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Don't Make My Entertainment Political! Social Media Responses to Narratives of Racial Duty on Competitive Reality Television Series

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ABSTRACT

To what extent should scholars view competitive reality television series as a politically relevant medium for transmitting messages about race, racial identity, and politics in the United States? Cultivation theory argues that the depiction of social issues and groups on television influences how individuals perceive the world around them. Drawing on this theory, I argue that the increasingly diverse casts of American competitive reality series are a heretofore underexplored site for studying the transmission of narratives related to race and racial justice to ostensibly unsuspecting American television audiences. In this article, I analyze viewers' reactions to Black contestants discussing their feelings of racialized social obligations when playing the game – what I refer to as *narratives of racial duty*. Employing a sentiment analysis as well as an inductive thematic content analysis of tweets reacting to four episodes from the 41st season of *Survivor*, I found that audience members overwhelmingly reacted negatively to embedding narratives of racial duty into the series. Specifically, they described the season as too political – the worst in the show's history – and even vowed to stop watching. These findings suggest that broadcasting exemplars who challenge prevailing narratives of racial progress may stoke feelings of racial backlash that could ultimately prompt individuals to tune out of these entertainment programs at best, and stoke racial discord at worst. Thus, I conclude that bringing race to the center of communication research offers scholars in both traditions a new vantage point for studying trends in American racial attitudes.

KEYWORDS

Cultivation theory; entertainment media; race and politics; political communications; racial social norms; political storytelling

Introduction

Following the racial uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd in police custody in May 2020, former Black contestants on the competitive reality television series, *Survivor*, were inspired to band together and make demands for racial justice in the world of media and entertainment. These players began a diversity campaign demanding greater representation and storytelling for historically marginalized groups from CBS Entertainment Group, the network responsible for producing *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and other popular competitive reality television series in the United States. This campaign led to an unprecedented number of Black individuals being casted on seasons 23 and 41 of *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, respectively. In both contexts, these contestants chose to reflect on the political moment

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while playing the game. This decision meant that several intimate scenes where issues of race, racial identity, and justice were being discussed were broadcasted into the homes of millions of people who were ostensibly unsuspecting recipients of political messages about race in America.

Over six decades of research drawing on cultivation theory has demonstrated that exposure to mass communications can influence the way that individuals perceive the world around them (for a review, see Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). This line of research has specifically explored the influence of television viewing on audiences' perceptions of social reality. Most famously, Gerbner (1978) argued that network television dramas provide audiences with "facts" about the world around them. For instance, he and his colleagues found that aggregate patterns of violence-riddled television led heavy viewers of this content to exhibit more violent attitudes and express greater levels of fear about walking alone at night (Gerbner, 1978). Similar relationships have been found with portrayals of drug use on television and beliefs about the prevalence of illicit drug use (Minnebo & Eggermont, 2007), depictions of mental illness and support for opening mental health service offices in one's neighborhood (Diefenbach & West, 2007; Granello & Pauley, 2000), portrayals of lesbian and gay characters and attitudes about homosexuality (Żerebecki et al., 2021), police reality series and endorsement of capital punishment and gun ownership (Holbert et al., 2004), and environment-related programming and expressing concern about the environment (Holbert et al., 2003).

In this article, I use cultivation theory to motivate the study of viewer responses to narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players when appearing on the competitive reality television series, *Survivor*. Narratives of racial duty are Black contestants' claims about the commitment or obligation they feel to positively represent their racial group and make decisions that advance other Black players when competing on these series given their shared marginalization in society-at-large. I argue that these narratives transmit messages challenging the assumptions baked into narratives of racial progress that have become entrenched in American political discourse. These narratives suggest that racial oppression is no longer a major issue in the United States and racial equality has been achieved (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Kraus et al., 2019; Onyeador et al., 2021; Richeson, 2020). Different from the racial progress storyline, narratives of racial duty impart Black Americans' perceptions of the continued relevance of race in America – in particular, their understanding of the obligation to work together in order to combat their *ongoing* marginalization in society.

Recent work has already begun exploring how narratives championed in the competitive reality television series genre can influence individuals' beliefs about social and political issues in the United States. For instance, Kim (2022) found that competitive reality television series expose audiences to exemplars who reinforce prevailing narratives of American meritocracy. She argues that this exposure is politically consequential because it appears to entrench viewers' beliefs about the possibility of upward economic mobility in the United States.

In this study, I extend this work by investigating how audiences react to gendered and gender-neutral racial narratives expressed by racial exemplars appearing on the competitive reality television series, *Survivor*. Using tweets reacting to players' accounts of how their gender, racial, or both identities influence their decision-making in the game, I tracked trends in the overall valence of tweets reacting to these disclosures. I also identified

prominent themes in the content of these reactions. I found that individuals overwhelmingly reacted negatively to embedding narratives of race and racial duty into the competitive reality television genre. They rejected the experiences shared by Black contestants, describing the season as too political – the worst in the show's history – and even vowed to stop watching. These findings suggest that broadcasting exemplars who challenge prevailing narratives of racial progress may stoke feelings of racial backlash that could ultimately prompt individuals to tune out of these entertainment programs in the same way that previous research has shown voters, especially those who exhibit low political interest, are willing to "tune out" of traditional news sources (Prior, 2005).

Given these findings, I conclude that a benefit of bringing race to the center of the study of political communications is that doing so showcases how media platforms can be used to advance scholarship on race, theories of group interests, as well as overall trends in racial attitudes. Indeed, work conducted at the intersection of race and political communications is uniquely positioned to observe how identity can influence political decision making and also detect both subtle and sweeping shifts in the content and tone of racial discourse in the United States. In this way, placing racial politics and political communications research into conversation with one another has the potential to advance scholarship in both traditions.

The Study of Race on Competitive Reality Series

For the most part, political communications scholarship on race and competitive reality series has focused on how production choices reinforce existing racial conventions and constructions. Work in this area has examined how the selection of cast members as well as show topics set up racial provocations and capture moments of racial conflict (Drew, 2011; Pardo, 2013). For instance, Pardo (2013) argues that casting, production, and editing practices on reality series play into, and often exploit racial paranoia to create dramatic narrative hooks. In a discourse analysis of two scenes from the 2009 *Survivor* season, Pardo found that racial conflict primarily emerged indirectly through the use of racial stereotypes such as referring to Black cast members as being "from the ghetto" and lacking adequate command of the English language (e.g., speaking with poor grammar). Bell-Jordan (2008) similarly examined how race is constructed on reality television series. She argues that reality series like *Survivor* promote politics of difference by emphasizing conflict and positioning race as a point of contention among cast members and incorporating dramatic scenarios that reinforce cultural codes and stereotypes.

Work in this area has also explored how reality series producers edit shows in this genre in ways that reinforce existing racial ideologies. For example, Drew (2011) used the 2006 season of *Survivor* to showcase how producers edited the show in a manner that championed a post-racial narrative. Taken together, existing research has repeatedly shown that media elites, especially show producers, have used competitive reality series to champion particular interpretations of race and racial realities in the United States (Hentges, 2008; Squires, 2013).

While this scholarship has convincingly demonstrated how production decisions can perpetuate racial stereotypes and existing racial hierarchies, this research has devoted less attention to exploring how racial group members might exercise individual agency on competitive reality television series and use the genre to challenge racial stereotypes and disrupt mainstream racial discourse. The paucity of research on this topic is surprising

given the chorus of criticism waged at show producers by Black contestants on competitive reality series like *Survivor*. For instance, the first Black woman to compete on *Survivor*, Ramona Gray Amaro, accused show producers of creating an edit that made her look lazy, fueling negative stereotypes about Black people (Deegans, 2020). *Survivor* alumni have also pointed out the distinct barriers that contestants of color, especially Black players, face in winning these competitions in media interviews and on social media (Cesternino & Rector, 2020). These challenges include being voted out first by their cast mates, being subjected to negative stereotyping or microaggressions, and toxic audience culture (Carter, 2019; Deegans, 2020; Dehnart, 2019).

Different from this work which focuses on choices made by show producers, I study how viewers respond to Black players' decision to openly speak about how their gender and racial identities influence their decision making when competing in the game. I study these disclosures in light of media insights reports that consistently rank *Survivor* in the top 10 most in-demand reality series in the world (Parrot Analytics, 2021). These data suggest that competitive reality television series like *Survivor* are heretofore underappreciated sites for transmitting weekly messages about the state of race and racial justice in the United States to millions of unsuspecting recipients of political content. While previous research has explored how these series are used by producers to reinforce prevailing racial narratives in society, less is known about how Black players' decision to use their time on the show to highlight racial bias, racism, and injustice both inside and outside the game impacts people watching at home.

Transmitting Narratives of Racial Duty via Competitive Reality Series

Storytelling is an omnipresent feature of the American political landscape. By storytelling, I mean the narration of events to convey moral lessons. Storytelling often emerges in the political arena because it makes rhetorical arguments more accessible (Ricci, 2016). Without us knowing it, stories connect the dots in our mind. This occurs because humans tend to organize experiences and memories of events in narrative format (Bruner, 1991). In this way, storytelling helps us gain "a reliable fix on the world" by providing a familiar and intuitive framework for making sense of human happenings (Bruner, 1991, p. 14).

Existing research on the emergence of racial narratives in the U.S. context suggests that there are stark differences in storytelling about progress toward racial equality across racial groups. Most notably, work in this area has found that White Americans tend to believe that greater progress has been made toward racial equality than Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006). This perception gap has largely been explained by differences in the reference points used by racial group members to evaluate progress. For instance, Eibach and Ehrlinger (2006) found that individuals tended to formulate their assessment of racial progress in one of two ways: by drawing comparisons to the past or comparing present day conditions via references to the principle of equality. They found that respondents who referenced the past to justify their assessment of racial progress were more likely to perceive that the conditions faced by racial minorities had improved than individuals who used equality as a metric for assessing present conditions.

Previous work suggests that this perception gap has emerged, at least in part, due to a stubborn narrative of racial progress that has become entrenched in American discourse. This narrative suggests that "racial oppression has been overcome" and that the struggle for

racial equality "has largely already been achieved" as evidenced in historical achievements such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the election of the first African American president (Kraus et al., 2019, p. 900). Individuals who subscribe to this narrative have been found to overestimate the racial wealth gap and more generally exhibit faulty beliefs about the intractable nature of inequality in the United States (Kraus et al., 2019; Onyeador et al., 2021; Richeson, 2020).

It is in this context that I study viewer responses to narratives of racial duty. Different from racial progress narratives, narratives of racial duty shine a light on the perception among African Americans that race continues to be a factor in their everyday lives and decision making. Specifically, this narrative conveys Black Americans' interpretation of racialized social obligations that exist and inform their decision to behave in ways that benefit the group as a whole rather than solely thinking of themselves as individuals. From this perspective, narratives of racial duty add complexity to narratives of racial progress by showcasing how certain groups continue to perceive that they must think and behave in ways that benefit their racial group – an understanding that is in tension with the notion that race is no longer a determinative factor in individuals' life experiences and outcomes.

Because the *Survivor* series is in the competitive reality television genre, I expect that narratives of racial duty that emerge in this context will center on Black *Survivor* players' accounts of how race and racial duty influences their gameplay as contestants. Gameplay refers to contestants' choices about with whom they will interact with in the game and how they will respond to challenges and overcome them. When appearing on competitive reality television series, players must navigate at least two levels of gamesmanship. First, they must consider how their individual traits, characteristics, and life experiences may affect how they are perceived by others. Players' traits, characteristics, and life experiences can be either visible or non-visible. For instance, individuals often make snap judgments about other's race or gender based on physical markers like their skin tone or clothing. On the other hand, one's education level or occupation can be more difficult to decipher without an individual disclosing this information.

The second level of gamesmanship involves concerns about how one's actions will be interpreted in the context of their broader group membership. In particular, this involves the way that stereotypes about social groups to which one belongs may affect how one is viewed by others. For example, Black players might worry that negative stereotypes of their group as thieves and criminals will exacerbate negative emotional responses that arise when they inevitably are forced to go back on their word or deceive others in the game.

There have already been two widely discussed seasons where issues of race and racial justice have been prominently featured in the *Survivor* franchise. First, during the 2006 season, show producers initially divided the 20 contestants into tribes by race and ethnicity: Asian-American, African American, Latino, and White. They did so in an attempt to address criticisms that the show lacked diversity. Second, during the 2021 season show producers honored a 2020 CBS diversity pledge that at least half of their reality series' cast members would be Black, Indigenous, or people of color. Then CBS President George Cheeks explained, "the reality tv genre is an area that's especially underrepresented, and needs to be more inclusive across development, casting, production and all phases of storytelling" (Hibberd & Ross, 2020).

This mandate all but guarantees that there will be a critical mass of Black players and a sustained commitment to diverse storytelling on competitive reality series going forward.

Given this reality, communications and race and politics researchers can anticipate having access to exciting new sites to observe mediated racial discourse among Black Americans as well as a range of other historically marginalized groups in society. It is in this context that I use *Survivor* as a site to observe Black Americans' discussions of their racial group and feelings of racialized social obligation and develop theoretical expectations about the impact of broadcasting these displays into millions of households around the world on a weekly basis.

Social psychological research on identity and intergroup relations has repeatedly demonstrated that the perception of shifts in U.S. demographic characteristics stokes White Americans' fear and anger toward minority groups, leads them to express lower support for diversity, and heightens the level of implicit and explicit bias they express toward racial and ethnic minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). For instance, Craig and Richeson (2014b) found that making changes in the racial composition of the United States salient for White Americans led them to perceive their group status was threatened in society and, in turn, caused them to express more conservative attitudes on both racial and nonracial policy issues. In related work, Outten et al. (2012) found that White respondents expressed specific affective responses – anger and fear – toward racial and ethnic groups after being exposed to information suggesting that their racial group is projected to decrease in size in the near future relative to racial and ethnic minorities. Importantly, work in this area suggests these psychological processes emerge among White Americans irrespective of their partisan affiliation (Major et al., 2018).

Drawing on this research, in the current study I expect that racial messages embedded in competitive reality television series should similarly provoke negative affective responses among presumably White audience members. Specifically, I expect that presumably White *Survivor* viewers will exhibit negative affective responses to mediated displays of Black players' efforts to coordinate their gameplay and increase the odds that someone Black ultimately wins the game. This should especially be the case in reaction to diversity and inclusivity policies that decenter Whiteness and make explicit commitments to establishing quotas guaranteeing that show contestants exhibit greater diversity. Given Hancock's (2004) work on the pervasiveness of negative sentiments directed toward Black women – what she refers to as the "politics of disgust"—I expect that there will likely be differences in sentiments that arise in response to woman-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty.

Research Design

To better understand the valence and content of viewer responses to narratives of racial duty presented in competitive reality television series, I analyzed public posts made on the social media platform, Twitter, the week following the broadcast of four episodes from the 41st season of CBS' *Survivor*. For each episode, I tracked the overall sentiment in tweets from public Twitter accounts reacting to players' narratives about the centrality of their social identities in their *Survivor* game play. Specifically, I tracked responses to gendered narratives of racial duty as well as gender-neutral narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players as part of their gameplay. Women-centered narratives of racial duty are Black women's expression of the feelings of social obligations they feel toward other Black women as a result of their intersectional identities as Black women. Gender-neutral narratives of

racial duty, on the other hand, are Black women and men's non-gender specific proclamations about the feelings of racialized social obligations they feel with other Black players when participating on the show.

As part of the analysis, I also tracked viewers' reactions to a White woman in the game deciding to form an all-girl alliance that would have three women-two White, one African American – band together and vote out the men in their group. The decision to work in an all-girl's alliance was described as an attempt to overcome gender bias in the game. Including reactions to this gameplay provided a reference point to contextualize reactions to narratives of racial duty. Appendix A contains a full description of the *Survivor* show format for those unfamiliar with the show's structure.

Social Identity Driven Gameplay Decision Making During Season 41 of CBS' Survivor

The current study includes public tweets reacting to social identity driven gameplay during four episodes of Season 41 of *Survivor*. The first episode titled "Juggling Chainsaws" aired October 6, 2021. In a scene approximately ten minutes into the episode, the audience is shown a scene where Evelyn "Evvie" Jagoda, a woman on the five person Yasé tribe, is debating whether to align herself with either the two men (Voce or Xander) or the two other women (Liana or Tiffany) in her tribe. During the episode, Jagoda is shown strategizing with the two men in her tribe but then producers cut to a one-on-one testimonial where Jagoda admits that she actually plans to work with the other women in her tribe. In the testimonial, she explains that "it happens so much that when a woman is working with men, at the end of the game, the men get all the credit and I'm not letting that happen to me." The scene then cuts to Jagoda walking and talking with the two other women on her tribe, sharing critical information she has learned about the men's gameplay. In the study, I use reactions to this scene as a baseline to compare viewers' reactions to players' discussion of identity and how it shapes their gameplay – in this case, the strategy of forming a coalition based on shared gender identity in order to avoid perceived gender bias in the game.

The second episode included in the study is titled "The Strategist or the Loyalist." This episode aired on October 20, 2021 and featured a woman-centered narrative of racial duty expressed by two Black female contestants: Shantel "Shan" Smith and Liana Wallace. Halfway into the episode, audience members watched Smith and Wallace take a three-hour long trek up a mountain together and bond over their shared identities as Black women. In the opening scene, Smith and Wallace immediately discuss the need to be careful about how they talk about their journey because the assumption that the other players will likely make that they are working together because they are both Black women. During the scene, Smith and Wallace discuss their plan to discretely work together when their tribes merge so that no one will suspect that they are a team. At the end of the scene, Smith even sacrificed her own shot at an advantage in the game so that Wallace would be guaranteed to get it and gain an upper hand after returning to her current tribe.

The third episode in the study, titled "Ready to Play Like a Lion" aired on October 27, 2021. This episode contained a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty. Specifically, the second half of the episode featured a scene with the remaining four Black players in the game-two Black men and two Black women. During the scene, the four Black players discuss their intent to form an alliance based on their shared racial identity. The scene begins with Shantel "Shan" Smith describing her perception that her season's cast is one of

the most diverse and inclusive in the show's history. The screen then cuts to a scene where all four of the Black players, standing on the beach, declare their intent to work together in the game. Gathered in a huddle, Smith explains that she wants the group to make headlines. Wallace then adds "after this year, we need that." Wallace's comments are a reference to the racial uprisings that had recently taken place following the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of then police officer, Derek Chauvin, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Danny McCray then added to the conversation, "let's do it but keep it really low (i.e., discrete)." The scene then cuts to a testimonial by Wallace where she explained that "as people of color, there is a shared experience. You immediately have this bond . . . and the connection and we do want to uplift one another." The scene then cuts to the final Black player in the game, DeShawn Radden, who excitedly added: "oh my gosh, you guys. Let's do this!" Viewers then see a testimonial from Radden. In the confessional-style interview, Radden explained that he had not expected to be able to play with other Black players coming into the game and was happy to be able to do so.

The final episode in the study, titled "Do or Die," aired on December 1, 2021. This episode contained a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty. Toward the end of the episode when the remaining players in the game attended Tribal Council, Radden shared his concerns about being depicted as a player lacking integrity following his decision to vote out his alliance member, Shantel "Shan" Smith, the previous week. As part of the discussion, Jeff Probst, the host of *Survivor*, asked Radden why he was worried about how the other players and people at home might be perceiving his level of integrity. Radden explained that a lot of minority players put in a lot of work to diversify his cast and when he was selected to play the game, he wanted to represent the Black community well. As he spoke, Radden bowed his head and began to softly cry. He explained through his tears, "so it just hurt to even have to write her name down because that really is my sister, but, like, the gameplay and morals intersected, and it was so hard." Radden's disclosure prompted a discussion of the extra burden that Black players feel in the game that other White players had been oblivious to up to that point.

Study Data

The unit of analysis in the study is individual tweets. As part of the analysis, I examined tweets that directly replied to a tweet published by CBS' official Survivor Twitter account the day each episode aired and six days thereafter. To collect the relevant Twitter data, I built a query using Twitter's Streaming Application Program Interface (API) to collect a random sample of publicly available tweets written in English that responded to the user identification number for CBS' official *Survivor* Twitter account. Using this method, I collected 3,386 tweets. Of these tweets, 760 replied to "Juggling Chainsaws," 677 reacted to "The Strategist or the Loyalist," 812 responded to "Ready to Play Like a Lion," and 1,137 discussed the "Do or Die" episode.

To identify tweets reacting to gender or race-motivated elements in contestants' game play, I manually reviewed each tweet and only retained those that garnered an affirmative response to at least one of the five questions I formulated to detect gender or racially-motivated decision making in *Survivor* contestants' gameplay discussions. For instance, one question probed whether social media users were reacting to Black players' commentary on

the expectation that they represent their racial group while playing the game. Appendix B contains the text of each question that was used as inclusion criteria for the study sample.

The final dataset contained 835 tweets – meaning, a nontrivial 25% of tweets published the week the episode initially aired contained a reaction to players' discussions of how identity influenced their gameplay. With that said, there was considerable variation in the *intensity* of attention to players' discussions of identity-driven elements of the game across episodes. Viewers most frequently published tweet reactions to the "Do or Die" episode, which contained a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty. Indeed, forty-four percent of the tweets in the dataset ($N = 501$) reacted to DeShawn Radden becoming emotional about the obligation he felt to represent the Black community when playing the game as well as the broader discussion of the lived experiences of Black people in America that dovetailed from his emotional disclosure during the episode's Tribal Council.

Members of the audience least often responded to the "The Strategist or the Loyalist" episode containing a woman-centered narrative of racial duty. During the week following this episode, only four percent of tweets ($N = 24$) engaged with players' remarks about their feelings of racialized social obligations when playing the game. Finally, viewers published a similar proportion of tweets reacting to the episodes that contained women contestants forming an all-girl's alliance to circumvent gender bias in the game ("Juggling Chainsaws;" 22% or $N = 168$) and Black players creating an all-Black alliance to increase the odds of someone Black being named the Sole Survivor ("Ready to Play Like a Lion;" 18% or $N = 142$).

Analytical Approach

The study analysis proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, I analyzed the valence of sentiment in tweets reacting to three different identity-based gameplay displays featured in the aforementioned *Survivor* episodes. When conducting this analysis, I used the National Research Council (NRC) emotion lexicon, which contains 140,000 words that have been manually coded for positive and negative tone using crowdsourcing techniques (Mohammad & Turney, 2013a, 2013b). This codebook allows researchers to identify aggregate levels of positivity or negativity in texts based on word choice as well as measuring specific emotional states by tracking the use of words associated with specific affective states including sadness, anger, and surprise. In this study, I compared aggregate trends in positivity versus negativity in tweets replying to contestants' identity-driven discussions of their gameplay.

In the second research phase, I conducted a hand coded inductive thematic analysis of the content of Twitter users' tweets reacting to each episode. Inductive thematic analysis is a tool researchers can use to move beyond broad assessments of sentiment in text. This analytical approach allows researchers to derive context-driven meaning and recognize thematic patterns (Bernard et al., 2016). In this stage of the analysis, I sought to identify the most prevalent themes in audience members' reactions to players' disclosures about how their racial and gender identities influenced their gameplay including deciding with whom they would align themselves in the game.

Potential Study Limitations

Qualitative research studies must carefully grapple with issues of credibility and transferability from the earliest stages of research design. A major concern that could be raised about the current study is the lack of data documenting the socio-demographic characteristics of Twitter user accounts included in the study, which makes it difficult to extrapolate about how the valence of sentiments – as well as the content of responses – vary across politically-relevant groups. Others might also be concerned that individuals who engaged CBS' *Survivor* Twitter account after each episode substantively differs from the general population, limiting the transferability of the study findings. These kinds of concerns have led scholars to attempt to develop tools that make it easier to make inferences about social media platform users' demographic characteristics (Ardehaly & Culotta, 2014; Murthy et al., 2016; Wood-Doughty et al., 2018, 2021). Work in this area has found that social media users tend to be younger, better educated, and more liberal leaning (Mellon & Prosser, 2017). In this study, I have minimal concerns about the representativeness of the Twitter data limiting the study design given the pervasiveness of racial progress narratives among Americans irrespective of individuals' background characteristics including age, socio-economic status, and race (Davidai & Walker, 2022; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Kraus et al., 2017; Richeson, 2020).

Sentiments Expressed in Social Media Responses to Narratives of Racial Duty

As Figure 1 indicates, results of the sentiment analysis reveal that there was some – albeit slight – variation in the overall tone of reactions to *Survivor* players' discussions of racial and gender identity driven elements of their gameplay. Indeed, the study findings suggest that individuals used the fewest positive sentiment words during the "Juggling Chainsaws" episode. During this episode, there was a nearly 8% point difference in the proportion of positive words (46%) to negative words (54%). That is, Twitter users invoked negative sentiment words more often than positive words. On the other hand, the study findings suggest that the relative proportion of positive to negative sentiment words was highest during the "The Strategist or the Loyalist" episode. In this episode, 53% of sentiment words in tweets reacting to players' identity-driven gameplay discussions were positive and 47% were negative – a seven percentage point difference in the affective tone of Twitter responses.

While one might infer from these findings that audience members seemed to respond more positively to Black women coming together around their shared identities than a White woman proposing to do the same, there are broader contextual differences in how these alliances were discussed that warrant mentioning. First, the "Juggling Chainsaws" episode was aired immediately after the season premiere, titled "A New Era," where *Survivor* host, Jeff Probst, discussed his perception that his long-time tag phrase when greeting players at group challenges should be changed. Probst explained that he believed that they were presently "in the midst of one of the most powerful, still evolving periods of time that we will probably ever go through in our lives." Given this reality, he urged players to talk about how they were feeling, thinking, and experiencing because "we might learn something."

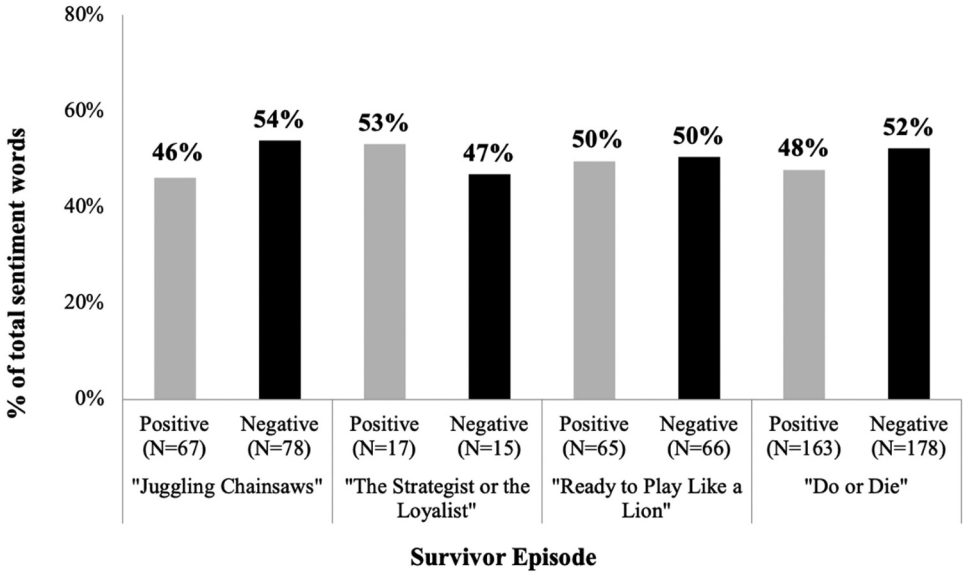


Figure 1. Overall sentiment in twitter reactions to select identity driven displays. Column chart of sentiment in Twitter reactions to Survivor players' discussion of gender and racial identity-driven elements of their gameplay, which shows that there were only slight differences in the negative versus positive sentiment words used by Twitter users in their tweets reacting to the four episodes included in the study. Percent positive sentiment words ranges from 46% to 53% of the total sentiment words identified; percent negative sentiment words ranges from 47% to 54%.

Probst then shared that he would start. He told the players that he needed their guidance – that for 20 years he had been using the phrase "come on in, guys!" to call players into challenges but was now contemplating if he should continue to do so. He then asked, "in the context of *Survivor*, is a word like 'guys' okay or is it time to retire that word?" Here, Probst was signaling his awareness of public discussions of gender identity and inclusiveness including the growing visibility of transgender or non-binary individuals in entertainment, sports, politics, and society-at-large.

Initially, the players decided that it was okay for Probst to continue using the traditional tagline. It was only when the large group gathered for a second time halfway through the show that viewers see a scene that features one of the players, Ricard Foyé, sharing that he believed Probst's signature phrase should be updated. He explained, "the reality is *Survivor* has changed over the last 21 years and those challenges have allowed all of us, all of us brown people, Black people, Asian people, so many queer people to be here." Audience members then watched Probst tell the group that Foyé had made a great point. In fact, he shared that Foyé and been courageous in his decision to circle back to this issue and stand up for what he believed in the midst of a million-dollar game. He then agreed to change his longtime greeting to "come on in!" and told the audience that they could pile on him for "caving into pressure" on Twitter using his hashtag because "I'll probably never read it anyway."

This discussion suggests that audience members were likely not blank slates with respect to discussions of the relevance of identity elements inside of the game during the "Juggling Chainsaws" episode for which I collected data. Rather, there were likely cumulative effects

of Probst's initial discussion of broader social change and the need to evolve elements of the game that fans perceived to be an important tradition. From this perspective, there were likely spillover effects of identity-driven discussions from episode to episode that makes it more challenging to observe – at least in the aggregate using abstract sentiment terms – variation in how individuals responded to gendered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty and how this compares to solely gender-identity driven gameplay decision making.

Nevertheless, the trends evident in Figure 1 demonstrate that both negative and positive sentiment words emerged in response to episodes featuring women-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty. Viewers used the lowest overall number of sentiment words after viewing the episode featuring the woman-centered narrative of racial duty contained in the "The Strategist or the Loyalist" episode; however, the relative proportion of positive sentiment words (53%) was highest in this context. During the episode where the all-Black alliance formed—"Ready to Play Like a Lion"—which contained a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty, tweets contained an evenly divided proportion of negative and positive sentiment words. In the "Do or Die" episode, which contained a full Tribal Council discussion of the personal turmoil that Black players often feel in the game (a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty), individuals used slightly more negative sentiment words (52%) than positive sentiment words (48%).

Themes in Social Media Responses to Women-Centered and Gender-Neutral Narratives of Racial Duty

While the sentiment analysis provides some information about how *Survivor* fans reacted to narratives of racial duty embedded in entertainment programs, tracking overall sentiment does not allow me to speak concretely about the rhetorical arguments that individuals formulated in response to these depictions. To speak to this question, I conducted a thematic content analysis of tweets published in reaction to the three episodes containing woman-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty included in the study. In total, I hand coded 835 tweets contained in the study dataset and identified 80 distinct themes in viewer reactions. In the majority of cases, only a single code was applied to tweets contained in the dataset. However, it was possible for a tweet to contain multiple codes given my goal to exhaustively code tweet content. In the study, the number of codes applied to tweets ranged from 0 to 4. As part of this analysis, I identified the five most prominent themes reacting to each episode and analyzed the affective tone of this commentary to assess whether audiences were reacting negatively or positively to woman-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty.

Figure 2 summarizes reactions to the "The Strategist or the Loyalist" episode, which featured a woman-centered narrative of racial duty. As Figure 2 indicates, the most prominent theme in this episode was "*Survivor* Becoming Too Political," which constituted 41% of codes applied to tweets reacting to the episode. In these tweets, individuals shared their perception of how the show had changed with this season and lamenting producers' decisions to become "preachy and political." One viewer replied, "Survivor is horrible this year bring back the old survivor all this political crap is for the birds it's so boring now bring back Russell." Others joined in, providing similar takes on the new season being "all about wokeness and race" with some even nicknaming the show "Woke Survivor." The second most common thematic code in tweets – comprising 19% of coded segments –

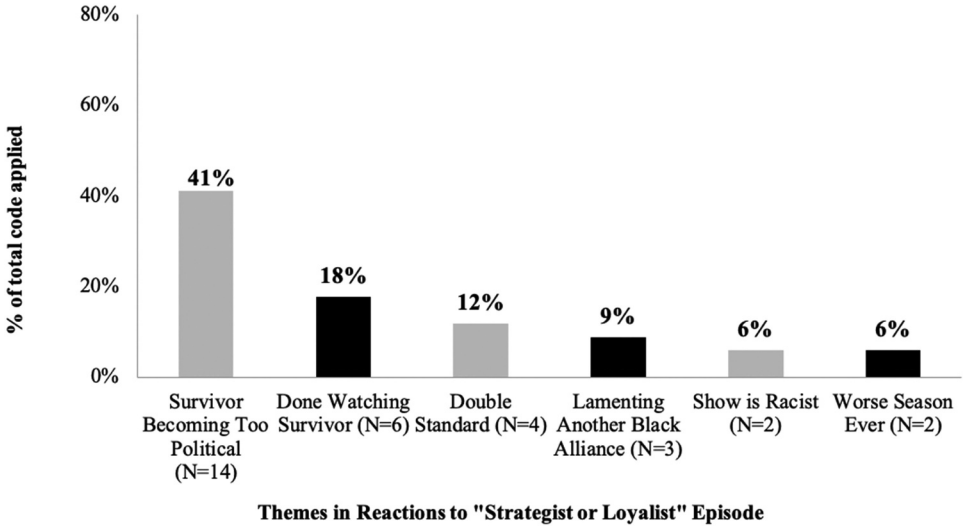


Figure 2. Prominent themes reacting to woman-centered narrative of racial duty in "strategist or loyalist" episode. Column chart of prominent themes that emerged in Twitter reactions to a woman-centered narrative of racial duty in the "Strategist or loyalist" episode where the most common theme expressed the view that the Survivor television series has become too political.

were individuals declaring their plans to no longer watch the show. In the third most prominent theme, viewers offered specific reasons why the show proved distasteful in their eyes. They expressed outrage at what they perceived to be a double standard on display among the Black players. One viewer noted, "Why does everything have to be quoted as 'women of color' and 2 black women working together. If 2 white women said that they would be racist."

These sentiments were part of a larger conversation wherein viewers lamented having to watch another Black alliance on competitive reality television. Specifically, in the fourth most prominent theme identified in the analysis, viewers compared Black Survivor players to Black contestants who had appeared on Big Brother earlier in the year and formed an all-Black alliance that led to the first ever Black winner. One person wrote, "I thought it was sad when this year Big Brother had a group of racist[sic] on their show and the show did nothing about it. Now it appears Survivor has some racists on their show, what are they going to do about it?"

There was a tie for the fifth most prominent theme. On the one hand, viewers tweeted that the show Survivor was racist. On the other hand, individuals concluded that the current season was "without doubt – the worst season ever."

Figure 3 summarizes the five most prominent thematic codes that were applied to tweets responding to the gender-neutral narrative of racial duty presented during the "Ready to Play Like a Lion" episode. Once again, the most prominent themes in viewers' reactions were negative in tone. In this case, the most prominent theme was "Double Standard," which constituted 25% of the total number of codes applied to the text. In these comments, audience members questioned how White contestants would be viewed if an all-White alliance were made. They claimed that "racism is okay if it is black people" and repeatedly referred to this as a double standard. They bemoaned, "if a white person ever did that. . ."

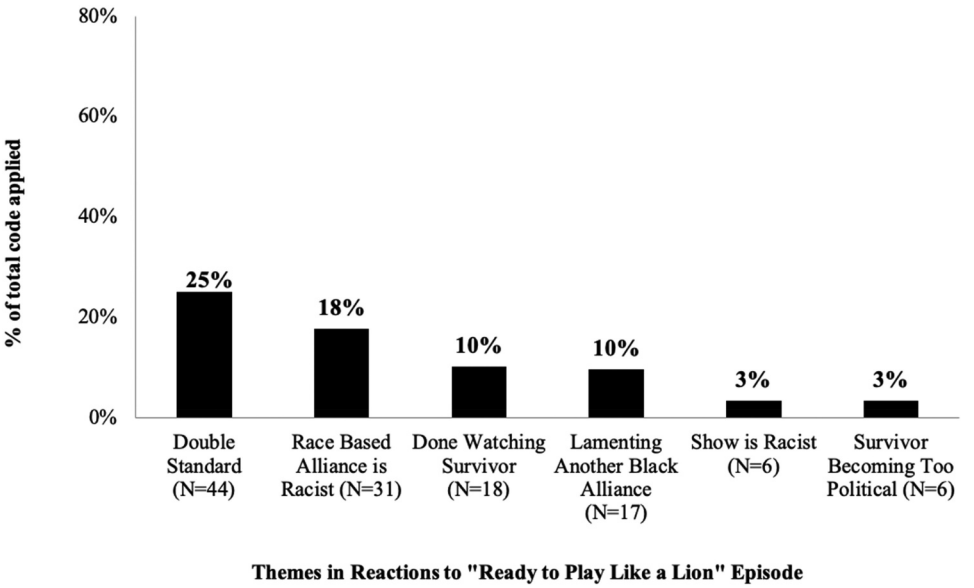


Figure 3. Prominent themes reacting to gender neutral narrative of racial duty in "Play like a lion" episode. Column chart of prominent themes that emerged in Twitter reactions to a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty in the "Play Like a Lion" episode where the most common theme expressed the view that there is a double standard in white and Black players' ability to openly discuss their intent to form same race-based alliances while playing the game.

show producers "might actually stop the show mid scene to remove those players" or "the show would be canceled." Relatedly, the second most prominent theme in tweets, which made up 18% of codes applied, called the all-Black alliance racist. They also described the act of "hav[ing] cliques by race" or "forming an alliance based on the color of one's skin" a racist act.

In the third most prominent theme, viewers declared that they were done watching *Survivor*. Referencing the show's tradition of extinguishing the torches of people who are voted out by their tribe, one viewer wrote, "I'm out, I will extinguish my own torch." In several cases, individuals were clear about why they intended to stop watching. For instance, one person explained, "After all these years, my wife and I just switched Survivor off . . . with all the woke racist BS we're done . . . WE ARE DONE!"

The fourth most prominent theme further highlights the negative backlash to racial discussions on the show. Similar to the reactions to the woman-centered narrative of racial duty, viewers complained about there being a Survivor version of an all-Black alliance. One person wrote, "@survivorcbs has a racist 'cookout' alliance like @CBSBigBrother is this what you expected @JeffProbst?" In the remaining prominently featured themes, viewers once again called *Survivor* racist and argued that the show was becoming too political.

Figure 4 illustrates the most common themes in tweets reacting to the "Do or Die" episode, which contained a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty. Interestingly, while viewer responses were still overwhelmingly negative, viewers also reacted positively to the episode. Indeed, while the most prominent theme in reactions to the gender-neutral narrative of racial duty in this episode declared that the show had become too political,

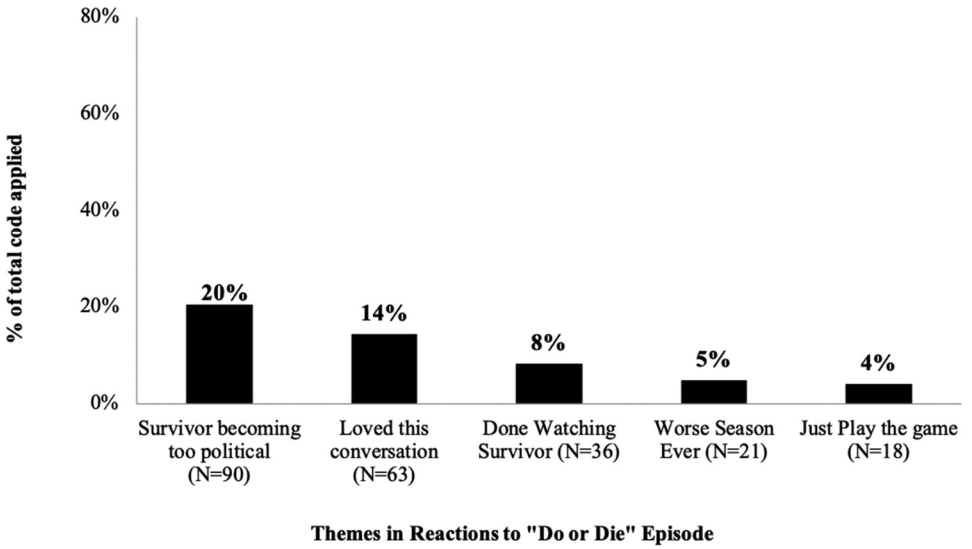


Figure 4. Prominent themes reacting to gender neutral narrative of racial duty in "Do or die" episode. Column chart of prominent themes that emerged in Twitter reactions to a gender-neutral narrative of racial duty in the "Do or Die" episode where the most common theme expressed the view that the Survivor television series has become too political.

the second most prominent theme was viewers sharing that they enjoyed the conversation that the episode provoked. For instance, one viewer wrote, "Bringing the real world to their knees with this tribal emotion! Love this group, love this moment, love this season!" Another person watching the episode tweeted, "I freaking LOVE what just happened at tribal. These conversations, this understanding, breaking out everywhere; so important. So necessary. Bravo, y'all." Others praised the players for "bringing these real-world issues into the game. I think it's important for everyone to hear and it was beautiful to have you all bare your souls." On this point, another viewer shared, "I'll take conversations like this every week over the mad scrambles and whispers before voting. #LearnandGrow"

While it was clear that at least some viewers were receptive to the narratives of racial duty shared by the players during this episode, overall, reactions to the episode were negative. Similar to reactions to previous episodes, viewers declared that they were done watching the show, that this was the worse season in the show's history, and urged players to "just play the game." For example, viewers pointed out that "it's funny that the only people seeing color are the ones talking about it." In more terse tweets, viewers asked, "can we just get to the game part?" Others were clearly agitated by the narratives of racial duty on display. One person wrote, "FFS [for fuck's sake] everyone has something no matter what color they are and the whining and crying is ridiculous. Play the game!"

Taken together, these findings suggest that the content of audience members' responses to woman-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty were overwhelmingly negative. And, in line with my expectations given Hancock's work on the politics of disgust, negative responses to mediated narratives of racial duty were most pronounced when they were women-centered. However, these findings also revealed that some individuals responded positively to narratives of racial duty shared by Black players. For these viewers,

Survivor had provided a valuable teaching moment where they were exposed to the raw lived experiences of Black players and learned their views on issues of race and racial justice both inside and outside the game.

Discussion

In this article, I used the competitive reality series, *Survivor*, as a site to study how ordinary Americans respond to storytelling by Black players that complicates prevailing narratives of social change and racial equality in the United States. I identified episodes that contained narratives of racial duty expressed by Black players – that is, Black contestants' descriptions of the commitment or obligation they feel to positively represent their racial group and make decisions that advance other Black players when competing on these series given their shared marginalization in society-at-large. I argued that studying the emergence of these narratives in the context of entertainment programs was useful because it allows researchers to observe how racial group members might exercise individual political agency and use the genre – which they know to be viewed by millions of audience members each week – to challenge racial stereotypes and add nuance to mainstream discourses on racial progress and equality.

In a sentiment analysis and inductive thematic content analysis of tweets reacting to narratives of racial duty presented in three episodes from Season 41 of *Survivor*, I found that individuals overwhelmingly reacted negatively to embedding narratives of race and racial duty into the competitive reality television genre. They complained that the show had become too political and vowed to stop watching. They also critiqued what they perceived as a double standard on the part of CBS and *Survivor* producers. According to these viewers, if White players ever conspired to create a race-based alliance they would be called a racist and canceled whereas Black players were being celebrated. However, there was also a small subset of audience members who appreciated the opportunity to learn about others while watching one of their favorite shows. These audience members expressed gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow and praised *Survivor* producers for using the platform to address social and political dynamics in the world outside the game.

These findings offer corroborating evidence of the value of using competitive reality television series like *Survivor* as sites to better understand how the American public is thinking about and reacting to narratives related to ongoing social change and inequality in the United States. Indeed, analyzing audience members' reactions on social media to episodes like those included in the current study allows researchers to collect real time and highly visceral data about Americans' attitudes about race and gender in manner that is exceedingly difficult to replicate in a survey or lab setting. From this perspective, placing race and politics and political communications research into conversation with one another offers fruitful opportunities to advance scholarship conducted in each tradition.

Beyond showcasing the value of bringing race to the center of the study of political communication, the study findings draw attention to the potential backlash effects of exposure to narratives about racial progress via entertainment programs. To date, much of the work showcasing backlash effects to information about demographic changes and racial inequality has been conducted in a survey setting (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014b, 2014b). This study builds on this work by providing corroborating evidence from a real world setting where individuals are clearly willing to be both candid and unfiltered in their reactions. Unfortunately, these

findings paint a stark image of the course of intergroup relations in the United States. Given recent work by Petersen et al. (2023) on the tendency for some individuals to simultaneously exhibit a "need for chaos" and a "burn it down" mentality when faced with perceived personal status loss, it seems appropriate to conclude by acknowledging the potential negative democratic implications of broadcasting narratives of racial duty into the homes of unsuspecting viewers who, this study suggests, may have a clear preference for keeping their entertainment programming apolitical.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

M. Brielle Harvin (PhD, Vanderbilt University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at United States Naval Academy. Her research investigates the emergence of narratives related to social issues stemming from media exposure, social identities, and personal experience

Data availability

The data will be made available upon request by contacting the corresponding author

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Materials. The materials are openly accessible at https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2195365

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Appendix A Description of *Survivor* Show Format

Survivor is an Emmy-award winning competitive reality series that has introduced audiences to a group of between 16 to 20 contestants twice a year since the show first aired in 2000. As part of the series, contestants are flown to a remote location for 26 to 42 days to compete for a million-dollar cash prize. Once contestants arrive, they are evenly split into what show producers refer to as "tribes" that can range from six to ten people. Sometimes show producers divide cast members based on shared characteristics or traits such as age, race, or gender. Other times, tribe members are decided randomly. Whatever the case, on the first day tribes are sent to different "camps" where they must build a shelter, start a fire, and search for food and water. They must also compete in challenges. Those who lose must attend "Tribal Council" where they are forced to vote out one of their tribe members.

Framed as a competition whose main objective is to "outwit, outplay, and outlast," *Survivor* contestants must depend on one another to gather water and cook food, compete in physical and mental competitions, and forge alliances to avoid being voted off during Tribal Council meetings. At the same time, their life in the game is contingent on forming relationships that help them: skillfully navigate the group's social dynamics, create bonds of trust to learn heavily guarded information, and form relationships to secure jury votes at the end of the game. Yet, only one person can win, which means that coalitions that form will be tested and contestants will have to make hard choices that may pull at their core values and commitments. From this perspective, shows in this genre are a microcosm of civil society where both group dynamics and politics are continually at play. With that said, for at least some, *Survivor* is viewed as an escapist outlet providing an entertainment experience to distract from larger social and cultural issues. The potential tension in audiences' expectation and the reality of the content of episodes in this genre draws attention to the need to better understand how individuals react to discussions presented in this genre that mirror real world social and political dynamics – especially as they pertain to issues of race and racial justice.

Appendix B Inclusion Criteria for Including Tweets in the Study Sample

The questions below were used to detect tweets reacting gender or racially-motivated decision making in *Survivor* contestants' gameplay discussions. Questions 3–5 were constructed to home in on viewers' reactions to woman-centered and gender-neutral narratives of racial duty.

(1) Reaction to players' thoughts about the influence of race, racial identity, and/or gender identity when playing the game?
(2) Reaction to players' thoughts about the distinct challenges/advantages that players from historically marginalized groups must face when formulating a game strategy and/or playing the game?
(3) Reaction to Black players' commentary on the expectation that they represent their racial group while playing the game?
(4) Reaction to Black players' expression of feelings of camaraderie or kinship with other Black players, especially relative to non-Black players?
(5) Reaction to Black players' discussion of the tension in playing the game for oneself versus the broader racial group?

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