

QUEEN OF THE CLAPBACK: A Framing Analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Use
of Social Media

by

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ABSTRACT

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, commonly known as AOC, quickly became a national public figure when she became the youngest elected Congresswoman in American history. The purpose of this study was to analyze the strategies used by AOC to frame her messages on two popular social media networks: Twitter and Instagram. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study analyses the frames and content of the data to reveal the strategies used by AOC during the three months prior to her election (August 2018-November 2018) and the three months after her election (November 2018-February 2019). Using pre-determined frames to compartmentalize (or code) the contents of her posts, the study concluded that prior to her election, the strategy was to create an image to which people could relate to. Additionally, making comparisons between how things are and how they could be created a sense of hope and foreshadowed a better tomorrow. After her election, the content of her social media posts became more combative in fighting back against critics and redirecting negative messages. The parameters placed on the study limit the scope of the research, creating opportunity for further research of the communication exchanged on virtual spaces by public figures.

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My utmost gratitude goes to my parents who came to this country with nothing but a dream—I love you and I am eternally indebted for your sacrifice.

Mi mayor gratitud es para mis padres que vinieron a este país con nada más que un sueño—los amo y estoy eternamente en deuda por su sacrificio.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, commonly known as AOC, burst onto the American political scene in the fall of 2018 with her surprise victory over 10-term incumbent, Joe Crowley. As pundits debated the strategies and media outreach she used, a conclusion frequently drawn had to do with how she connected with the electorate. Reaching not only the citizens of the district she would be representing, AOC used social media to discuss local, national, and global issues that were affecting working-class Americans, including herself. Open about her own struggles, AOC used social media to tell her story as well as the stories of people in her community—this was a group effort. Since her election, AOC has used social media platforms to bring everyone along for the ride. From posting “behind-the-scenes” content and demystifying the election process, to casually live-streaming from her kitchen and discussing policies, AOC is not your ordinary politician.

The purpose of this study was to analyze AOC’s social media use before and after her election. The two social media platforms analyzed are Twitter and Instagram, as her activity is largely in these two networks. The scope of this study was limited to a six-month period in order to explore the critical months before and after her election—August 6, 2018-November 6, 2018 and November 7, 2018-February 6, 2019.

Analyzing posts three months pre-election and three months post-election, Erving Goffman's framing theory (1974) was used to explore how AOC presents messages to her audience in order to influence perception. Specifically related to framing in political communication, the work of R. Lance Holbert (2007) was incorporated given his work particularly focused on conceptualizing characters as people rather than focusing on mere politics. Taking a critical look at her social media use, the study explores the ways in which she frames her ideas on social media and appeals to her audience to generate engagement and stimulate conversation in the midst of a vexed political climate. Chapter 1 discusses the impact of social media on elections, a brief biography of AOC, the theoretical grounding for this study, the methodological approach and presents the research question that guides this study.

116th District

Along with many 'firsts', the 116th Congress is composed of a record-breaking number of women sworn into the House of Representatives, the largest Congressional Black Caucus, and the largest Congressional Hispanic Caucus (Timm, 2019). Taking center stage and making headlines across the nation is also the youngest congresswoman ever elected—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known as AOC. Representing New York's 14th congressional district, AOC is a prominent figure in Congress, leading the charge with a progressive ideology amidst the conservative agenda of the Trump administration, differing in views from POTUS on issues such as immigration, universal healthcare and climate change (Vesoulis, 2018). AOC's unexpected victory in the Democratic primaries over 10-term incumbent, Joe Crowley, draws question as to how she managed to take on the "King of Queens" at only 28 years old to later defeat Republican Anthony Pappas for

a seat at House of Representatives. With over 4.9 million followers on Twitter and 3.8 million followers on Instagram, it is no surprise that her social media presence might have something to do with that. AOC's quick-witted intellect coupled with her knowledge of social media culture makes for a powerful modern-day leader seeking to make significant change. This research concentrated on interworking of her social media use and political agenda that make her one of the most talked-about politicians in recent times.

Description of Artifact

Today's social networking era has brought about several platforms users can interact with in various ways, such as streaming live content temporarily, using location filters to share whereabouts, and connecting with people from all over the world with a single tap. With all the different ways users can stay connected, it is no surprise people are glued to their technology devices. Twitter and Instagram are among the top 10 most popular social networks worldwide (Ahmad, 2019). Appealing to her constituents and other interested followers, AOC has made a name for herself in the social media world through her use of both these social networks. An overview of both Twitter and Instagram give way to how AOC uses these platforms to frame her identity and political stance while a look at her upbringing gives light to how and why she is such a successful politician and popular public figure.

Twitter

Twitter is an online microblogging service allowing users to communicate by distributing short messages among groups of recipients via personal computer or mobile device (Gil, 2019). Founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, Noah Glass and Biz

Stone, Twitter has evolved from being a free SMS (short message service) with a social networking element to an emerging outlet for the dissemination of information while maintaining the social networking purpose. Since the original launch in March of 2007, Twitter is now considered an indispensable method of communication on a global scale with 100 million daily active users and 500 million tweets sent daily (Staley, 2016). Users can post (or “tweet”) messages (or “tweets”) using 280 characters or less to their audience (or “followers”).

The element of convenience comes from the fact that users can stay connected through concise messages instead of lengthy works. The feature “Trending Topics” allow users to have live updates on the latest trending news, collecting frequently used key words and “hashtags”. Additionally, Twitter is also used to promote (or plug) artists, authors, businesses, entrepreneurs, celebrities, influencers, professionals and, yes, politicians (Forsey, 2019).

Politicians quickly made their way onto Twitter. As previously mentioned, former President Barack Obama was notably successful in this sphere, amassing more than 20 times more followers on Twitter than opponent John McCain in the presidential race of 2008 (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). The success and “hype” of Obama was partly credited to social media, ensuring that future candidates would include a social networking presence as part of their campaign strategies, including AOC (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Instagram

While Twitter is predominately used for short, concise messages, Instagram is more widely used for photographs and short videos (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Instagram

offers a variety of filters and effects, allowing users to edit their photographs without a professional software. The popular social networking platform was created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in October of 2010 and later sold to Facebook Inc. (“About Us,” n.d.). Users are able to share digital photographs with followers and, most recently, also post temporary images/clips on “My Story” which are only available for 24 hours unless permanently saved or deleted by the user. Another new feature on Instagram allows users to go “live”, streaming live video footage from the user accessible to followers. Similar to Twitter, Instagram allows users to stay connected by categorizing public posts and using hashtags to organize topics. Schmidbauer, Rösch and Stieler (2018) note that 60% of Instagram users are between the ages of 18-35, which suggests this social media platform appeals to a younger demographic.

The use of Instagram is also a common trend in today’s political realm. While a certain political agenda weaves in the content shared, users follow politicians more so for the connectedness they feel on a personal level. Politicians use this platform to share images of their families and portray themselves in a way that makes their audience feel a part of the journey (Glantz, 2014). The idea is to create a sense of transparency, allowing citizens to feel included and engaged (Tromble, 2018). This is also an effective way of getting people to the polls. Politicians and political organizations will post images of the campaign and urge users to use a certain hashtag in order to gain attention and influence other users, such as the popular hashtag #vote. Public image is critical, and social media networks can help politicians mobilize digitally and establish relevancy.

Who is AOC, anyway?

Since the early years of social media, politicians were taking advantage of the various platforms in order to promote their image and gain campaign support, so what is it about AOC that has made such a ruckus? AOC does not fit the mold of most politicians, and she refuses to compromise her values in order to do so. Of Puerto Rican descent and born in the Bronx, AOC is a product of two working-class parents. Her father, Sergio Ocasio, was a small business owner and her mother, Blanca Ocasio-Cortez, a house cleaner (“Meet Alexandria,” 2018). Always trying to provide the best opportunities for their children, AOC’s parents found a way to send her and her brother, Gabriel, to public school in Yorktown instead of the Bronx. The 40-minute drive from the Bronx to Yorktown was a representation of income inequality and the difference in schooling, economic opportunity, and health outcome—the starting line is not the same for everyone (Urfer, 2019).

While she was in high school, she took 2nd place in the 2007 International Science and Engineering Fair in the Microbiology category (Urfer, 2019). After high school, she earned a scholarship from Intel and attended Boston University where she majored in economics and international relations. A natural leader, she was the president of *Alianza Latina*, a community organization for Latinx students—even in college, she was amplifying the voices of minorities. Working in the Immigration and Foreign Affairs office of Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts during her time at BU, AOC became incredibly passionate about advocating for the rights of immigrants and undocumented workers, greatly influencing her political platform (Urfer, 2019).

In 2008, her father passed away from lung cancer as the market crashed, leaving her family struggling to make ends meet and fighting to keep their home. AOC found herself working 18-hour shifts in restaurants and bartending to help her mother, realizing that her situation was not unique and that thousands of working-class Americans endure similar struggles. She had experienced two different realities, understanding the distinct differences between the middle-class and working-class.

After graduating from Boston University with a BA in International Relations and Economics, she moved back to the Bronx to work in education and community organizing. Although she took on multiple jobs to help her mother, she remained active and even founded Brook Avenue Press, a publishing firm for books that portrayed the Bronx in a positive light (Urfer, 2019). At one point, she was also working as an Educational Director, helping high school students expand their skill-sets in community leadership and social enterprise (“Meet Alexandria,” 2018). All these experiences would prepare her for what was to come—the opportunity to represent the people with whom she was working alongside.

Joe Crowley, 10-year incumbent, was predicted to win in the New York’s Democratic primaries and become the next Democratic leader (Chaitin, 2019). AOC’s experience in advocacy and organizing coupled with her personal struggles and triumphs got attention from the Brand New Congress, an organization encouraging working-class leaders to run for office (“Brand New Congress,” 2017). Co-founder of Brand New Congress and Chief of Staff for AOC, Saikat Chakrabarti, has a background in the world of tech, so the momentum behind AOC’s campaign took to the streets of the Bronx and to the internet (Okun, 2018). Months prior to the Democratic primaries in June of 2018,

AOC was incredibly active on Twitter and Instagram as she was the first Democratic primary challenger to run since 2004. An online presence coupled with grass-root canvassing and endorsements from national left-leaning organizations, AOC was putting up a fight (Honan, 2018). Unlike Crowley, AOC was determined to be powered by the people, not money. Her social media activity portrayed a young, ambitious leader eager to serve the people of District 14, as she documented her journey by outlining her platform, posting pictures/videos of her campaign, sharing links to various articles regarding the election, educating people on the election process, urging people to vote, and demonstrating that she was showing up (Lipsitz, 2018).

The odds were stacked against her, as her opponent, Joe Crowley, was one of the most powerful Democratic congressman and potential Speaker of the House (Urfer, 2019). Nevertheless, she persisted and won—AOC defeated Joe Crowley in New York’s 14th House District (“Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeats Joseph Crowley...,” 2018). Netflix released a documentary titled “Knock Down the House,” following the story of AOC from the early stages of her campaign leading to her unprecedented victory. The documentary also features Cori Bush, Paula Jean Swearinger and Amy Vilela—all women determined to challenge big-money politicians (“Knock Down the House,” 2019).

In a district where Democrats outnumber Republicans 6-to-1, AOC later defeated Republican opponent Anthony Pappas and earned her seat at the House of Representatives (Groves, 2018). The tremendous diversity and the record number of women in office have shaken things up, to say the least. The make-up of the 116th Congress demonstrates that there is a place in politics for men AND women, people of color and young leaders. Social media has played a major role in this movement, as in the

case with AOC. Her social media use before and after her election in November is noted as an example of how politics is once again transforming to appear more transparent and accessible to the public (Seitz-Wald, 2019). I chose to focus my research on AOC because her accomplishments as a young Latina are inspiring, prompting my desire to succeed against all odds. Her remarkable victory at such a young age made me reflect on my own life—what am I doing to prompt positive change? We all have a platform, and how we choose to use that platform can truly make a difference; AOC is a young Congresswoman with a knack for social media, changing politics one post at a time. This study looked at a sample size of 120 tweets and Instagram posts three months before her election (August 6, 2018-November 6, 2018) and three months after her election (November 7, 2018-February 6, 2019)—a sample from roughly 1,009 tweets and 58 Instagram posts.

Theoretical Framework

The buzz about AOC is different from other politicians. In order to explain the reasoning behind the hype, there needs to be an understanding of the image portrayed. Goffman (1974) coined the term “frame analysis” to help explain what is real and what is perceived to be real. According to Goffman (1974), this is process that involves “framing”, which is the application of certain cognitive procedures onto given situations. Essentially, frameworks are tools for meaning and making discovery—how something is presented to an audience will influence the choices people make about how to process that information (Davie, 2014). According to Goffman (1974), natural frameworks and social frameworks differ in how they are put in place. Natural frameworks take into consideration physical occurrences, while social frameworks add context. Media can

serve as “frames”—representing information to the public. Closely related to agenda-setting theory, framing theory suggests that the media (or the person behind the media) highlights certain events and then places them within a particular context to encourage or discourage certain interpretations (“Framing Theory,” n.d.).

In the political realm, the work of Goffman (1974) states that our political consciousness is shaped by the frames posed by the political world. In this case, AOC uses specific frames through her use of social media to create an image that is interpreted by her audience (or followers). Her audience (or followers) interpret the information through their own frames, which can either overlap or contradict the image portrayed by AOC.

Framing theory is used to explore how the media can have pervasive, deep influence on how people think and shape their opinions towards ideas in the social and political world (Leeper & Slothuus, 2018). Focusing on the effects of entertainment television in politics, the work of Holbert suggests that individuals receive political information from a variety of sources, affecting socio-political attitudes and behaviors (Holbert et al., 2007). Prime-time television presents content that engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program—all of which frame the messages presented to the viewers (Gamson, 1999).

The West Wing is an NBC fictional drama that depicts the professional and personal experiences of White House senior staff and the President of the United States (“The West Wing,” 1999). While the show is fictional and intended as a means of entertainment, certain messages are communicated about the American presidency to an

audience, shaping their perceptions about politics. The frame used in *The West Wing* depicts the daily activities of the American president, not aiming to provide justification for their opinions regarding the American presidency but, rather, offering context. Holbert et al. (2007) argues that the focus is more on the character rather than policy, differing from news media. As with social media platforms, the multifunctional aspects of “posting” and “sharing” content is not always aimed to focus on facts, but more so to create identity.

Gamson and Lasch (1983) identify eight types of frames used by media: 1) metaphors, 2) exemplars, 3) catchphrases, 4) depictions, 5) visual images, 6) roots, 7) consequences, and 8) appeals to principle. Holbert et al. (2007) states that political communication-based framing research tends to focus on the frames of roots, consequences and appeals to principle—providing justifications or reasons for a general position. However, the purpose of this study is not to explain a particular political position, rather to explore the frames used by AOC via social media to explain the “clout”.

Literature Review

Previous investigations have sought to explore the power of social media in politics. Harris and Harrigan (2015) analyzed the role of social media in shaping political debate during the UK election campaign in May of 2010. Their findings concluded that significant value is added to social media communication when implemented long-term and also incorporated an offline relationship building strategy (Harris & Harrigan, 2015). These types of findings support the notion that strategic social media use requires technique and knowledge of the audience base reached by certain platforms. Who is

listening? How do I appeal to the listener to keep them listening? Digital native and freshman congresswoman, AOC has managed to obtain a following not because of her extensive experience in politics, but because she knows her audience and engages accordingly (Garcia-Martinez, 2019).

A study by Lewinstein (2019) explored the impact of AOC's use of social media as an agenda setting tool in the House of Representatives. Lewinstein (2019) studied two time periods—the month leading up to her election and her second month in office. Categorizing AOC's tweets within those two time frames, Lewinstein (2019) concluded that since being elected, AOC's posts about National issues significantly increased. Additionally, Lewinstein (2019) concluded that a notable portion of AOC's tweets utilized personal anecdotes, inspirational messages, feminist actions and insights, and calls for progressive leadership in order to create a connection with her audience.

The political landscape is ever changing, molding to fit societal and technological shifts to appeal to voters. While politicians have changed their tactics to suit to voters, the politicians themselves have only recently begun to change. Sanbonmatsu (2015) notes that a record number of women of color have held office in recent years, but women of color remain underrepresented. One of the reasons is that women of color face additional barriers in politics, as there are fewer resources and a double disadvantage of gender-based and race-based discrimination (Prestage, 1977). The intersectionality of gender and race play a major role in politics today, as white men have historically controlled the domain (Robinson, 2019). How have women of color earned their seat at the table? Using a transnational feminist lens, Ratna (2018) addresses the transient boundaries of space,

identity, belonging, and knowledge production to emphasize the critical role of women of color and their experiences—voices of the voiceless.

The rise of women of color in politics embodies empowerment and suggests that change is happening. However, Shames (2015) found that the overwhelmingly negative perceptions of politics have systematically kept women of color away. The data gathered from this study suggests women of color lack faith in politics' ability to solve problems and perceive it as a discriminatory space. Women of color have to fight longer and harder, challenging the status quo and paving the way for future leaders. Social media is helping change the narrative about women of color in politics. Made up of women of color and popularly known as “the Squad”, congresswomen Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib and AOC are making headlines for their fearless, unapologetic presence in Congress (North, 2019). AOC posted a picture of her and the other progressive women of color with the caption “Squad” in November after their election. Since then, the four have been both praised and criticized, appealing to some and despised by others (Sullivan, 2019). Nonetheless, these women are using social media as a tool to spread a message of solidarity.

Similar to the framework used in the current study, Fountaine (2017) undertook a thematic analysis of tweets sent by politicians Nikki Kaye and Jacinda Ardern during New Zealand's 2014 general election campaign to explore how young women use Twitter to frame themselves during campaigns. The findings of this study suggest that a “likeability” frame dominated their messaging, characterized by humor, flattery, acknowledgment of others, references to family and friends (and animals), expressions of empathy and sympathy, and low levels of negativity and conflict (Fountaine, 2017).

While the women were effective in their messaging, Fountaine (2017) concludes that likeability is not clearly associated with more votes. Ultimately, a woman's long-term electoral viability will depend on framing choices and the social context in which the frames are created and shared. Gender and its intersecting identities play a role in how the frames are interpreted, an aspect of self-framing that is often glossed over.

Method

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the frames used by AOC via social media in order to explain the successful campaign that led to her election.

Additionally, the practices she followed were examined, contributing to her popularity in the media. In order to conduct this investigation, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What strategies does AOC use to frame her messages on Twitter?

RQ2: What strategies does AOC use to frame her messages on Instagram?

Methodology

As previously explained, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) present a technique that outlines the ways in which frames are created, including the following:

- Metaphor: to frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else
- Stories: to frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way
- Tradition: cultural mores that imbue significance in the mundane, closely tied with artifacts

- Slogan, jargon, catchphrase: to frame an object with a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relatable
- Artifact: objects with intrinsic symbolic value—a visual/cultural phenomenon that holds more meaning than the object itself
- Contrast: to describe an object in terms of what it is not
- Spin: to present a concept in such a way as to convey a value judgement (positive or negative) that might not be immediately apparent; to create an inherent bias by definition

Using the technique presented by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), this study used a deductive approach, relying on predetermined framing categories to analyze posts. As previously mentioned, the two platforms used in this study were Twitter and Instagram—both used by AOC regularly. The scope of this study was narrowed to a six-month period—three months before her election (August 6, 2018-November 6, 2018) and three months after her election (November 7, 2018-February 6, 2019). Posts were gathered from her Twitter and Instagram accounts within those dates—amounting to 1,057 posts (999 Tweets/Retweets and 58 Instagram posts).

Sample & Procedure

In order to view a manageable, representative sample of the total number of Tweets and Instagram posts, a sample size of 100 Twitter posts and 20 Instagram posts were randomly selected for this study—50 tweets pre-election/50 post-election and 10 Instagram posts pre-election/10 post-election. Posts were gathered from AOC's accounts and coded using the frames outlined by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996). The coding process

included selecting the sample at random, reviewing the posts, and coding them according to the frames proposed (metaphor, stories, tradition, slogan, artifact, contrast and spin).

Results

Results of the data were presented on a chart to visualize the types of frames created by AOC within the sample size, highlighting which frames she used the most and the least. An analysis of the results explains the ways in which her messages were framed and suggest how that might influence her followers.

Summary

It has been evident that social media plays a major role in modern times, influencing perception and changing the way we interact with politics and politicians. AOC navigates through the world of social media networks to engage with her followers in a particular way. This study sought to understand the frames created through her social media content. Chapter I introduced the topic, artifact, and rationale for the significance of this research. Additionally, the theoretical framework was introduced and explained

Chapter II explores a literature review of previous investigations in regards to framing theory as well as a look at women of color in politics. Chapter III follows with a description of the methodology and an overview of the study itself and explains the coding process

Following the explanation of the method, Chapter IV reports the results of the analysis. Finally, Chapter V discusses the findings, presents limitations of the study and possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter I introduced AOC and outlined the framework for this study. The next chapter expands the discussion of politics, media and frames used by politicians. In addition, I examine young, female leaders and how AOC is perceived and the media attention she has received in the months following her election in November of 2018.

Politics & Media

The evolution of media did not start with a tweet, but it traces back to a different time. At the forefront of it all? Politics. The world of politics quickly adapts to current means of communication, as politicians seek to appeal to the general audience in whatever means possible. Public opinion is not merely determined by an individual's personal agenda, but also by the overall image portrayed by the media. In 1960, the first televised presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John. F Kennedy changed the world of politics forever. Nixon was projected to win the election, as he had served as Vice President under the Eisenhower administration for eight years. His opponent, however, was picture-perfect and portrayed a stronger, more confident image when they went toe-to-toe on a live debate watched by 70 million Americans (National Constitution Center, 2017). The verdict? Image and style over seniority.

In modern times, popularity and public opinion are significantly influenced through online presence. This second phase of media evolution once again changed the game of politics, affecting not only the politicians themselves, but also the American voter. The first time we saw this truly unfold on a large scale was in the historic presidential election of 2008, in which Barack Obama outran fellow Democrat and powerhouse, Hillary Clinton, to ultimately defeat the Republican candidate, John McCain (Birnbaum, 2008). Elected as the first African-American president, the former Illinois Senator ran a successful campaign, gaining momentum through direct contact with citizens, public debates, and media presence in news and interviews. Appealing to a younger voter demographic, the Obama campaign took to new information technologies as a tool to spread his message of hope and change while also raising funds for the campaign itself (Reig, Garcia-Cubells & Femenia-Almerich, 2013). According to Lopez & Taylor (2009), the voter turnout was the highest it had been since the election of 1968, resulting from the most diverse voter turnout in United States history. Spikes in African-American and Latinx voter turnout contributed to this election as well as engagement from a younger-than-usual voter demographic. Obama served as President of the United States for two full terms and continues to be a popular national and global public figure. Former First Lady, Michelle Obama, is also an active public figure, serving as a beacon of leadership and strength through her literary works and public appearances. No doubt, the Obama administration changed the course of history.

Change came quickly. In 2016, the Electoral College voted in favor of Donald J. Trump, making him the 45th President of the United States (The New York Times, 2017). His infamous campaign slogan “Make America Great Again”, or MAGA, is

praised by some and despised by others—there is hardly a middle ground. Vastly contrasting views from the left and the right have caused a great divide in government in the last few decades, causing legislative gridlock (Bernecker, 2016). In what has been one of the most unorthodox presidencies in US history, Trump has been infamously known for his use of social media to stir controversies, scandals, and what he coins as “fake news”—creating a greater divide. Long-time businessman and former reality TV star, Trump has made headlines all over the world with the actions he has taken and the words he has spoken... or tweeted, rather (Bleakley, 2018). With more than 65 million followers on Twitter, Trump’s reach extends beyond the United States and places him at the center of almost every news article (Hollinger, 2018). This circles us back to the current phase of media evolution: the reign of social media—tool or threat?

With great change comes great resistance, in this case. Trump’s far-right agenda generated great combat from the left, as Democrats significantly swept seats in Congress in the midterms following Trump’s election (Rucker, Viser, Viebeck & Stanley-Becker, 2018). In what is noted as the most diverse congressional elections in United States history, there were several ‘firsts’ within this group: first indigenous women, **Deb Haaland** and **Sharice Davids**, first Muslim women, **Ilhan Omar** and **Rashida Tlaib**, first congresswomen from Iowa, **Abby Finkenauer** and **Cindy Axne**, first Hispanic congresswomen from Texas, **Veronica Escobar** and **Sylvia Garcia**, first African-American congresswoman from Massachusetts, **Ayanna Pressley**, first African-American congresswoman from Connecticut, **Jahana Hayes**, first Asian-American member from New Jersey, **Andy Kim**, first African-American congressman from Colorado, **Joe Neguse**, and first openly gay or bisexual members from various states,

Chris Pappas, Angie Craig, Katie Hill, Sharice Davids and Kyrsten Sinema (Timm, 2019).

Politics & Frames

What kind of frames are used by politicians? Rathje (2017) explains the ways in which messages are framed by both Republicans and Democrats, appealing to their respective audience. According to Rathie (2017), those who affiliate with the Republican party tend to value in-group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity. The messages framed by Republican politicians tend to hone in on these values in order to maintain a more conservative agenda. Democrats, however, are more likely to value fairness, reciprocity and doing no harm in determining what is moral (Rathie, 2017). While framing messages to align with the dominant values of a particular party is effective, Rathie (2017) states that it is often more effective to frame arguments in terms of the opponent's values when arguing across party lines—a never-ending game of “he said, she said.”

In 2004, George Lakoff wrote a book titled *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, in which he outlines the ways in which conservatives frame their messages, influencing voters and swaying votes. One of the main insights he provides concludes that negating a frame inversely strengthens the frame. As in the 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, there were several frames posed by both politicians in regards to one another. Trump often referred to Clinton as “Crooked Hillary” while Clinton referred to her opponent as “Dumb Trump”—nicknames that were both particularly popular on social media (Hoffmann, 2018). The focus was to create negative frames about each other rather than attempting to address or deny the allegations made about

them, avoiding the elephants at all costs. In this example, the focus of the frames was placed on their opponents, not themselves.

Frames can be derived from nicknames to speeches, especially at an executive level. Kuypers, Cooper and Althouse (2008) conducted a frame analysis of President George W. Bush's speech to the United Nations in November of 2001 regarding the attack on 9/11. Bush argued that the War on Terror would be an international effort, framing the following themes in the speech: (1) civilization versus barbarism, (2) good versus evil, (3) the nature of the enemy as evil, implacable, and murderous, (4) the nature of the war as both domestic and global, and enduring, and (5) the war as being dissimilar to prior wars (Kuypers, Cooper & Althouse, 2008). However, different themes were interpreted by the media, themes that cast a negative light on the messages brought by the Bush administration. The depictions of the speech as presented by the media created themes of an unnecessary war, comparing it to either World War II or Vietnam. Additionally, there was an emphasis on lack of patience on behalf of the American public (Kuypers, Cooper & Althouse, 2018). While Bush attempted to create a sense of solidarity, the media was actively framing themes in such a way that opposed, misrepresented, and/or ignored the President's focus.

As previously mentioned, gender can influence the frames surrounded by politicians. Ross (2014) used framing theory and Touchman's (1978) theory of symbolic annihilation to explore the ways in which two active female politicians, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, were represented in news coverage. Using coding, image analysis, and critical discourse, Ross (2014) uncovered gendered language and imaging in news coverage over female politicians. The four stereotypes coded were the Mother, the Pet,

the Iron Maiden, and the Sex Object. Results concluded that the stereotype of the Mother was predominantly used by the media, framing the politicians vastly different than male politicians. According to Carlin and Winfrey (2009), the stereotype of the Mother has three manifestations: 1) women are seen as more caring and nurturing, 2) maternal responsibilities may reflect a female political candidate as less qualified, and 3) a woman candidate may be seen as scolding or shrewish. Ross (2014) concludes that the language used by the media to depict female politicians feed existing stereotypes in consumer consciousness, affecting public opinion.

Young Women in Power

As previously mentioned, AOC made history by becoming the youngest woman elected in the House of Representatives. Around the world, other young women are also breaking barriers and making headlines. In 2015, Mhairi Black became the youngest Scottish National Party (SNP) Member of Parliament for Paisley and Renfrewshire South at only 20 years old (“Mhairi Black”, n.d.). Black studied politics and public policy at the University of Glasgow and had not even finished her undergraduate degree when the election began. Nonetheless, Black defeated her opponent, Douglas Alexander, and graduated with honors (“Outstanding Women of Scotland”, n.d.). Black was re-elected in 2017 and continues to be an influential figure for the people she represents. Similar to AOC, Black is quite active on Twitter, posting almost daily to a following of over 165,000. In fact, her official website, MhairiBlack.scot, states her latest up-to-date news are more easily accessible through her Twitter feed (“Mhairi Black MP”, n.d.). While being elected as a MP at a young age quite the accomplishment, Black states her age is the least interesting thing about her, urging people to see past her age (Williams, 2015).

At age 24, Typhanie Degois became the youngest member of France's parliament in 2017 (Panetta, 2019). The recent law school graduate defeated her opponent, Dominique Dord with 50.67% of the vote ("2017 Legislative Results...", n.d.). Similar to AOC's victory over Crowley, Degois's victory over Dord was unexpected, as Dord was very well established in his constituency, having been elected for twenty years. Degois used social media platforms to mobilize voters and encourage turnout and support, an effective strategy that led to her election ("2017 Legislative Results...", n.d.).

Spain's parliament gained its youngest member in 2015 (Panetta, 2019). Of Egyptian-Spanish descent, Nagua Alba was not only the youngest member of parliament at 25 years old, but also the first member of Arab descent. Alba's victory did not come easy, however. In an interview with El Pais, Alba mentions being young and being female puts her in a position where she constantly has to prove she's enough (Sanchez-Hidalgo, 2018). At a debate during the race, her opponent made the comment that he was old enough to be her father, undermining her ability to be a member in parliament (Sanchez-Hidalgo, 2018). When it comes to social media, Alba states the importance of transparency and allowing the people she represents to see who she truly is, favoring Instagram because she feels it gives off a greater sense of intimacy (Sanchez-Hidalgo, 2018).

There are several similarities between Black, Degois, Alba and AOC. All four politicians made their way in a historically male-dominated sphere, and at a young age, too! The use of social media was vital in their elections, connecting with voters and changing the stereotype of what a "politician" is supposed to look like.

Public Opinion on AOC

The constituents of New York's District 14 voted in favor of AOC, but what does the rest of America think about the young congresswoman? The answer to this question differs depending on the news outlet. In an interview with *The New Yorker* (2019), AOC states that she is considered to be either "America's number one villain" or "the New Hope", referring to the differing ways in which she is depicted by news media (Remnick, 2019). Fox News, a notably conservative news outlet, has mentioned AOC in their news segments more often than any of the Democratic 2020 presidential candidates (Beauchamp, 2019). AOC is subject to criticism for almost every aspect of her life—her intellect, makeup, clothes, apartment building, boyfriend, childhood, relatives, and even her dance routine from her days at Boston University (Remnick, 2019). Most recently, she was placed in a video alongside dictators Kim Jong Un and Fidel Castro, depicting her as an enemy of freedom (Gaydos, 2019). The video was played by minor league baseball team, the Fresno Grizzlies, during a Memorial Day tribute. The proclaimed "oversight" on behalf of an employee cost the Grizzlies a sponsorship from Sun-Maid, even after an official apology was extended to AOC (Gaydos, 2019). Regardless of the intentionality behind the video, AOC states that such content poses a threat to her life, as death threats come flooding in (Gaydos, 2019).

All the negative media portrayals from conservative news outlets have affected her poll numbers, as 74% of Republicans view her as unfavorable compared to 2% that view her as favorable, leaving only 23% that do not know enough about her. (Quinnipiac University Poll, 2019). Among Democrats, however, 47% view her as favorable and 7% unfavorable, while 44% haven't heard enough about her to make an opinion (Quinnipiac

University Poll, 2019). The quick rise to fame and the overwhelming media coverage of AOC did not sit well with other Democratic leaders, as one argues AOC poses a threat to the House majority and the presidency if all they see is news coverage of her (Haverluck, 2019).

Despite negative portrayals by conservative news media and fear from other Democratic leaders, AOC is also viewed as a fearless leader and role model for young voters (Mickle, 2019). Her use of social media has tapped into an emerging political force—Millennials and Gen Z (Mickle, 2019). Her posts, traditionally laced with emojis, slang, and casual jabs at her rivals, are popular among a younger voter demographic, creating a sense of engagement rather than a stiff, “business as usual”-type presence. It is unclear if AOC’s political career has only begun or if it will be cut short, but her presence in the limelight is not over.

Summary

Chapter II briefly explored the waves of the media, using examples from the presidential race between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, to the latest race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Additionally, a look at political frames discussed how media depicts politicians and the consequences it brings about. Surveying the careers and campaigns of other young female politicians provides a context for understanding AOC’s rise to power. Lastly, an overview of public opinion regarding AOC helped understand the general consensus regarding her presence in the media.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

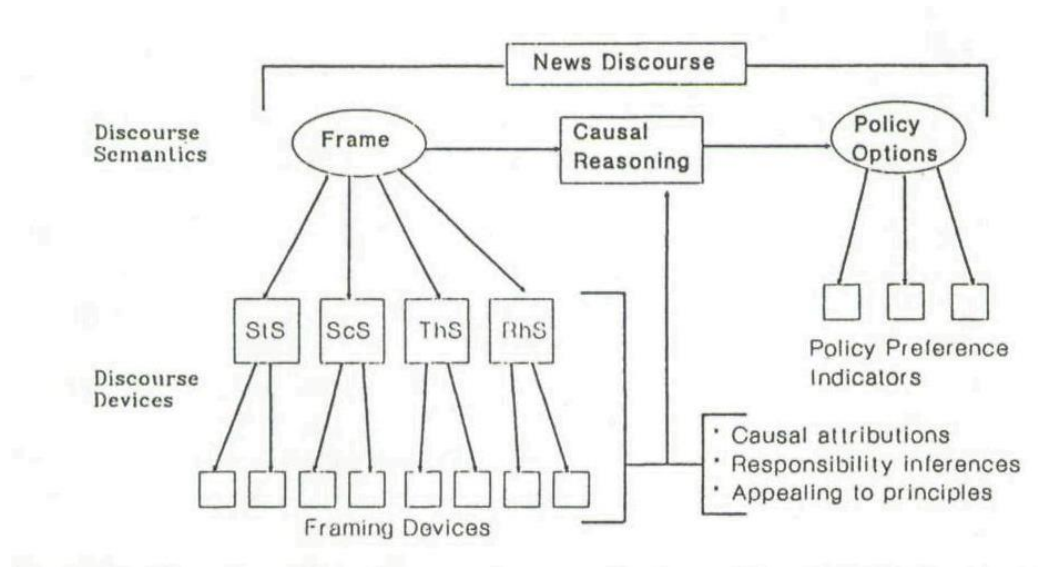
The previous chapter explored the evolution of media in politics and examined the ways in which frames are used in the sphere of politics. Additionally, a mention of other young politicians and their use of social media lead into public opinion on AOC. Chapter III dives into previous use of framing theory analysis and defines the specific frames used in this study. Additionally, an overview of the sampling and coding process help explain the method used.

Framing Theory

As explained in Chapter I, Goffman (1974) coined the term “frame analysis,” which involves the application of certain cognitive procedures onto given situations. Pan and Kosicki (1993) explain how both politicians and news media seek to frame public policy issues. In their study, news discourse was conceived as A socio-cognitive process and a framing analysis was used to conceptualize news texts into four different structures: 1) syntactic, 2) script, 3) thematic, and 4) rhetorical. Syntactical structures refer to the arrangement of words and phrases, implying validity by quoting experts, citing data, quoting official sources, and marginalizing points of views by relating a quote to a social deviant. Script structures refer to the element of story, establishing a sequence of events that the viewer internalizes. Thematic structures refer to stories that include a focus on one issue or topic from which a theme is derived from the perspective of the

journalist or quotations from the observer. Rhetorical structure refers to the specific style used by the journalist in order to present the information, usually to invoke images, increase salience, and increase vividness of the report. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. News Discourse Structure



An illustration of news discourse structure. Notations: StS - Syntactic structure; ScS - Script structure; ThS - Thematic structure; RhS - Rhetorical structure.

**Adapted from Pan and Kosicki (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 63)*

Operational Defining Frames

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) presented seven frames in their frame analysis technique. This study used the seven frames outlined by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) as a skeleton, compartmentalizing the data into pre-determined categories (or frames) as interpreted by the researcher. Using pre-determined frames automatically placed parameters, limiting the types of frames identified in the data as per the researcher. Given the inevitable possibility of subjective interpretation, the data was coded using a guide that further explores the defining concepts of each frame. In order to conduct a more objective approach to this research, questions were posed to guide the coding process.

Although not entirely eliminating subjectivity, defining the frames in this fashion provides trace of the process.

Metaphor. Making a comparison between two things. Are messages and/or images presented to contrast or emphasize a point?

Stories. Personal stories or the sharing of others' stories. Are personal narratives included in the messages and images presented? Are the stories of others used to prove a point or make the message stronger or more memorable?

Tradition. Are cultural artifacts or references used to validate an argument or make a statement stronger?

Slogan, jargon, catchphrase. The strategic use of words to create a catchy message that is easy to remember. Is the use of speech coding included in formulating the message? Is there a repetition of words or phrases included in the message?

Artifact. The use of an object to symbolize meaning. Are messages embedded in the presentation of objects visually? Is there cultural meaning in the objects visualized?

Contrast. Comparing to emphasize differences. Are certain views or opinions compared to others as a way to contradict?

Spin. Presenting a message or image in a way that might not be immediately apparent. Is the message or image brought forth in a light different than that originally established? Is there an inherent bias established by the message presented?

Method

A representative sample of 100 tweets and 20 Instagram posts were randomly selected and coded in this study. The posts were gathered from AOC's personal Twitter and Instagram accounts—username @AOC on Twitter and @ocasio2018 on Instagram.

The time frame used in this study focused on the critical months leading up to her election and the actual start of her role as Congresswoman. In the three months leading up to her election (August 6, 2018 through November 6, 2018), AOC tweeted roughly 313 tweets/retweets, not including her replies to other users or accounts. The tweets were copied from her Twitter account and organized on an Excel spreadsheet. The tweets were numbered 1-313 in the order they were posted, 1 being the earliest post and 313 being the latest post. Using a randomization tool on Excel, 50 tweets were selected from the data set and used for the study. Similarly, 50 tweets from the three months after her election (November 7, 2018 through February 6, 2019) were gathered at random from a total of roughly 686 tweets. In total, 100 tweets were randomly selected for analysis out of the 999 tweets/retweets posted three months before and three months after her election.

Mirroring the random sampling method used to gather the tweets, AOC's Instagram posts were also gathered from her account and organized chronologically. Within the first time frame (August 6, 2018 through November 6, 2018), AOC posted 25 images on the social media platform. Using the same strategy as with the tweets, posts were numbered 1-25 and a random sample size of 10 posts were selected. Within the second time frame (November 7, 2018 through February 6, 2018), another 10 posts were selected at random from a pool of 33 posts. In total, 20 Instagram posts were selected for this study out of the 58 posts posted within the time span of six months.

Coding

Given the use of pre-determined frames, a deductive approach was used to code the tweets and Instagram posts. The process of coding was conducted differently for tweets and Instagram posts, given the type of content provided for each one. Tweets and

Instagram posts can both contain text and images, however, as previously explained, Instagram is geared more towards images than text and Twitter, vice versa. Coding was conducted and presented separately in order to answer both the research questions posed in this study.

Coding: Twitter

The sample set of tweets gathered from AOC's Twitter account were reviewed several times. Round one consisted of a close reading of the sample so as to get acclimated to the data set. The second round, another close reading of the data set was conducted while paying particular attention to key words, phrases, and structure as well as use of emojis, gifs, or images. The themes posed by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) were used to categorize the tweets in regards to the frames used. Each tweet was analyzed and up to two codes were given to tweets that used more than one frame.

Coding: Instagram

There has been an increasing shift towards social media platforms with visual communication rather than mere text, increasing persuasive political messages on social media (Gupta, 2013). Gabe and Bucy (2009) conducted research on the visual framing of television coverage of the 1992 through 2004 presidential campaigns. Similar to this study, Gabe and Bucy (2009) used pre-determined frames to analyze media coverage. For this study, each Instagram post was coded determined by the image's content, which included examining the foreground, background, and the accompanying caption. As with tweets, Instagram posts were reviewed before being categorized.

Summary

Chapter III focused on the methodology, including an example of frame theory in a previous study. Following the reference to a previous study, the pre-determined frames that were used to categorize the tweets and Instagram posts were defined. Additionally, an explanation of the method was included along with details about gathering the sample and conducting the coding and visual coding. Chapter IV will proceed with the results of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies AOC used to frame her messages on social media—Twitter and Instagram specifically. Chapter III outlined the way in which the tweets and Instagram posts were gathered and coded. This chapter presents the findings of the study.

Twitter Results

The first research question posed in this study seeks to understand the strategies used by AOC on Twitter. As previously stated, a sample of 100 tweets were gathered from AOC's personal Twitter account and coded using pre-determined frames. As outlined in Chapter III, the study used the technique presented by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) which included the following frames: 1) metaphors, 2) stories, 3) tradition, 4) slogan, jargon, catchphrase, 5) artifacts, 6) contrast, and 7) spin.

The first 50 tweets were gathered from August 6, 2018 through November 6, 2018—three months prior to her election. Within that time frame, the predominant frames used by AOC were contrast and spin. Contrast was frequently used to compare how things are and how things could be, while spin was used as a way to present an idea from the perspective of AOC herself. Of the 50 tweets, seven were coded as using two frames and two were coded as using none of the pre-determined frames. Table 1 displays the results of the study pertaining to the three months prior to her election.

Table 1

Frequency Table for Twitter Frames from August 2018-November 2018

Frame	Frequency
Metaphors	1
Stories	7
Tradition	2
Slogans, Jargon, Catchphrases	5
Artifacts	4
Contrast	10
Spin	12
Contrast & Spin	2
Stories & Spin	1
Stories & Artifact	1
S/J/C & Tradition	1
S/J/C & Spin	1
Metaphors & Stories	1
N/A	2
(N = 50)	

The second set of tweets were gathered from November 7, 2018 through February 6, 2019—three months after her election. The results were similar to that of the tweets three months prior. Contrast and stories were the most frequently used frames and three

used more than one frame. The focus of the contrast in this case pertained to comparing who she is to how she was being portrayed by the media. The element of story was used to provide AOC's personal experiences as a way to provide context. Table 2 displays the frequency of each of the frame(s).

Table 2

Frequency Table for Twitter Frames from November 2018-February 2019

Frame	Frequency
Metaphors	1
Stories	9
Tradition	0
Slogans, Jargon, Catchphrases	8
Artifacts	1
Contrast	16
Spin	7
Contrast & Spin	5
Stories & Tradition	1
Stories & Contrast	1
N/A	1
(N = 50)	

From the entire sample size of 100, the most frequently used frame was contrast, used by AOC in more than 25% of the tweets from the total sample size. Spin, stories,

and slogan/jargon/catchphrase were also used frequently, while metaphors and tradition were used the least. A considerable number of tweets used more than one frame, amounting to 14% of the sample size. Figure 2 displays the results of the total sample size in percentages.

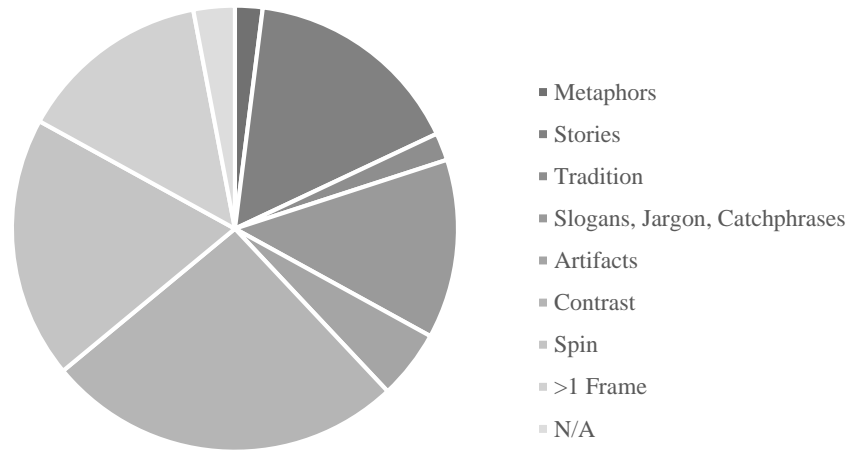


Figure 2. An illustration of the frequency of frames on Twitter from the entire sample size (N=100).

Instagram Results

The second research question posed in this study sought to understand the strategies used by AOC on Instagram. Mirroring the technique used to gather and code tweets, Instagram posts were gathered from AOC's personal account and frames were derived from the data. The same time frame was used to gather the sample, coding posts three months prior to her election and three months post her election. The sample size was smaller for Instagram, given the smaller amount of total posts within that time frame.

Within the first time frame, 10 posts were gathered and coded. The results indicated that there was not one predominant frame, as three frames (metaphors, stories,

spin) were used the most frequently. On the contrary, tradition, artifacts, and contrast were not indicated as being used in the posts. Table 3 displays the results of the data set.

Table 3

Frequency Table for Instagram Frames from August 2018-November 2018

Frame	Frequency
Metaphors	2
Stories	2
Tradition	0
Slogans, Jargon, Catchphrases	1
Artifacts	0
Contrast	0
Spin	2
Contrast & Spin	1
Spin & S/J/C	1
N/A	1

(N = 10)

The posts gathered three months after her election displayed slightly different results than that from three months before her election. The most frequently used frame was slogan/jargon/catchphrase and 50% of the data set used more than one frame. Table 4 displays the results of the second set.

Table 4

Frequency Table for Instagram Frames from November 2018-February 2019

Frame	Frequency
Metaphors	0
Stories	0
Tradition	1
Slogans, Jargon, Catchphrases	2
Artifacts	1
Contrast	0
Spin	1
Tradition & Spin	1
Contrast & S/J/C	1
S/J/C & Artifacts	1
Artifacts & Stories	2
(N = 10)	

From the total sample size of 20 Instagram posts, the most frequently used frames were slogan/jargon/catchphrase and spin—both used three times individually. Most of the posts, however, used more than one frame. Various combinations of frames were used in the sample both before and after her election. Figure 3 displays the results of the total sample set.

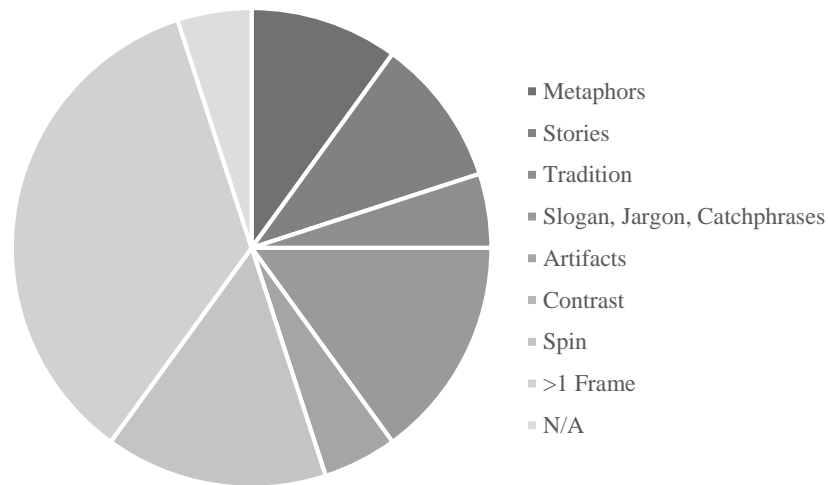


Figure 3. An illustration of the frequency of frames on Instagram from the entire sample size (N=20).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategies used by AOC on Twitter and Instagram to frame her message. The parameters of this study zoned in on the critical months leading and following her election. This chapter displayed the results of the study, individually breaking down the tweets and Instagram posts by time frame and then combining the two data sets, respectively. The results indicated that AOC predominately used contrast as a way to frame her message on Twitter and a combination of frames to convey her messages on Instagram.

While the data was quantified in Chapter IV, Chapter V discusses the findings and analyzes the use of frames in each of the social media platformed used in this study. Taking a deeper look at her use of frames explains the specific and strategic use of frames while taking into account the time frames and intended use of each social media platform.

Following the discussion, limitations of the study are presented and possibilities for future research are explored.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Social media has changed the way people communicate. The purpose of this study was to explore how politics and social media intertwine, specifically looking at the strategies used by AOC—a young, modern-day politician. Using pre-determined frames to categorize the content of her tweets and Instagram posts, this study sought to explore the types of messages sent by the young politician in order to help explain the hype surrounding her role as a Congresswoman in today's political climate.

In order to explain the implications of the messages produced by AOC on specific social media platforms, the following questions were posed for this study:

RQ1: What strategies does AOC use to frame her messages on Twitter?

RQ2: What strategies does AOC use to frame her messages on Instagram?

As explained in previous chapters, samples of her posts were gathered from her Twitter and Instagram accounts—specifically from the three months before and three months after her election in November 2018. The same pre-determined frames, as per Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), were used to code her messages on both Twitter and Instagram. The mixed-methods approach to this study used elements of both a qualitative and quantitative study. While the results were quantified in Chapter IV, the purpose of this study is to explore and explain the strategic use of frames in the messages presented on social media platforms.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) define concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in regards to the trustworthiness. Techniques of prolonged engagement and persistent observations were used in this study, as it was necessary to gain a general census of AOC's Twitter and Instagram feed inside and outside the parameters of this study. In order to capture different dimensions of the same concept, triangulation was used by gathering data from more than one social media platform. Triangulation of sources was a technique used in this study to produce understanding of the strategies used by AOC on multiple social media platforms within different points of time.

Analysis of Findings

Twitter

A total sample size of 100 tweets was gathered from AOC's Twitter account. The first half of the sample size was gathered from the three months prior to the election, which helped evaluate the strategies used by AOC to address the constituents of New York District 14 as well as American voters in general as they prepared to make a decision on election day. The results showed that the predominant frames used by AOC in the months leading up to the election were **contrast** and **spin**—a contrast frame was used in 11 tweets while the element of spin was used in 15 tweets.

As defined by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), **contrast** is used to make a comparison in order to emphasize differences. In the months leading up to the election, AOC was using Twitter to explain the differences between how current systems are and how they could be. For example, current healthcare systems were contrasted to new policy proposals, such as Medicare for All. Additionally, AOC presented great contrast between

the type of people that typically run for office versus the type of people that should run for office, relaying the message that politicians do not have to look, sound, or act a certain way. To emphasize her point, AOC mentions the disproportion of women in politics and argues that neither occupation, socio-economic status, nor outward appearance can “disqualify” people from advocating for human rights. See examples from the sample below.

@AOC on August 30, 2018:

Why is the GOP so corny? You can front a band and run for office. You can pierce your nose, be a bartender, a teacher, a stay at home parent; wear a dress or rip your jeans - none of this disqualifies you from advancing the fight for healthcare, education, housing, and justice.
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018a)

More imperfect people need to run for office. We need to eliminate the idea of “perfect” candidates - there’s no such thing. What matters are your values and the platform you’re fighting for. When the opposition goes into personal nonsense, it’s because they’re empty handed.

@AOC on September 12, 2018:

They hate, we organize. Hitting turf w/ @Biaggi4NY this AM ahead of tomorrow’s primary. The Bronx has almost NO female elected officials. Can you believe that? Biaggi doesn’t take ANY money from luxury real estate lobbyists driving up rents. She gets it. NYC: Vote tomorrow!
(Ocasio- Cortez, 2018b)

@AOC on November 3, 2018:

What makes America great isn’t the notion that a man born into wealth can become President. It’s that a child born into poverty could
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018c)

The other predominant frame was **spin**, which Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) describe as the strategic way of presenting an issue with an inherent bias. AOC presented several issues with the intent of casting a negative or positive light depending on her personal stance on the matter. For example, questioning the financial funds for ICE detention centers challenges the justification of their establishment and further objects their

purpose. With the intent to make a point about the intersectionality of race and class, AOC also makes mention of other issues, such as gentrification and mass incarceration.

Slightly different results were gathered from the sample size within the three-month period after her election. Contrast was still predominantly used by AOC, but the focus was placed on contrasting who she is versus how she was being depicted by the far-right media, Fox News specifically. AOC ruffled a lot of feathers when she got elected, which brought about opposition from the GOP, as per the content of her tweets. Focused on defending against allegations of inadequacy, AOC redirected negative messages by contrasting actions of the GOP—“*I know what you are but what am I?*”. See examples from the sample below:

@AOC on November 20, 2018:

Now that's *TWO* fallen GOP Vice Pres candidates going after a freshman Congresswoman that's not even sworn in yet. Isn't it a little early to be bringing out the big guns? Especially when they look like the FWD:RE:FWD:WATCH THIS grandpa emails from the '08 election they lost
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018d)

@AOC on January 9, 2019:

GOP have been losing their mind + frothing at the mouth all week, so this was just a matter of time. There is also a Daily Mail reporter (Ruth Styles) going to my boyfriend's relative's homes+offering them cash for “stories.” Women in leadership face more scrutiny. Period.
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018e)

@AOC on January 16, 2019:

I could've sat there quietly as the far right tore me to shreds (they were guaranteed to do so the moment a woman like me won my primary), or I could fight back+not let them. I chose to define myself instead of allowing them to take that away from me. And that's why they're mad.
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018f).

The other frequently used strategy included embedding **stories** within the posts to emphasize authenticity. According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), stories are used to make messages stronger and/or more memorable. Even before her election, AOC was using

personal stories to share her perspective. After she was elected, her personal narratives were used to emphasize how a “normal” person could run for office and win. Stories of her own upbringing and the stories of her constituents helped create a parallel, establishing a greater connection with the people she represents. See examples from the sample below:

@AOC on November 16, 2018:

The reason journos from @FoxNews to @dcexaminer can't help but obsess about my clothes, rent, or mischaracterize respectful convos as “fights” is bc as I've said, women like me aren't supposed to run for office - or win. & that's exactly why the BX and Queens sent me here.

(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018g)

@AOC on December 1, 2018:

In my on-boarding to Congress, I get to pick my insurance plan. As a waitress, I had to pay more than TWICE what I'd pay as a member of Congress. It's frustrating that Congressmembers would deny other people affordability that they themselves enjoy. Time for #MedicareForAll.

(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018h)

@AOC on December 29, 2018:

My mamá taught me how to deal with bullies. When I moved to a new town at a young age, I stuck out for all sorts of reasons: I looked different, I spoke Spanish, my clothes weren't as nice. Bullies don't bother me, but this parent's account touched my heart. People are watching.

(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018i)

Among the frequent use of contrast, spin, and stories as strategies to frame messages, the results of this study also indicated that the use of slogan/jargon/catchphrase was also common within the context of her tweets. Of the total sample size, 15% included some form of slogan, jargon, or catchphrase. Adhering to Twitter culture by using hashtags, emojis, and slang appeals to general audience of young followers and voters (Gonzales-Ramirez, 2019). Below are some examples from the sample:

@AOC on August 13, 2018:

“Had to talk to God, dropped down, and prayed for this/ To my surprise, He replied, said, "You made for this"/ That's when they came for me on Twitter with the backlash/ "Cardi B Is So Problematic" is the hashtag/ I can't believe they wanna see me lose that bad” - @iamcardib
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018j)

@AOC on September 16, 2018:

Thank you Fox News for making all the campaign graphics I never knew I needed



(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018k)

Instagram

A total sample size of 20 Instagram posts were gathered from AOC’s personal Instagram account, 10 before her election and 10 after her election. Within the three months prior to her election, the results from the sample size indicated that she was not using one predominant frame specifically, as three different frames were used the same amount of times—**metaphors**, **stories**, and **spin**. Leading up to her election, AOC was framing messages in various ways in order to create an image that people could understand and relate to. The images she posted mostly pertained to how she was connecting with her community, posing with community members at various events. By posting pictures of herself at community events, AOC framed an image of a potential leader that is proud to be from the Bronx and connects with the people she would represent. Figures 4, 5, and 6 illustrate examples from the sample:

Figure 4. AOC with Community Members



Photograph of AOC posing for a photograph with community members. Photograph posed on August 28, 2018. Retrieved from Instagram [@ocasio2018]. Caption: The Bronx is beautiful 🌟 And recognizing our community's worth is a radical act. (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018l)

Figure 5. AOC high-five with Community Member



Photograph of AOC high-fiving a young community member. Photograph posted on September 25, 2018. Retrieved from Instagram [@ocasio2018]. Caption: We're back out there hitting the streets and connecting with the community for November - come swing by our Queens & Bronx offices to pitch in! (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018m)

Figure 6. AOC at Community Event



Photograph of AOC helping young children with arts-and-crafts at a community event. Photograph posted on November 1, 2018. Retrieved from Instagram [@ocasio2018].

Caption: Don't boo 🙅, vote 🗳️! Happy Halloween everyone!

Special thanks to all the NY-14 families who came out to celebrate our first-ever community Halloween party. As a Parkchester resident, I've always seen children trick-or-treating at local businesses year after year, since sometimes its hard to trick or treat in apartment buildings. I wanted to create a place for them to cap off their travels, and that's where we came up with the idea for our first-ever neighborhood Halloween party!

It was a smashing success, all thanks to local community organizations like @lovingthebronx who came together and brought games + activities for children to enjoy. It was great, we made a lot of pumpkins and candy apples, and reminded everyone to VOTE this Tuesday to boot!

*📷: @coreytorpiephotography.
(Ocasio-Cortez, 2018n)*

The results from the sample size following her election concluded that AOC predominantly used a combination of frames in her posts. After winning the election, the focus was to document her journey as a newly-elected member of Congress. Taking her followers with her on this new journey, AOC made posts in reference to her new position, often using slogans/jargons/catchphrases to showcase her understanding of modern times and contemporary trends. Given the demographic of her followers and

social media culture in general, AOC's posts contributed to the young, hip politician image encompassed by her use of diction and reference to popular culture. Below are Figures 7, 8 and 9—examples from the sample:

Figure 7. AOC with Congresswomen



Photograph of AOC alongside other newly-elected congresswomen. Photograph posted on November 12, 2018. Retrieved from Instagram [@ocasio2018]. Caption: Squad cc @ilhanmn @ayannapressley @rashidatlai. (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018o)

Figure 8. Article of AOC on CNN



Photograph of a CNN article featuring AOC. Photograph posted on November 17, 2018. Retrieved from Instagram. [@ocasio2018]. Caption: Progress > polite society. This week our good trouble with [@sunrisemvmt](#) got us from ZERO to EIGHT Democrats signed onto the Select Committee resolution for a Green New Deal.

I got a lot of heat when I joined these amazing activists on Tuesday. “Go protest Republicans,” we were told. “You’re being disruptive and unhelpful,” we were admonished. But the thing about protesting Republicans is that none of them listen. We learned that w/ the Kavanaugh fight and so many before that. Democrats, on the other hand, DO listen. So when everyday people show up in numbers and ask for change with commitment and consistency, we can get somewhere. And we are.


Today I’m thankful for gutsy leaders like [@reprokhanna](#) (CA), [@repjohnlewis](#) (GA), [@repblumenauer](#) (OR), sisters [@deb4congressnm](#) (NM) & [@rashidatlaib](#) (MI), NY fam [@repmaloney](#) & Rep. Serrano for signing on. Now call your local Dem Rep and let’s get a win in before we’re even sworn in.  (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018p)

Figure 9. AOC alongside CPD Member



Photograph of AOC walking alongside member of CPD Action. Photograph posted on February 6, 2019. Retrieved from Instagram [@ocasio2018]. Caption: Walking into #SOTU like...w/ @cpdaction (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019q)

Limitations & Future Research

Limitations arise from the parameters placed on this study. The time frames used in this study only looked at the three months prior and post AOC's election. The type of messages spread during that time period were very specific, and may not be all-encompassing of her entire social media content. The study can vouch for a six-month period, but can not reflect an entire platform. Additionally, the pre-determined frames placed a limit on the categories available for coding. This type of study can be furthered by gathering codes without pre-dispositioned boundaries. Additionally, this type of research can be reproduced to evaluate other politicians or public figures and their use of virtual spaces and identities

Conclusion

The evolution of social media has propelled the speed at which messages are sent and received, significantly changing aspects of communication. The world of politics adapts to the changing of times, mobilizing campaigns and reaching voters through virtual platforms. Creating an image and establishing an identity is crucial for politicians, as staying relevant is the key to successful campaigns, as previously explained. AOC is a prime example of just how powerful social media is, helping propel her campaign and make her one of the most talked about politicians in recent times.

Twitter and Instagram are popular social media networks, allowing users to share and receive information in the form of quick, concise messages and images with captions. AOC has used both platforms to connect with users as well as to spread certain messages that both spark conversation and cause controversy, as earlier explored. The purpose of this study was to identify the strategies used by AOC on both platforms to reach her

followers. The results indicated that the types of strategies utilized in the framing of her messages varied based on the time frame being evaluated. Prior to her election, the strategy was to create an image to which people could relate, recounting her own experiences as a working-class Latina from the Bronx. Making comparisons between how things are and how they could be created a sense of hope and foreshadowed a better tomorrow. After her election, the content of her social media posts became more combative in fighting back against critics and redirecting negative messages. Additionally, she used her new platform to create a more transparent understanding of a political system foreign to the average American voter. Adhering to the culture of social media, AOC continues to use these virtual platforms to not only publicize her stance on policies, but also establish an identity that reflects competency and “wokeness.” Not everyone is fond of her popularity, but what cannot be denied is her effective use of social media networks.

With the constant evolution of communication, this type of research is important in understanding trends that arise throughout time. Social media networks have changed the way people communicate, shaping the role of the sender and the receiver. Public figures have a lot at stake when it comes to creating and delivering messages, as their public status relies on how they are perceived. Politicians are using social media networks to not only relay their political ideologies, but also to create a connection with the people they represent. The research presented in this study takes a screenshot of the virtual trail created by a public figure in politics. The findings of this study are important because it opens the door to further research that can explore the strategic techniques used by other politicians or public figures to remain in the spotlight (or limelight). This

type of research adds to the discipline of communication by adding a lens through which virtual communication can be analyzed, reflecting the intersection of human connection and technology.

The research presented in this study adds to framing theory by proposing that parameters used as time frames can greatly influence the intended message. This type of research adds to the communication industry as a whole by expanding on the type of content that can be analyzed. Virtual platforms create virtual identities, both of which can be used to examine how communication is exchanged. The findings of this study add to academia by contributing to existing knowledge of political communication while examining context and strategy, specifically related to online presence and the intersectionality of race, age, and gender.

AOC has established a name for herself not only by becoming the youngest woman elected to Congress, but also by becoming one of the most talked-about politicians in recent times due to her social media use. The power of social media is evident, and public figures are quick to notice the impact and importance of virtual presence to sustain relevancy and connectedness with constituents, fans, or followers. Communication is an art that changes constantly, and the future of social media is uncertain, but, in the meantime, #staywoke.

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