another major children’s study by Swindler (1986) echoed these findings, arguing that the accumulated experience of exposure to media contributed to the cultivation of children’s values, beliefs, and expectations, which help shape their identity that they will carry throughout their life.

Identity formation in media was also explored by Lacan (2006), who suggested the concept of the mirror stage of development. This begins with infants seeing themselves in the mirror and is the first step to recognizing themselves as integrated, whole beings (Kondo, 2019). Positive racial representation can help abolish internalized stereotypes, increase self-esteem, and enhance awareness of the world (Evgenivna, 2017; Bell & Janis, 2011; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). And because of this, it’s critical that people see themselves mirrored in popular culture such as TV and cinema (Kondo, 2019).

Strong racial representation in a film can also translate to better sales. Cox’s (1994) *Interactional Model of the Impact of Diversity on Individual Outcomes and Organizational Effectiveness* shows that when there is a diverse group in an industry or organization— in this

case, the film industry— it better represents society as a whole and has a better chance of succeeding in the box office. Statistics reveal that the more inclusive a film is, the more money it can make (Anderson, 2017). The Creative Artists Agency examined more than 400 theatrical films released from January 2014 – December 2016 and detailed the ethnicity for the top 10 billed actors per movie— a total of 2,800 people. For the top 10 grossing movies in 2016, almost 50% of the opening weekend audience were racial minorities and seven of the top 10 highest-grossing movies screened to opening weekend audiences who were more than 50% people of color (Anderson, 2017).

Diversity’s Limitations in Hollywood. Major studios offer cultural producers advantages that smaller studios cannot afford. When it comes to screening films in theaters, major studios have offices in regional markets, allowing it to maintain continuous contact with theater chains across the country. Independent distributors are less strategically networked with theaters, and have more difficulty marketing and gaining larger theatrical releases for its films. Because of this, directors working primarily with independent studios experience disadvantages in theatrical releases of their films compared to directors working mostly with major studios (Erigha, 2015). This limited access to major studios presents a level of inequality for women and racial minorities in the labor market, which includes directors.

Data from the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2018 and the Annenberg Foundation and USC “Inclusion in the Director’s Chair? Gender, Race & Age of Directors across 1,100 Films from 2007-2017” report show a slight decrease in the percentage of black directors from 2016 to the end of 2017 in the top 100 grossing movies for each year (Table 1). However, there was a slight increase in percentage of Asian directors in the same period (Choi, Choueiti, Pieper

& Smith, 2018). For this particular study, the statistics for only Black and Asian directors were listed.

Table 1

Percentage of Directors in 100 Top-Grossing Films: 2016-2017

Race	2016	2017
Black	5.8%	5.5%
Asian	3.3%	4.6%

Data from the UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2018 and the Annenberg Foundation and USC “Inequality in 1,100 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT & Disability from 2007 – 2017” report also show the number of white, Black, and Asian characters all decreased from 2016 – 2017, while the percentage of Latinx, defined as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina, increased (Table 2). Together, a total of almost 30% of all speaking characters were from an underrepresented racial group, and there was some fluctuation in the percentage of white, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian and other races from 2007 to 2017. In fact, 2017 had the highest percentage of Hispanic/Latinx characters across the sample, but had no major changes in 2007, 2011 or 2016. (Case, Choi, Choueiti, Pieper, & Smith, 2018).

Table 2

Characters in 100 Top-Grossing Films: 2016-2017

Race	2016	2017
White	70.8%	70.7%
Black	13.5%	12.1%

Latinx	3.1%	6.2%
Asian	5.6%	4.8%

Given that 45% of movie ticket buyers and almost 39% of the U.S. population is made up of those from the underrepresented racial groups, the mainstream film industry does not represent the country and its film viewing audience (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016). These findings reveal that Hollywood films continue to whitewash storytelling, and fail to depict Black, Latinx or Asian speaking characters on screen or behind the camera (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016).

With social issues such as lack of racial representation in media like film, social media has become a catalyst for change in the 21st century, offering a convenient way for audiences to share their voices.

Social Media Activism

The concept of virality has become commonplace with many hashtag movements gaining a lot of traction for social issues. Viral marketing can be defined as “electronic word-of-mouth whereby some form of marketing message related to a company, brand or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way, often through the use of social media applications” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 255). Virality can first be understood by its exponential growth pattern, meaning that each individual shares the content with more than one person, which is similar to that of other phenomena in business (e.g. compound interest) and physics (e.g. nuclear chain reactions) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). The second element is the use of social media applications, such as Facebook or Twitter. Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) said that social media

applications are suited for viral marketing as the community element embedded in the platforms makes it easy to transmit the marketing message to a large number of people.

These platforms have made it convenient for users to launch cyberactivism movements that have had a wide impact across the world, including #WomensMarch, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #TakeaKnee and #OscarsSoWhite, helping spur conversations about social issues involving sexual assault, women, and police brutality of people of color. The movements have especially taken charge on the social media application Twitter, which has had a growing role in facilitating revolutions (O'Reilly, 2005). The platform is particularly useful for social movements to reach a degree of virality due to the platform's unique features of always-on persistence, light-weight scripting, open infrastructural base, and portable back-end interface (O'Reilly, 2005).

The cyberactivism movements have thrived with the help of the Twitter hashtag, which was first introduced in 2007 (Doctor, 2013) and is a way for activists and users across the platform to coalesce around a topic. The hashtag is a string of characters preceded by the pound symbol (i.e., #) and is used as a way to join public discussions (Huang, Thornton, & Efthimiadis, 2010), categorize messages, or build communities around a topic of interest (Laniado & Mika, 2010; Wang et al., 2011; Yang, Sun, Zhang, & Mei, 2012;). It has garnered much media attention in the wake of strong efforts around special environmental, political and social issues (Moscato, 2015). Using hashtags around specific social issues has resulted in what journalists called "hashtag activism," originally coined by The New York Times writer and columnist David Carr (2012), which gives communicators a way to streamline their messaging on Twitter.

Changing the World with a Hashtag. While the skeptics of social media's efficacy with protest movements call hashtag activism "armchair activism" or "slacktivism," social media actually assist these hashtag movements by empowering users to carry out the work of activists (Kessler, 2012). The ability of Twitter hashtags to amplify information and ideas across the platform helped activists and advocates of these movements with new media outreach opportunities. The growing popularity and legitimacy of the movements invites more scrutiny of online cases by traditional media and the media's framing of Twitter's ability to foster ongoing dialogue positions it well for digital activism (Kessler, 2012).

For example, in 2011, Egyptian protests that led to the resignation of ex-President Mubarak were organized through a network of web-based communication that involved heavy use of Twitter and Facebook. While some dismissed the correlation between social media and the protests, others viewed social media as important to current social movements in similar ways to how the printing press and other media helped facilitate revolutions in the past (Ingram, 2011). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) discovered that Twitter had turned into a platform for news storytelling, which enabled collaboration of filtering and curating of news during the Egyptian uprising. Lim (2012) said that social media in current and past uprisings in Egypt afforded visibility to marginalized voices and enabled alternative narratives of dissention.

Another example of hashtag activism is the #MeToo movement. Although the term "Me Too" was originally started in 2006 by Tarana Burke to raise awareness about the sexual assault against women and girls of color, it gained mainstream traction in October 2017 as #MeToo after alleged sexual misconduct in Hollywood (Beigi, Kambhampati, Manikonda, & Liu, 2018). It began with accusations against producer Harvey Weinstein and continued with a large number

of executives, directors, and actors, including Kevin Spacey, CBS' Les Moonves and Amazon Studios' Roy Price (Coyle, 2018). Actress Alyssa Milano offered a call to action in a tweet she posted in 2017 that read, "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (Milano, 2017). Within 20 minutes of publishing, it had reached 10,000 replies and two days later, had topped nearly 61,000 replies (Birnbaum, 2017). People from all over the world came forward to share their personal stories and provide support to this online movement.

While Reddit and other social media platform users shared their own #MeToo experiences, Twitter users were more likely to pursue others to continue to share their stories, which helped continue the movement's virality. Ultimately, social media, particularly Twitter, has enabled individuals to see the importance of addressing stigmatized issues such as sexual abuse (Beigi et al., 2018).

But these types of social issues do not just exist online and in social media spaces. The news media often picks up content from what is trending online and going viral. For this study, which explores how an online social movement was covered by the news media, it is important to understand how media create salience and frame stories for consumption.

Agenda Setting Theory

In their seminal study about mass media's coverage of a political campaign, McCombs and Shaw (1972) hypothesized that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (p. 177). They found that while three presidential candidates placed different emphasis on different issues, the media exerted a "considerable impact on voters' judgments of what they considered the major issues of the

campaign” (p. 181). Since this landmark study, there have been more than 400 empirical studies of agenda setting, many conducted during political campaigns (McCombs, 2004).

For example, a 1994 study about the Taipei mayoral election in Taiwan showed the widespread occurrence of agenda setting in print media. At the time of election, there were three TV stations serving the city and they were all controlled by the government’s KMT political party. No agenda setting effects were found for TV news. However, major agenda setting effects were found for the two daily independent newspapers in Taipei that were free from direct control by the government or political party. It showed the direct comparison of the influence of open (newspapers) and closed (government-controlled TV) media systems where all the political and cultural factors are held constant (McCombs, 2004).

The United States has an open media system that allows a free flow of information without specific biases, and *The New York Times* is often considered one of the most influential information organizations (Denham, 2014). The publication has a very specific role within the news industry as being a premier agenda setter, as McCombs suggested:

A role now so institutionalized by the Associated Press (AP), the AP now alerts its members each day to the agenda of stories scheduled for the next morning’s front page of the [The New York] Times. It is the appearance on the front page of the Times that frequently legitimates a topic as newsworthy. (2004, p. 113)

Agenda setting is more than the common assertion that the news tells us what to think about. Additionally, the news frames the stories in a way that suggests to its viewers how they should think and feel about issues. McCombs & Shaw (1993) argue that both the selection of

items for attention and the selection of frames for how to think about these objects are powerful agenda setting roles.

Framing salient issues. Framing “is the selection of perceived reality in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). It focuses not on which topics are selected for coverage by the news media, but instead on the ways in which those issues are presented and how problems are formulated for the media audience (Ghanem, 1997).

According to Entman (1993), frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead readers to have different reactions. There are many complexities of the frame production process, which is dynamic in scope and involves frame building (how frames emerge) and frame setting (the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions) (De Vreese, 2005). Entman (1993) noted that frames have several locations in the production process, including the communicator, the text, receiver, and the culture. Framing is a highly complex process that can change in each iteration of media messaging. In the case of foreign policy issues, frames originating from the public administration could shape the frames used by the media, members of Congress, or the public (Entman, 2004). Additionally, the reaction by the public to an initial frame can affect the administration’s revised frames, showing that multiple people can influence the frame production process (Borah, 2011).

Framing is often traced back to roots in psychology, specifically in the experimental work of Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984). They looked at how different presentations of identical decision-making scenarios influence people’s choices and how they evaluate the various options

that are available to them. As a construct, framing is about how journalists and other communicators present information in a particular way that most resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

While early research of agenda setting theory and framing focused on who sets the public agenda, under what conditions, and how those issues within the agenda are framed, more contemporary research focuses on the role of media subsidies (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), which is a term that suggests information is a commodity that is responsive to surpluses and shortages (Gandy, 1982). In turn, public relations professionals work to sway media attention by providing content to journalists that decreases the amount of time and resources used during the newsgathering process (Curtin, 1999). The effectiveness of these subsidies relies on numerous factors, including newsworthiness, timeliness, and source credibility.

Agenda-building theory. In the 1980s, a new phase of agenda setting research emerged, which focused on the sources of the media's agenda (McCombs, 1994). Researchers began to ask: "Who sets the media's agenda?" (Cheng, 2014, p. 13). This question has stimulated the research of agenda building, which has been established in the area of public relations (Cheng, 2014). Agenda building occurs in public relations when certain tactics are used to gain and enhance salience in news media (Cabosky, 2014). While agenda setting examines the transfer of issue salience from media to the public, agenda building in public relations explores the reciprocal relations among the stakeholder groups in the process of salience formation, transfer, and exchange (Hughes & Dan, 2009). Information subsidies come into play in agenda building where if practitioners can obtain strong media placement of their subsidies, then they can influence the media agenda, "which in turn can influence public opinion and the public agenda" (Curtin, 1999, p. 54).

For example, when issues such as racial diversity and gender discrimination in the film industry come to the forefront, a special interest group like American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Directors Guild could push the topics through social media or news releases in an attempt to influence the news media to cover them. As the coverage grows, particularly from large media outlets such as The New York Times, this virality makes its way back to the various interest groups, which then produces a justification to continue advocating for the issue (Corbett & Mori, 1999). This cycle allows issue salience to be formed, applied, and transferred across various channels, which creates influence (Kiousis, Park, Kim, & Go, 2013). Developing this salience is considered first-level agenda building, while second-level agenda building entails how salient issues are framed (Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, McCombs, & Rey, 1997).

Although many studies have explored the lack of diversity in media overall (see: Cappiccie, 2012; Choi, Choueiti, Pieper & Smith, 2018; Case, Choi, Choueiti, Pieper, & Smith, 2018), few have examined how news media have framed the social media movement #OscarsSoWhite, which has helped shape the conversation about diversity in the Academy Awards, one of the film industry's most prestigious honors. Publications such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* are at the forefront of entertainment news, while *The Root* is a prominent Black online publication that provides analysis on issues that affect the Black community. Each publication has been covering the social media movement since 2016. Therefore, my research questions asked:

RQ1a: What issues did *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* make salient through its coverage of #OscarsSoWhite?

RQ1b: How did *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* frame coverage of #OscarsSoWhite?

RQ2a: What issues did the Academy Awards of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences make salient through its response of #OscarsSoWhite?

RQ2b: How did the Academy Awards of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences frame its response to #OscarsSoWhite?

Method

To understand which #OscarsSoWhite issues were most notable and how those issues were framed, this research project utilized a qualitative textual analysis of materials from news articles published by *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root*, as well as media releases published on the AMPAS website. This type of research is an in-depth interpretation of

media text and provides a deeper understanding of the text by taking a historical and holistic look (Fürsich, 2009). Textual analysis has become a popular method for cultural researchers who are interested in investigating media content and focuses on the underlying and cultural assumptions of the content (Fürsich, 2009).

Sampling Procedure

Using the ProQuest news database US Newsstream, an advanced search included articles in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* with the keywords “Oscars” or “Academy Award,” and “Oscarssowhite” or “so white” or “diversity” or “inclusive” to show the relationship between the award show with the social media movement and racial diversity that were published between January 1 and March 1 in the years of 2016 – 2019 (the start of the #OscarsSoWhite movement and concluding after most recent Academy Awards). These publications were chosen due to its proximity to the film industry and focus. *The New York Times*, based in the major hub of New York City, has prominent entertainment coverage with more than 4 million total subscribers across the country (Peiser, 2018), while the *Los Angeles Times* is the largest daily metropolitan newspaper centered around Hollywood, which has a daily circulation of 1.4 million (Los Angeles Times, 2016). I conducted another search for articles in *The Root* for “#oscarssowhite” between January 1 and March 1 in the years of 2016 – 2019. The online publication, *The Root*, has a monthly readership of 6.5 million visitors and analyzes issues in the Black community through commentary from Black thought leaders.

Additionally, there was a final search for articles in the “Oscars News” section on the AMPAS website with the keywords “diversity” and “inclusive” in the headlines from 2016 –

2019. These keywords were chosen to observe the organization's efforts to diversify nominations.

Data Analysis

In order to explore how the news media were covering the social movement, #OscarsSoWhite, and the organization's response to the movement, open and axial coding of published online articles was conducted to record and identify passages of text that were connected by a common theme or idea.

Open coding is the part of the analysis that includes identifying, naming, categorizing and describing the phenomena in the text (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). But the first step in answering my research questions was to start with a preliminary soak, which involved reading the articles and making note of interesting themes and trends. I then wrote down various points from each article, and compiled and categorized the content into a qualitative codebook, which included themes and keywords. This open coding allowed me to index the text into categories and establish a "framework of thematic ideas about it" (Gibbs, 2007).

Axial coding is the second step of analyzing qualitative data for purposes of theory development. It involved a degree of theoretical inference, which allowed me to modify and shape the conceptual framework as more content was examined (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). This resulted in a framework that could be synthesized and organized into more distinctly structured categories and subcategories (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). I was able to relate these categories to each other and examine causal relationships through a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From here, themes related to the narrative around #OscarsSoWhite were examined to see how they were framed.

Findings

The goal for this thesis was to explore the salient issues around #OscarsSoWhite and how these issues were framed in three major publications: *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root*, as well as media releases from AMPAS. I collected data from the time periods January 1 – March 1 from 2016 – 2019 with the keywords “Oscars” or "Academy Award," and “Oscarssowhite" or "so white," or “diversity” or “inclusive,” which resulted in a universal sample of more than 550 articles. After open coding 35% of the articles, I stopped seeing new themes emerge, which left me with a final sample size of 195 articles.

My research questions RQ1a and RQ2a focused on agenda setting and which issues were salient within the selected publications and AMPAS media releases. This required a broad level of analysis of what topics the writers were attempting to build into the public agenda and overall discourse. The findings indicated that the top four issues were: racial diversity, diversity other than race, the voting system within the Academy Awards, and overall TV ratings for the annual ceremony. Once I identified these salient issues, I was able to explore the second part of my research questions (RQ1b and RQ2b), which addressed how the salient issues were framed. My findings indicate two overarching frames were used to describe the issues: activism and capitalism.

Coverage of #OscarsSoWhite and Diversity: By the Numbers

The news media actively covered the topic of racial diversity as it relates to #OscarsSoWhite. *The New York Times* focused mainly on the representation of whites, Blacks,

Asians and Latinx; while the *Los Angeles Times* put a stronger spotlight specifically on Latinx; and *The Root* highlighted the Black and Asian communities.

I collected data until no more new themes were found among the searched articles. The search yielded more than 559 articles from the three different publications, plus up to just four media releases published on the AMPAS website, over a period of three years from January 1 – March 1, 2016 – 2019. #OscarsSoWhite were posed in more than 201 total articles in *The New York Times*, 300 in the *Los Angeles Times*, and 58 in *The Root*. AMPAS just featured four total media releases about the response to #OscarsSoWhite. Table 3 shows the breakdown in articles and media releases published per year.

Table 3

Number of Articles Featuring #OscarsSoWhite from January 1 – March 1, 2016 – 2019

Publications	2016	2017	2018	2019
<i>The New York Times</i>	76	60	30	35
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	150	57	36	57
<i>The Root</i>	36	16	2	4
AMPAS Media Releases	2	1	0	1

As agenda setting theory suggests, for an issue to become salient, it relies on attention—which for this study is the number of articles devoted to a particular topic. From 2016 – 2019, other prominent entertainment publications such as the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* covered racial diversity in just a handful of articles, while *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*

published numerous articles about diversity as it related to #OscarsSoWhite, implying a high level of salience for the issues of diversity and representation in the film industry (see Table 4).

Table 4

Number of Articles Featuring “Diversity” from January 1 – March 1, 2016-2019

Publications	2016	2017	2018	2019
<i>The New York Times</i>	50	25	11	19
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	107	38	21	18
<i>The Root</i>	36	16	2	4
<i>Hollywood Reporter</i>	4	7	4	2
<i>Variety</i>	13	10	6	1

Reporters covering my first theme of racial diversity often used conversations around white privilege and the lack of opportunities in Hollywood to address the umbrella issue of racial diversity. The news content mainly focused on the Black community, but also included acknowledgments of struggles facing the Asian and Latinx communities.

Racial Diversity: All signs point to ‘White Privileged’ Hollywood

A majority of the articles in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* agreed that there was a lack of diversity in not just the awards show, but in the film industry, overall. In a 2016 *Los Angeles Times* article, actor Mark Ruffalo said that this diversity problem “isn’t just the Academy Awards,” but “the entire America system is rife with white privilege racism”

(Rottenberg, 2016, para. 12). The author Josh Rottenberg also said in the article that “this Oscar’s season has become a painful referendum on its failure to reflect the world around it” (2016, para. 13). Another actor, Danny DeVito, echoed Ruffalo’s sentiment in a *Root* article, saying:

We are living in a country that discriminates and has certain racial tendencies which—racist tendencies—so sometimes, it’s manifested in things like this and it’s illuminated, but just generally speaking, we’re a racist—we’re a bunch of racists. It’s unfortunate that the entire country is a racist country. This is one example of the fact that even though some people have given great performances in movies, they weren’t even thought about. (Callahan, 2016, para. 3)

Decades before the #OscarsSoWhite movement, AMPAS was embroiled in a similar controversy after Steven Spielberg’s 1985 movie “The Color Purple” received 11 Oscar nominations but took home zero golden statues (Anderson, 2016). Margaret Avery, nominated for her supporting role in the movie, said the problem reaches higher than the Academy:

We need to be able to greenlight different kinds of films. They say it's all based off box office—they want to make money. But there are 'black films' that make money, and once something makes money that they thought wouldn't, you can't make it stop...but if it's five men making the decisions and they're all in the same camp, it's going to be all of the same kind of films [in the theaters]. (Anderson, 2016, para. 12)

The Root’s Yesha Callahan took a strong stance for the #OscarsSoWhite movement and racial diversity in Hollywood, saying that the movement rings true because its members are “so white and so male” (Callahan, 2016, para. 7). She continued:

When the majority of your members are old white men, they won't understand movies like 'Beasts of No Nation,' but they will sit through a movie like 'The Revenant' and throw it all the nominations they can muster. They'll leave out Ryan Coogler in the best director category for 'Creed,' only to nominate Sylvester Stallone for an Oscar for the same movie. (Callahan, 2016, para. 6)

This racial diversity issue also included Latinx, which the *Los Angeles Times* focused on in several articles. One 2016 article focused on a “film brownout,” with the author saying the conversation about #OscarsSoWhite focused too much on the Black community and left out the nation’s largest minority group: Latinx. Also in this article, Chon Noriega, a professor in the UCLA Department of Film, Television and Digital Media, pointed to the 1991 film "Grand Canyon," which was set in Los Angeles and dealt with issues of race and class but had no Latinx standouts. He said it was as if “only whites and African Americans have a subconscious, only they dream. It just doesn't look like L.A. Where did the other half of the city go?” (Becerra, 2016, para. 19).

These articles suggested one of the ways Hollywood flaunts white privilege happened through a practice called “whitewashing,” or casting white actors as nonwhite characters. For example, the classic musical “West Side Story” from the 1960s whitewashed its Puerto Rican characters with Russian-American actress Natalie Wood and Greek-American actor George Chakiris (La Jeunesse, 2018). Additionally, the movie “American Drug Lord,” which is still in development, gave the starring role of Mexican American drug cartel kingpin Edgar “La Barbie” Valdez to the white British actor Charlie Hunnam (Becerra, 2016). The findings reveal that

Hollywood films continue to whitewash storytelling and fail to depict Latinx, Black and Asian speaking characters on screen or behind the camera (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016).

While the social media movement, #OscarsSoWhite, emerged in 2016 as a demonstration of the lack of diversity in Oscar nominations, articles suggested the movement was more of a reflection of the film industry as a whole. *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* got to the core of the problem and pinned much of the diversity problem on the executives at the largest film companies who are setting the tone for the industry. In a 2016 *New York Times* article, writer Manohla Dargis said:

A lot of this is about who's cutting the checks, running the companies, calling the shots. Mostly, as we know, those people are white men, and while I have no complaint against them as a class of people (some of my best friends are white guys), none of this will change until they actively help bring about the necessary change or until the country's demographics force them out. (Dargis et. al, 2016, para. 26)

The consensus among *The New York Times* writers was that the slate of all-white nominees in 2016 not only exposed the “myopia” of the nominating body, but also the deep biases of the industry, itself (Dargis et. al, 2016, para. 6).

Racial diversity: Entertainment’s lack of opportunities. Some writers looked to a larger problem in entertainment: minimal job opportunities for minorities onscreen and behind the camera. Longtime director Spike Lee said:

As I see it, the Academy Awards is not where the 'real' battle is. It's in the executive office of the Hollywood studios and TV and cable networks. This is where the

gatekeepers decide what gets made and what gets jettisoned to 'turnaround' or [the] scrap heap. (Ng, 2016, para. 18)

Another artist echoed the sentiment, saying that there needs to be more opportunities for artists to do their craft. After the 2016 Oscars broadcast, the group Public Enemy took offense to the Academy Awards' use of their politically charged song, "Fight the Power." Member Chuck D said:

The song Fight The Power is beyond me & the crew. The point of the song is a call to making change eventually not just applauding the thought. Art speaking. Fight The Power. Make change. Demand respect. Do your own awards RIGHT & give indie artists & actors a chance to make a LIVING. (Callahan, 2016, para. 4)

Chuck D also said that the Oscars have always been "white" and that they need "Black communities to support the arts as much as we do sports" (Callahan, 2016, para. 5). Even President Barack Obama chimed in on the debate, saying:

As a whole, the industry should do what every other industry should do, which is to look for talent and provide opportunity to everybody. I think the Oscar debate is really just an expression of this broader issue of, are we making sure that everybody is getting a fair shot? (Eromsele, 2016, para. 6)

After the big "Best Picture" Oscar win for the movie "Moonlight" in 2017, the *Los Angeles Times* focused on the many more steps that still need to be taken for inclusiveness at the Academy, saying the film industry, itself, needs to be more inclusive. Author Tre'vell Anderson said the industry needs more people outside of what Hollywood traditionally considers worthy to

be given a chance to lead a movie, direct, write, be sound mixers, cinematographers, and production and costume designers. (Anderson & Yamato, 2018)

More than Race: Overall Representation

While the main focus of the movement rested on racial diversity, many articles in the three publications expanded its scope of the diversity problem to include women, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ communities, with some even saying that to focus so narrowly on Black inclusivity was missing the point that Hollywood has an overall diversity issue. Franklin Leonard in *The New York Times* article said:

The OscarsSoWhite hashtag has to be viewed as a synecdoche for ‘industry so white.’ If you view #OscarsSoWhite as being only about more nominations for Black actors at the Oscars, then you totally missed the point, and a lot of people did miss the point.

(Rutenberg, 2017, para. 10)

The USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism publishes annual reports on diversity in the film industry and *The New York Times* and *The Root* made the findings the basis of a select group of articles from 2016 – 2019. Writer Mike McPhate, in a 2016 *New York Times* article, said women were heavily outnumbered by men behind the camera, making up about 15% of directors, about 29% of writers and about 23% of series creators, the study found (2016).

One of the annual diversity studies was also featured in a *Root* article, which noted from the report that men were two times more likely than women to have speaking roles and between 2014 – 2017, only about 1% of the speaking roles were LGBTQ characters (Leon, 2019).

Additionally, *The Root* focused on other statistics behind the camera— of the 1,200 top-grossing

films between 2007 – 2018, only 4.3% of all directors were women with a minute number of those women of color. “Intersectionality played a role here, too, because only five were directed by Black women, three by Asian women and one by a Latina,” the author said (Stidhum, 2019, para. 8). *The Root’s* Tonja Renee Stidhum blamed Hollywood for the inclusivity problem, saying:

Women, in general, were given the shitty end of the 2018 top 100-grossing movie stick, with only four women sitting in the director’s chair in this high moneymaking group. Only one of those four was black: Ava DuVernay, for *A Wrinkle in Time*. Do better, Hollywood. (Stidhum, 2019, para. 6)

The lack of women directors was a focus in another article in *The New York Times* by Cara Buckley. In 2019, the Independent Spirit Awards, which are held every year the night before the Academy Awards, women took three of the five Best Director nominations. By comparison, since 1929, only five women have received “Best Director” nominations overall and just one has won with Kathryn Bigelow taking the award in 2009 for “*The Hurt Locker*.” Buckley (2019) continued, “The significance of Bigelow’s achievement cannot be overstated, yet it has had a curious distorting effect on the perceptions some show business people have about the number of female directors working on major films” (para. 5).

While the 2017 Academy Awards bolstered its nominee list in terms of diversity with the movie “*Moonlight*” taking the top honor of “Best Picture,” Reign, founder of #OscarsSoWhite, said it’s just one night that showed progress and there is still a lot more work to do. “#OscarsSoWhite remains relevant because there are still so many stories from traditionally

underrepresented communities that need to be told” she said (Rottenberg, 2017, para. 6). Writer Wesley Morris of *The New York Times* added to this sentiment, saying:

There’s demonstrable proof that North America wants to see itself—more of itself—in its entertainment. And the Academy—which is working to add more women, young people and color to its ranks—should want to see more of its ideal self at the Oscars. (Dargis, Morris & Scott 2016, para. 11)

Academy Award Voting System

In answering RQ2a, which asked what issues did AMPAS make salient through its response of #OscarsSoWhite in its media releases, the findings showed that when the #OscarsSoWhite movement went viral, it caused the Academy to reflect on the racial diversity of its membership and voting body. With a lack of diversity, the organization radically overhauled its voting and recruitment process in a bid to double its female and racially diverse membership by 2020. *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* highlighted the new strategies and recruitment process numerous times from 2016 – 2017—during President Cheryl Boone Isaacs’ term as president— which shows that AMPAS had prominent media placement of their media releases. Table 5 shows the number of articles featuring AMPAS strategies.

Table 5

Number of Articles Featuring AMPAS Strategies from January 1 – March 1, 2016-2017

Publications	2016	2017
<i>The New York Times</i>	22	0
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	43	9
<i>The Root</i>	2	1

Academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs said, “I am both heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion. This is a difficult but important conversation, and it's time for big change” (Ng, 2016, para. 6). In a 2016 article, *The Root* staff reflected on this as well, writing:

One of the major changes will require that the voting status of new and current members be reviewed every 10 years. Voting status for those who haven't been active in the film industry for a decade could be revoked. The academy will also be adding three more seats to its 51-person board; new board members will be nominated by the president. (The Root Staff, 2016, para. 3)

These changes were prominently posted on the AMPAS website in an article, “Academy Takes Historic Action to Increase Diversity” on January 22, 2016, just eight days after the all-white Oscar nominations were announced. In the news article, Isaacs said, “The Academy is going to lead and not wait for the industry to catch up. These new measures regarding governance and voting will have an immediate impact and begin the process of significantly changing our membership composition” (AMPAS Publicity, 2016, para. 2).

AMPAS also announced on its website an addition to the Academy's 51-seat board after the 2016 ceremony on March 15, plus resolutions on active voters. Isaacs said while she's proud of the steps they have taken to increase diversity, she knows there is more to do as they move forward to make the Academy a more inclusive organization (AMPAS Publicity, 2016).

Enhancing nothing: Counterarguments to the AMPAS' inclusion efforts. In a select few articles, writers in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* structured their articles around opposing viewpoints from audiences about #OscarsSoWhite. Some were not optimistic about the strategies to diversify the nominations in the Academy Awards, including one reader in *The New York Times* article “Readers Respond: Oscars So White? or Oscars So Dumb?” who said:

It's ridiculous to think I, or any individual voter, is going to vote for a performer because he's white or black or whatever. It is the performance we vote for. These comments make it sound like 'the Academy' chooses but 'the Academy' is made up of several thousand individual votes. There is no way that can be controlled or corrupted. (McDermott, 2016, para. 20)

Another reader agreed that the film industry lacks diversity to a troubling degree, but the real culprit is income and education inequality. “The Oscar nominations reflect the current state of the industry, not a racist nomination process” (McDermott, 2016, para. 13). In a *Root* article, Isaacs acknowledged that a change in diversity wasn't going to happen overnight, but the Academy realized that it needs to work faster and do more (Callahan, 2016). Still, the new strategies to diversify in 2016 caused much tension within the Academy because of the restrictions. In a 2016 *New York Times* article, author Buckley said:

The upshot of this controversy is that Academy members are on the defensive and are also angry because the Academy leaders have announced its plans to strip inactive members of their voting privileges. (para. 10)

While much of content about the #OscarsSoWhite movement rested on the issues of racial diversity, overall representation, and the voting system of the Academy, some writers, rather, looked to the effects of this movement on the actual TV ratings of the annual ceremony.

TV Ratings

The New York Times, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* emphasized the TV ratings for the annual Academy Awards ceremony in late February and how the lack of diversity might have an effect on overall viewership. From January 1 – March 1, 2016 – 2019, *The New York Times* mentioned TV ratings in 16 articles, while *Los Angeles Times* highlighted the ratings in 58 articles.

In a 2018 *Los Angeles Times* article, writer David Ng said if other prominent entertainment industry figures, in addition to director Spike Lee and actress Jada Pinkett Smith, joined the boycott of the 2016 Academy Awards, it had the potential to spoil Hollywood's annual showcase event. And should a large number of African American viewers tune out, it could dent ratings for the Oscars telecast (Ng, 2016). "It has such high ratings most years, so the image of Hollywood that the Academy presents is at stake," said Ana-Christina Ramon, assistant director and associate researcher at UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies (Ng, 2016, para. 3).

Also at the height of the movement in 2016, Rev. Al Sharpton, a prominent figure in the Black community, "promised wrath on advertisers of the Oscars telecast if they continued to support an awards ceremony that had no black nominees" (Barnes & Cieply, 2016, para. 6). He continued, "We know you couldn't break your contracts this year, but we are putting you on

notice: If you want to have another all-white Oscars, we will cut you off” (Barnes & Cieply, 2016, para. 6).

The fall and rise of ratings. The 2016 ceremony hosted by comedian Chris Rock saw the TV ratings fall by nearly 8% from the previous year’s telecast to 34.4 million. *The New York Times* writers Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply noted that reasoning for the drop in the ratings is maybe that Black viewers tuned elsewhere because they were “upset about a second straight year of all-white acting nominees” (2016, para. 4).

In 2017, the Academy Award ceremony TV ratings fell even more to 32.9 million viewers, which was the second lowest total since Nielsen started tracking viewership in 1974. John Koblin of *The New York Times* pointed out several reasons for the low ratings, including #OscarsSoWhite (2017). “Last year, the controversy surrounding #OscarsSoWhite, a movement on social media aimed at the lack of diversity among the nominees, led to speculation that viewers could be turned off by the prospect of an hours-long civics lecture” (Koblin, 2017, para. 8).

Despite the previous year’s lackluster ratings, the Oscars website promoted its ad sales for the following year in 2018, selling out its entire ad inventory two weeks before the ceremony— the fastest sellout in history, writer Steve Dove said in the “ABC Sells Out All Ads for 90th Oscar Telecast in Record Time” media release (2018). “The network is celebrating record revenue up high single-digits versus last year, marking another milestone for the telecast,” he continued (Dove, 2018, para. 1).

Ultimately, given that AMPAS is a business and it takes money to run the yearly ceremony; if the viewership is low, it could impact the ad sale revenue. In 2015, a 30-second TV

spot reached \$2 million. And that year, alone, ABC made \$110 million in ad fees from its broadcast of the ceremony. The 2016 yearly financial report for the Oscars showed that the ceremony that year cost nearly \$22 million to run, which is supplemented by advertising revenue (Pulver, 2017).

Still, TV ratings dropped even more in the 2018 telecast— to 26.5 million viewers— which was a 20% drop versus the previous year and was an all-time low for the awards show (Koblin, 2018). Koblin attributed the low ratings in *The New York Times* article to possibly “lackluster movies” (para. 8) and a viewership trend across the board with other award shows such as the Grammys and Screen Actors Guild (Koblin, 2018).

The host-less 2019 ceremony saw a rating boost for the first time in five years with a 12% increase over 2018’s numbers to 29.6 million. *Los Angeles Times* writer Stephen Battaglio (2019) credited ABC’s determination to have a faster-paced telecast to the increased ratings, as well as suspense surrounding the “Best Picture” category. Lauren Zalaznick, media consultant and former network executive, said in the article that, “the range of movies honored gave the show a ‘big tent’ atmosphere that the telecast has not had in recent years” (Battaglio, 2019, para. 10), which hinted at the highly diverse nominee pool. There was no mention of #OscarsSoWhite and its possible effect of TV ratings in previous years’ ceremonies.

The findings from this thesis suggest that journalists focused on four salient topics when discussing #OscarsSoWhite issues. Further analysis identified that these issues were framed in one of two ways: These issues were framed by the writers of *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Root* using an activist lens by illustrating how representation in films was important. Another popular frame was using capitalism to justify actions, which focused on the

backlash of #OscarsSoWhite and the financial implications of minimal diversity in the film industry.

Activist Lens

After identifying these salient issues in the sample size, one of the frames that emerged was promoting diversity for social reasons, which I'll refer to as using an "activist lens." In many of the articles, writers showed how this lack of diversity in the nominations affected audiences and how better representation in films was beneficial for society.

Activist reaction to #OscarsSoWhite. Most of the writers in the sample size supported the #OscarsSoWhite movement, saying that it shed light on the systemic lack of diversity at the Oscars and in the film industry as a whole. For example, in a *New York Times* article, writer Buckley noted that diverse voices providing diverse narratives is more important than ever:

We've been fed narratives from an overwhelmingly white male perspective since Hollywood began. Isn't it high time for some alternate narratives, at the very least? Isn't the purpose of art to jostle, broaden and challenge our worldview? (2016, para. 13)

The prominent online publication *The Root* provides a Black perspective that appeals to a wide range of readers, including Latinx and white. The publication showcased a strong opinion about the Academy, but offered different viewpoints and counterpoints to the #OscarsSoWhite movement. For example, writers focused on prominent actors and industry professionals who opposed #OscarsSoWhite, including actress Charlotte Rampling as well as director Lee Daniels, who said in an article, "Go out and do the work. Oscars so white! So what? Do your work. Let your legacy speak and stop complaining, man. Are we really in this for the awards?" (Callahan,

2017, para. 2). Writer Yesha Callahan, one of *The Root*'s frequent writers about the movement, countered in the article with:

If Hollywood isn't giving the same number of actors of color a shot as it does for every other Ben Affleck-like or Jennifer Lawrence-like person who instantly becomes the 'next big thing,' then how does [Lee] Daniels suppose these actors actually start to create a legacy? (Callahan, 2017, para. 6)

Most writers of these publications agreed that #OscarsSoWhite has spurred outrage and inspired many to speak up about the inequalities in the film industry. Reader Okema T. Moore said in a 2016 *Root* article:

The acknowledgment of who and what we are in this industry, and the fact that we've consistently and literally built this industry on our blood, sweat and talent, then there's a need for an #OscarsSoWhite hashtag. We're not the ones in the forefront. (Young, 2016)

Progress in representation. Over the years, the content about overall representation at the Oscars gave a strong indication that the publications were seeing progress through representation. From 2017 – 2019, more people of color were included in the Oscars nominations and behind the camera, and my sample publications demonstrated a more positive outlook with keywords such as “breakthrough” and “step forward.” In particular, Josh Rottenberg in the *Los Angeles Times* focused on the records that were broken in the 2017 Oscars ceremony by highlighting the high number of awards given to African Americans, including the acting categories, which showed the progress can be made through increasing diversity through on-screen representation (2017). He said:

The diversity of Sunday night's winners— which also saw Ali become the first Muslim actor ever to win an Oscar— was seen by many as a sign that, as academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs told the crowd at the Dolby Theatre, the film industry is ‘becoming more inclusive and diverse with each passing day.’ (Rottenberg, 2017, para. 9)

The Root framed the 2017 Oscar nominations as a step in the right direction of inclusivity in the film industry, saying “this year’s Academy Awards nominations featured so much blackness, some racist trolls on Twitter might just start calling the Oscars the BET Awards” (Adams, 2017, para. 1). A *New York Times* writer even touted the 2017 nominations as #OscarsSoBlack (Bruni, 2017). In a majority of the articles published, #OscarsSoWhite was described as a success, crediting activist April Reign as making the problem realized on a grander scale, because as the author Ronda Racha Penrice of *The Root* said, this lack of diversity “is no anomaly” (Penrice, 2017, para. 1).

Much of the movement centered on the Black community, but as the years passed, the focus also shifted to the Latin and Asian populations. After two years of #OscarsSoWhite, the 2018 Academy Award nominations showed promise with 12 African Americans nominated. However, it was the sixth year in a row where no Latinx people were nominated (Tseng-Putterman, 2018). Many writers lamented that Hollywood needs to do better by Latinx and nonblack Asian Americans. #OscarsSoWhite activist Reign, in particular, said there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. She added, “Our work to confront Asian-American and Latinx media underrepresentation—and the countless violence our communities face outside of Hollywood—is cut out for us. But let’s be clear: It is our work” (Tseng-Putterman, 2018, para. 17).

Capitalist Lens

In addition to the activist lens, a counter frame emerged that focused on how increasing diversity would benefit the bottom line, which I refer to as a “capitalist lens.” This frame included conversations about the backlash against #OscarsSoWhite for the Oscars brand and the financial implications of diversity in films, mainly focusing on box office sales and viewership of the annual ceremony.

The backlash. At the start of the movement in 2016, writers framed the lack of diversity in the nomination pool of the Oscars as damage to the brand and something that would negatively impact the 2016 ceremony. For instance, *Los Angeles Times* writer Josh Rottenberg said in a 2016 article leading up to the Oscars ceremony that year that:

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences— faced with an all-white slate of acting nominees for the second year in a row— has struggled to navigate a controversy that has divided its membership and damaged its image. And now, many expect it will take some of the glitz off Sunday night's Oscar ceremony. (2016, para. 6)

The New York Times writer Buckley, one of the prominent writers of diversity for the publication, also painted a somewhat uncertain picture of the Academy and its efforts to become more inclusive saying the strategies might be quick fixes, but are nothing substantial:

For all the on-camera embraces of diversity, the changes the Academy has announced— along with doubling its diversity push, it wants to weed inactive members out— continue to have multiple members of the organization, publicists included, on the defensive, and seething. Whether the academy's shift will mean more diverse movies are made— and recognized— remains to be seen, as does whether this year's diversity ‘conversation’ will

have legs. (2016, para. 11)

In a select few articles, writers of *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* structured their articles around a variety of viewpoints about #OscarsSoWhite. In a 2016 *New York Times* article, author Marie Tae McDermott put a spotlight on readers' views of the social media movement with many saying that it was not a worthy cause and that the nominations were correct that year. One reader said that films that year starring Black actors were simply not "worthy of being nominated for the 'best' of anything" (McDermott, 2016, para. 8). Some said that the controversy reflected a wider problem of race and diversity in the country while others marked AMPAS as an infallible institution and even defended the nominations in 2016, rallying behind #OscarsSoRight (McDermott, 2016).

The prominent online publication *The Root* showcased a strong opinion about the Academy, which signaled higher accountability for an organization such as AMPAS, but offered different viewpoints and counterpoints to the #OscarsSoWhite movement. A select group of actors and directors have shared the same views of these readers, including Academy Award-winning actor Michael Caine who suggested that "Black people need to be more patient and maybe they'll get an Oscar, too" (Callahan, 2016, para. 2). Callahan said in response to Caine's viewpoint, "Patient? Huh? Tell that to Spike Lee, who recently received a 'freebie' from the academy after it bypassed many of his films" (Callahan, 2016, para. 3).

An interesting point that actress Jada Pinkett Smith said in another *Root* article was that AMPAS' strategies to diversify their voting body implies that Black people only vote Black, which is not the case, and "...it's not just about having more black voters" (Smith quoted in Eromosele, 2016, para 4). She continued, "The Academy as a whole, we all need to, as human

beings, get to know each other, expand our education about everyone” (Eromosele, 2016, para 4).

There is a clear divide in high art and mass art as it relates to films, and many writers deferred to studio executives as leaning toward making big money at the box office as the ultimate goal than creating film for social change. *The New York Times* writer Manohla Dargis said:

The major studios tend to mimic this divide, as we know. They roll out the blockbusters in the summer and their prestige films in the fall. Little gold statues and glowing reviews are nice, but box-office domination is the name of the industry game. (Dargis et. al, 2016, para.12)

But despite a somewhat better representation in the 2017 Academy Awards, writers said it didn’t change the lack of progress being made in the ranks of the studio executives, the low number of female directors, and that consequences for bad behavior “still seem to go by a sliding scale based on whom your connections are or your potential at the box office” (Rutenberg, 2017, para. 8).

Discussion

This study adds to the limited body of scholarship regarding how diversity has been addressed in the news media since the #OscarsSoWhite went viral in 2016. Between 2016 – 2019, media covered #OscarsSoWhite and focused on four salient issues: racial diversity, diversity other than race, the voting system within the Academy Awards, and overall TV ratings for the annual ceremony.

As the coverage of the movement grew, particularly from large media outlets such as *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, this prominence made its way back to the movement founder, which then produced a justification to continue advocating for the issue and even helped ignite changes at the Academy and its voting system (Corbett & Mori, 1999). This agenda setting cycle allowed the issue salience to be formed, applied, and transferred across various channels, which created influence with the Academy, as well as TV and movie actors, and audiences (Kioussis, Park, Kim, & Go, 2013).

This news coverage in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* prominently focused on how the diversity problem at the Oscars is a systemic problem in Hollywood, looking to commentary from audiences, professionals within the film industry—including directors, actors and actresses, and designers—plus executives and even professors who specialize in diversity. Content demonstrated why representation of all races and populations is so important; promoted the idea of “inclusiveness” of all races and populations; and highlighted that ultimately, diversity is a “journey”—something that doesn’t happen overnight.

Representation Matters

My findings indicated the importance of representation of all people was a popular theme with a majority relaying how critical it was for everyone to see people like themselves on the screen. According to Stuart Hall, identity is a “moveable feast”—formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems that surround us (1987). In addition to the Black community, many articles focused on how Asians and the Latinx population, considered a large movie-going audience, are very underserved in

terms of stories they can relate to, and why it's so important for overall representation in films. Becerra said that "there is something powerful about seeing people on the big or small screen who look like you. That is universal to human beings" (2016, para. 18). This supports the idea that when real-world exposure is lacking, those mass mediated representations can often build, reinforce, or reject personally held stereotypes (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Plant & Devine, 1998).

Media diversity remains one of the most consequential—and still often ignored—factors shaping how all Americans view themselves and each other (Morgan, 2019). Articles stressed that diversity enhanced the film industry and mainly the Academy Awards— that diversity of stories, backgrounds and demographics bolstered ideas and helped AMPAS better relate to its diverse audiences. For example, filmmaker Ava DuVernay said in a 2016 *Los Angeles Times* article:

This work needs to be done so people of color can see themselves as real people on screen. That's an issue of survival, essential to our personhood and our humanity and our dignity. It has nothing to do with those hashtags. (Whipp, 2016, para. 21)

But while there has been much progress in TV and film to showcase the varied perspectives of storytellers, studies still show that biases in media portrayals continue to "perpetuate attitudes toward minority communities and fuel our country's simmering divisions" (Morgan, 2019, para. 4).

The effects of whitewashing. In addition to overall representation, there was special attention paid to the effects of whitewashing in film, and how it reinforced stereotypes of various ethnicities. In many instances, journalists argued for having a white person play a character of a different race shouldn't be an issue—it should be cast regardless of race and the casting should

be “colorblind” (Lowrey, 2010). Another argument is that financial considerations typically take “center stage” when casting for a major film and that studios do not aim to be discriminatory (Lowrey, 2010, p. 4). In a select few articles, writers noted how this whitewashing ultimately hurt marginalized populations such as the Latinx and Asian communities, who are “underserved in terms of stories and characters they relate to” (Barnes, 2018, para. 11).

This whitewashing seems to have an effect on representation in films, which in turn, has affected representation for these communities in award shows like the Oscars. In fact, a 2018 article noted startling statistics within these communities, saying that this makes the sixth year in a row that no Latinx actors have been nominated for an acting Academy Award, and only 1% of Oscar nominations have gone to Asian actors in the past 89 years (Tseng-Putterman, 2018).

This lack of representation has been commonplace in the film industry, but it looks like some progress has been made. In a 2017 *Los Angeles Times* article, writer Melissa Batchelor Warnke noted white actor Ed Skrein, who backed out of a role in a “Hellboy” reboot that was originally of mixed Asian heritage. The writer said, “Being a white advocate for racial justice means putting people of color forward for economic opportunities, not droning on about how important it is for them theoretically to have access to those opportunities” (Warnke, 2017, para. 3).

The common theme in many articles that highlighted whitewashing was that AMPAS needs to stop apologizing for lack of diversity and take the initiative to curb it, which reinforces the idea that diversity should be viewed through a proactive activist lens. When the Oscar nominations were announced in 2016 with no people of color, each publication in my sample

criticized AMPAS and shortly after, the organization made efforts to diversify its membership and revise its voting structure that helped perpetuate the lack of diversity in the first place.

But, these frames could potentially reinforce what DiAngelo (2016) says are popular white narratives that work to deny racism. While the words “diversity” and “inclusion” are widely employed to talk about reforming the industry, they often have the effect of rendering issues of power, privilege, and discrimination. Gender historian Joan Wallach Scott said ultimately, it’s not “diversity and inclusion” that will remedy these problems but programs [and organizations] aimed at combating racism, sexism, and homophobia altogether (Drazenovich, Rodriguez & Mercedes, 2017).

Hashtag activism: Pushing for an ‘inclusive’ environment. Many articles focused on the idea of the film industry and AMPAS being more proactively “inclusive”— that is, having objectives designed to increase the participation of all people and to leverage diversity effects (Roberson, 2006). After the 2016 Oscar nominations when no people of color were announced, #OscarsSoWhite got the conversation started about inclusiveness at the Academy Awards and Hollywood.

At the beginning, #OscarsSoWhite was considered a “hashtag activism” movement, a term originally coined by *The New York Times* writer and columnist David Carr (2012). #OscarsSoWhite took over Twitter in 2016 and gave activists a way to streamline their messaging. While the skeptics of social media’s efficacy with protest movements call hashtag activism “armchair activism” or “slacktivism,” (Kessler, 2012), #OscarsSoWhite was not mentioned as such in any article I read. Instead, some writers transformed the hashtag into other hashtags to reflect various ideas about the issue. For example, other hashtags were frequently

cited in the articles, such as #HollywoodSoWhite, #WritersRoomsSoWhite, #OscarsSoRight, #OscarsSoDumb, #OscarsSoContrite, #OscarsSoBlack and #OscarsSoBlackandWhite.

Ultimately, social media, particularly Twitter, enabled individuals to see the importance of addressing stigmatized issues such as diversity (Beigi et al., 2018).

The ability of Twitter hashtags to amplify information and ideas about the lack of diversity at the Oscars across the platform helped activists and advocates of this movement with outreach opportunities, which helped spur interest in the print media, particularly *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Reacting to #OscarsSoWhite. The #OscarsSoWhite movement pushed AMPAS to implement new strategies in 2016 but many were not on board with the changes. In a *Root* article, AMPAS President Isaacs acknowledged that a change in diversity wasn't going to happen overnight, but the Academy realized that it needs to work faster and do more (Callahan, 2016). Still, the new strategies to diversify in 2016 caused much tension within the Academy because of the restrictions.

Writers noted that older members of AMPAS complained that they were being unfairly blamed for a recent wave of white nominations even after they helped name the movie “12 Years a Slave” with a Black director and actors the “Best Picture” of 2014 (Barnes & Cieply, 2016). This was a common complaint in many of the articles—it's not the Academy's fault, but look to the studios that run the film industry, which are responsible for creating these films that get voted on in the first place.

Another viewpoint about the strategies was that it implied Black voters only vote for other Black people, which isn't exactly the case. “Part of the reason we have art is so we come

out of our comfort zones and get to know about different cultures and different realities” Pinkett said (quotes in Eromosele, 2016, para. 6).

While racism and diversity is a slightly divisive topic, much of the research found on representation and diversity in the media, including the USC annual diversity reports, concluded that there has been a problem with inclusiveness onscreen and behind the camera, which is difficult to dispute (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016; Case, Choi, Choueiti, Pieper, & Smith, 2018). With the adoption of these strategies by AMPAS, it has helped diversify nominations, evidenced by 2018 and 2019 Oscar ceremonies with the most diverse nominations in its history.

Diversity as a journey. Articles projected a dim outlook until the 2017 Oscars ceremony when the tone shifted as more people of color were nominated in the major acting categories and the Black drama “Moonlight” won the biggest category of the night, “Best Picture.” Journalists for *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* embraced the growing diversity at the Academy Awards.

The common salient issue highlighting overall representation at the Oscars gave a strong indication that the publications were seeing progress through an activist approach to representation. “Achieving true diversity involves more than just checking the boxes and an attitude that says ‘OK, we’ve hired a woman, so now we’re done,’” said Audra Jenkins, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for Randstad (Binford, 2019, para. 8). As the years passed and more people of color were included in the Oscars nominations and behind the camera from 2017 – 2019, coverage rewarded the move by calling initiatives “breakthrough” and a “step forward.” In particular, Josh Rottenberg in the *Los Angeles Times* focused on the records that were broken in the 2017 Oscars ceremony by highlighting the high number of awards given to African

Americans, including the acting categories, which showed the progress can be made through increasing diversity through on-screen representation (2017). This includes the 2019 Oscars ceremony, which showed even more diversity than ever in its nominations. *The New York Times* writer Brooks Barnes said:

The Hollywood establishment, excoriated for its longtime exclusion of women and minorities, recognized African-American production design and costume virtuosos for the first time. Asian-American filmmakers were honored. A movie about a gay rock star collected four trophies. (2019, para. 1)

Diversity and the Bottom Line

Some articles focused on diversity in terms of #OscarsSoWhite affecting the “bottom line” with ticket sales, as well as viewership of the annual Academy Awards ceremony.

Many articles in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* pointed to the power that these executives of major studios have over independent distributors: They offer cultural producers advantages that smaller studios cannot afford. When it comes to screening films in theaters, major studios have offices in regional markets, allowing it to maintain continuous contact with theater chains across the country. Independent distributors are less strategically networked with theaters, and have more difficulty marketing and gaining larger theatrical releases for its films (Erigha, 2015). This presents a level of inequality for women and racial minorities in the labor market.

Additionally, writers agreed that leadership and those hiring the artists and designers seem to have a problem hiring more minorities for films. The questions remain: Are the executives who decide what content to green light capable of working outside of their safe zones

and taking risks on new creators and new talent? Are audiences capable of demanding more diversity from Hollywood by using their money to force change? The answer to these questions is “yes,” but it will require both a top-down and bottom-up transformation of the value proposition between Hollywood and its consumers. Today, the film industry is controlled by a small number of profit-driven mega-corporations that appear to have created a culture that is risk-averse, predictable, and ready to say “no” to new ways of thinking outside the box or unknown talent (Miller, 2018).

Major distributors tend to play it safe, relying on franchise-heavy, blockbuster-dependent films that ultimately are not working to “move the inclusion needle forward,” but has been ideal for corporations (Miller, 2018, para. 9). Even after “Black Panther” shattered assumptions about featuring minority characters in lead roles—it earned \$1.29 billion at the box office (McClintock, 2018)—some in the industry are still having trouble recognizing it as a game changer. The 2018 movie shows that strong racial representation in a film can translate to better sales and higher viewership. Cox’s (1994) Interactional Model of the Impact of Diversity on Individual Outcomes and Organizational Effectiveness shows that when there is a diverse group in an industry or organization— in this case, the film industry— it better represents society as a whole and has a better chance of succeeding.

The rise and fall of TV ratings. Another issue that arose in some of the content in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* was TV ratings for the annual Academy Awards ceremony and how the lack of diversity might have an effect on overall viewership.

By the writers focusing on the TV ratings of the Academy Awards broadcast, it provided a glimpse into how the diversity problem in Hollywood possibly affected viewership and

ultimately, the “bottom line” of the annual ceremony. But the ratings drop in recent years also could be a result of movies losing their cultural relevancy in an era of peak TV (Rottenberg, 2017).

In today’s media-saturated market, there is much competition for a viewer’s attention and that’s why it is important to have diversified casts and stories on the big screen—they often have higher viewership and earn more revenue than those that are homogenous (Deggans, 2014). By highlighting this facet of the diversity problem, it might give an incentive for studios to “do better,” as some writers noted in their articles.

To effect change, studio executives must receive support from the top to seek out and build relationships with content creators, artists, producers and aspiring young professionals who reflect their increasingly diverse audiences (Miller, 2018). And a driving factor to this progress is the fact that hashtag activism worked. It took an issue that started online (Twitter) and brought tangible change to policies in the Academy.

Hashtag activism and agenda building. In answering RQ2b, which asked how AMPAS framed their issues in response to #OscarsSoWhite in its media releases, the findings showed that when the #OscarsSoWhite movement went viral, it caused the Academy to reflect on the racial diversity of its membership and voting body. While agenda setting examines the transfer of issue salience from media to the public, agenda building in public relations explores the reciprocal relations among the stakeholder groups in the process of salience formation, transfer, and exchange (Hughes & Dan, 2009). Information subsidies come into play in agenda building where if practitioners can obtain strong media placement of their subsidies, then they can influence the media agenda, “which in turn can influence public opinion and the public agenda” (Curtin, 1999, p. 54).

AMPAS pushed the new strategies to enhance diversity through its media releases in an attempt to influence the news media to cover them. As the coverage grew, particularly from large media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root*, #OscarsSoWhite made its way back to social media, which then produced a justification to continue advocating for the issue (Corbett & Mori, 1999). This cycle allowed issue salience to be formed, applied, and transferred across various channels, which creates influence (Kiousis, Park, Kim, & Go, 2013). This issue salience of the new strategies support first-level agenda building.

In this case, while *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* featured the new strategies prominently when they were introduced in January shortly after the 2016 Oscars nominations, writers framed the lack of diversity in the nomination pool of the Oscars as damage to the brand and something that would negatively impact the 2016 ceremony.

By making this a prominent issue in response to the social media movement, it indicated that the Academy has had a systemic problem with inclusiveness in its organization and after being “called out” by celebrities and other prominent film industry professionals and threats of boycotts, it needed to take steps to diversify. Its first media release about new strategies to bolster its membership was published online on January 22, 2016, just eight days after the all-white Oscar nominations were announced. AMPAS’ media releases indicated a low position of power and showed that they needed to change their system, as seen by its language in the opening paragraph, “The Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences approved a sweeping series of substantive changes designed to make the Academy’s membership, its governing bodies, and its voting members significantly more diverse” (AMPAS, 2016, para. 1).

By strategically using the language “sweeping,” “substantive” and “significantly,” the AMPAS worked to overcompensate in its content for its current lack of diversity with its membership and voting body. AMPAS highlighted its new diversity efforts for membership but failed to mention its current racial makeup, which doesn’t allow the reader to have context about how much the Academy is working to diversify its membership and make improvements. This also includes a follow-up media release about changes to the Board of Governors, which the AMPAS said would increase diversity. They said:

The Academy will also take immediate action to increase diversity by adding new members who are not Governors to its executive and board committees where key decisions about membership and governance are made. This will allow new members an

opportunity to become more active in Academy decision-making and help the organization identify and nurture future leaders. (AMPAS, 2016, para. 6)

Again, by using language such as “immediate action,” “key decisions,” “decision-making,” “identify,” and “nurture,” AMPAS framed their response to increase diversity across the board as reactionary, which overcompensated for a current lack of diversity at the core of the organization—an issue for decades. The #OscarsSoWhite movement made the issue realized on a grander scale, because, as the author Ronda Racha Penrice of *The Root* said this lack of diversity “is no anomaly” (Penrice, 2017, para. 1). As of February 2019, AMPAS has more than 8,000 voting members, made up of 31% women— up from 25% in 2015— and 16% people of color— up from just 8% in 2015 (Brooksbank, 2019). However, “while these stats represent a sizable change in the makeup of the Academy in a short amount of time, it still falls short of reflecting the demographic makeup of the United States,” broadcaster Tommy Brooksbank said (2019, para. 5). It will take the Academy much more time to reflect the country’s population due to the organization’s structure and rules, but the strategies seem to be changing the culture of the award show for the better, which signals that the film industry is changing, too.

Future Research and Limitations

As a qualitative study examining how prominent publications have covered the #OscarsSoMovement, there has been limited research on social media movements and how they have been discussed in publications. Future researchers may want to broaden the scope of social media movements as a whole and how publications’ frames of these movements possibly play a role in affecting change in society.

In addition, future research might explore other entertainment publications that are geared toward races other than white and African American. While *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Root* were chosen as illustrative entertainment publications, their viewpoints may not be indicative of all entertainment publications in the United States, thus potentially limiting the study's findings. As seen, the issue of diversity is complex and no publication is truly representative of #OscarsSoWhite or diversity as a whole. And although I took extensive steps to develop a comprehensive search strategy for the articles, I may have missed some articles in these publications about #OscarsSoWhite as it relates to diversity. Also, my data does not examine factors that influence fluctuations in the coverage and framing of the #OscarsSoWhite movement and lack of diversity in the film industry. The focus of this paper was to provide a broad overview of the coverage of the movement, including what issues were made salient and how the media framed these issues for readers. Finally, the basis of the study was a social media movement, but the conversation about #OscarsSoWhite was not observed online to see which issues were made salient by Twitter accounts using the hashtag, which could potentially be different than my findings.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to examine the coverage of diversity in the film industry, particularly in the Academy Award nominations, with a focus on what issues the news media has made salient and how they have framed these issues. This study makes a contribution to practical and scholarly literature in the field of media and diversity through examining news media and a prominent organization in the film industry that has much influence in society and the arts. When its lack of diversity became a wide topic of conversation on social media and the

news media used its influence to make this issue salient across the country and possibly the world, AMPAS took immediate action to ensure a more inclusive environment for voting, which has had a ripple effect in Hollywood and major studios responsible for a majority of the films in wide release. Because film is a prominent medium where people share their stories and its reach extends across the world, the Academy Awards have remained an important fixture in the media and diversity. There has been a slow change in overall diversity across the board and the public has noticed. But, in trying to change the system and culture of the film industry, the Academy Awards organization is seeking to make film a more inclusive and accepting society and changing any culture takes time.

Additionally, it adds to the literature of the importance of representation and inclusiveness by looking at comprehensive reports on diversity in the media and how the news media has made issues about diversity and inclusion salient through its vast coverage about the movement as it relates to the Academy Awards. Plus, it shows how journalists and other communicators present information in a particular way that most resonates with existing underlying schemas among readers (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). These frames of the movement ultimately influence readers about how to think about diversity at the award show and film industry as a whole, thus potentially producing more inclusive strategies at a high level and offering more opportunities for minorities.

Finally, this study has implications for other arts organizations that have a lack of diversity in their workforce and are looking to enhance opportunities to all minorities. The Academy Awards were studied as an example because their annual ceremony is the pinnacle for the craft of filmmaking. Knowledge of diversity strategies adopted by the award show and major studios

in Hollywood can help other organizations, professionals, and publics adapt to change and be more open to new ideas.

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