Minorities in the Lead: Collectivism and Self-Personalization in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Political Campaign Videos

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Abstract—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a representative of the 14th Congressional District for New York State in the United States, uses YouTube to share her political statements and to bolster her election campaign. These videos are tools to not only attract voters but also to brand and construct her identity as a female politician and a representative of the diverse NY-14 district. This article aims to elucidate the ways in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s videos articulate collective racial, ethnic, and social class identities. Using defining features of tactical repertoires and collective action frame, the research findings show that the collectivism strategy helps to amplify the willpower of the people and construct an inclusive nuance through Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign videos. In addition, the analysis also uncovers ways in which videos highlight her image as a female politician by using predominantly feminine traits while strategically using self-personalization. Further discussion is needed regarding the use of other political communication strategies to make a more inclusive political campaign that could lead to a more diverse representation in U.S. politics.

Keywords—Collective identity, Minority, Political campaign, Self-personalization, YouTube.

I. Introduction

In his 2019 State of the Union address, President Donald Trump celebrated that “...exactly one century after the Congress passed the Constitution amendment giving the vote to women, we also have more women serving in the Congress than ever before” [1]. On 3 January 2019, the 116th Congress, the most diverse in American history [2]; [3]; [4], convened for the first time. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the youngest member ever elected to Congress, is one of the representatives who catches America’s eyes. She is a 29-year-old working-class Latina who was also a first-time candidate. As a new member of Congress, Ocasio-Cortez often gains the undivided attention from the media concerning her political beliefs and policies. Many consider Ocasio-Cortez to be a breakthrough for a more inclusive Congress. Her race, ethnicity, and social class are very distinctive in comparison the majority of current and former Congress members, who mainly older white men. However, some consider Ocasio-Cortez to be incompetent, for she is said to be lacking of logic and common sense [5] due to her unfavorable background as a working-class Latina [6]. Despite the negative remarks and she often receives, Ocasio-Cortez continues to embrace her background as one of her political campaign strategies, especially on her YouTube channel.

YouTube is one of a number of new media formats that are the subject of political campaign strategy research [7]; [8]; [9]. Miller [10] investigated the use of new media during Obama’s presidential campaign, concluding that it was relatively successful, and it encouraged other local candidates to make use of new media during their campaigns. Muir [11] also conducted research on political campaigns of the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) that heavily linked with the union party in Australia, and the research showed that the grassroots movement campaign can be amplified throughout the country with using new media. In addition, McGregor, Lawrence, and Cardona [12] reviewed “self-personalization” strategy in candidate’s political campaigns through social media. Furthermore, research concerning YouTube as one of many means of electoral political campaigns in several European countries has also been explored [13]; [14].

The literature review conducted for this article revealed that there has not been any research regarding the impact of YouTube usage on female politician political campaign, and particularly not regarding first-time female politicians who run for Congress and come from minority background. For this specific reason, the article examines how a female political candidate makes use of YouTube videos for her campaign not only as a tool to attract and gain voters, but also as a medium to address social issues on education, economy, and inclusive representation. The article explores the significance of Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign videos during the primary election in June 2018, and how they articulates a collective identity in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class. This article attempts to contribute to the existing discussion on YouTube political campaign videos and to scrutinize the videos by analyzing the context, verbal content, and cinematographic elements.
II. Method

To assess the Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign, we analyzed ten videos in two categories: collectivism in political campaigns through new media and the use of personalization strategy in political campaigns. The division of these categories is based on the frameworks of Taylor and Van Dyke’s [15] defining features of tactical repertoires and Gamson’s [16] collective action frame. To support the analysis of these campaign videos, Bordewell and Thompson’s [17] Film Art and Jones’ [18] electoral candidate linguistic markers also serve as tools to analyze the data. The article is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the collectivism and diversity within the video campaign. The second section deals with Ocasio-Cortez’s embrace of working-class people. The third section examines personalization strategy and the videos’ constructed of a “good” female politician. Finally, the concluding section gives limitations of the article and future research suggestion.

III. Results and Discussion

A. People of Color Assembled: Collective Identity and Diversity

Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign videos show clear evidences of a strategically inclusive political campaign by using two out of three main defining features of tactical repertoires: contestation and collective identity combined with collective action frame components [15]. The remaining feature of tactical repertoires, which is intentionality, is not discussed in this article because campaign videos are always intentional. Taylor and Van Dyke [15] explained that "tactical repertoire contains sites of contestation for which bodies, symbols, identities, practices, and discourses are used to pursue or prevent changes in institutionalized power relations” (pp. 7) In a video, “Courage to Change,” there is a voiceover from Ocasio-Cortez that says:

“It’s time we acknowledge that not all Democrats are the same, but the Democrat who takes corporate money, profits off foreclosure doesn’t live here, doesn’t send his kids to our school, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air cannot possibly represent us.” (00:01:21–00:01:37).

Ocasio-Cortez puts emphasis on a Democrat who does not take corporate political action committee money as an identity that is favorable for NY-14 district candidate by using the phrase “represent us.” This could be taken as a means to pursue changes in institutionalized power as mentioned before. In addition, the scene in the video also indicates that the contestation feature in the video is to pursue changes rather than to prevent changes. The changes that Ocasio-Cortez is constructing in her video are the creation of a viewpoint of what a righteous representative looks like and an alternative perspective of a Democratic candidate for Congress. The video suggests that a righteous representative is powered by the people, and he or she understands their district well by living in that district and knowing the dynamics of the people who live there.

Another feature is collective identity. Collective identity is used to create a nuance that strengthens the sense of collectivism among people from NY-14, which also includes NY-14’s people of color, who are under-represented in the House of Representative. Through her video campaigns, Ocasio-Cortez constructs collectivism among people of color and this is in accordance to Heath; Jagers and Mock; Phinney [19] that explained that for “individuals who are members of a minority group, traditionally under-represented, or are viewed as deficient and pathological by dominant culture, the need for community and inter-connectedness can be great.” This need for community can be seen in the “See What’s Possible” with a voiceover from her that says “This campaign is about what we can accomplish together” (00:02:22 – 00:02:26). Ocasio-Cortez, in the final scene of the video, emphasizes togetherness in her campaign also with the use of word “we” and “together.”

Beside the choice of words, the scene itself shows Ocasio-Cortez’s name colored in pastel-colored rainbow to indicate joy and diversity, and this understanding can be suggest the cheerful diversity of NY-14 that Ocasio-Cortez tries to emphasize and maintain in her campaign.

Besides features of tactical repertoires, Ocasio-Cortez’s video campaign is also embedded with collective action frame components, which are injustice, identity, and agency [16]. The injustice component within Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign is apparent in the “Courage to Change” campaign video that shows Ocasio-Cortez’s doubts about the incumbent congressman’s approach to the many social and economic problems happening in NY-14, such as high rent and a lack of health care coverage (00:00:42–00:01:02). Moreover, Ocasio-Cortez tries to lead the audience to share the same political consciousness about imparity from the influence of lobbyists’ contributions to the primary race with her choice of words in the same video: “This race is about people versus money. We’ve got people, they’ve got money” (00:01:12–00:01:20).

Following the component of collective action frame, the next component is identity. According to Ryan and Gamson [16], the identity element means “the process of defining a ‘we,’ typically but not necessarily in opposition to some they who have different interests or values” (p. 58). Furthermore, they explained that the “we” will help to amplify the collective action to effect change. Ocasio-Cortez wants to create these changes with the people by emphasizing the “we” that is apparent repeatedly in Ocasio-Cortez’s “Courage to Change” campaign video. The strong emphasis of “we” identity can be seen in the scene (00:00:42–00:00:43) and (00:00:58–00:01:03), and these scenes are accompanied with a voiceover from Ocasio-Cortez that says, "We have to ask ‘who has New York been changing for?’ and “It’s clear that the change hasn’t been for us, and we deserve a champion.” These two scenes show how
Ocasio-Cortez positioned herself alongside her constituents by choosing the pronouns “we” and “us,” and she attempts to amplify the nuance of political consciousness that she wants to create. The particular political consciousness is about people of NY-14 and how they can make changes by choosing Ocasio-Cortez as their representative.

The last component of collective action frame is agency, which appears in Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign video “Make Our Voices Heard!” in the scene where there is a woman who is giving an endorsement for Ocasio-Cortez “...because June 26th is when we get to make choices and our values heard” (00:00:35–00:00:42). The voiceover highly resonates with the definition of agency because it creates a consciousness that “we” can decide upon “ourselves” and make people’s aspiration heard by voting for Ocasio-Cortez. Also, the video does not show Ocasio-Cortez herself, but it shows a woman who supported Ocasio-Cortez, and this presence of the woman could help to strengthen the nuance of “we” as agent of change.

These frameworks demonstrate that the Ocasio-Cortez campaign videos are heavily imbedded with the nuance of grassroots movements and the willpower of the common people. Besides propounding inclusivity, these video campaigns make use of the discourses of injustice, identity, and agency to amplify Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign strategy in the election.

B. Personalization Strategy

Another strategy that appears within Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign video is audiovisual personalization, which has been widely used by many politicians in the United States as one of their political campaign strategies. As McGraw [12] further stated, how candidates present their personal lives to their constituents represents an important individuating influence on political impression formation, allowing voters to rely on candidate-specific information rather than on stereotypes to form their evaluations of candidates. Correspondingly, Ocasio-Cortez makes use of personalization in some of her videos “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Now This” and “Courage to Change.”

In her campaign video titled “Courage to Change,” personalization strategy could be seen in the following particular scene. Ocasio-Cortez says, “Women like me aren’t supposed to run for office. I wasn’t born to a wealthy or powerful family. Mother from Puerto Rico, dad from the South Bronx. I was born in a place where your zip code determines your destiny” (00:00:02–00:00:17). From the voiceover, Ocasio-Cortez shares her personal life with her constituents, but she interestingly informs the adverse side of her narrative rather than the positive one. It also shows that the narrative that candidates provide does not always have to be spun in a positive manner to apply the personalization strategy. The voiceover also appears in the first part of the campaign video and that can also be interpreted that Ocasio-Cortez first wants to introduce herself to her constituents building the perception of her self-projection as someone who is authentic and reliable by using personalization strategy.

The use of personalization in Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign videos is still in accordance with previous research concerning personalization, and the use of this strategy also further intensifies the position of this strategy in the realm of typical political campaigns. Interestingly, Ocasio-Cortez uses the unfavorable narrative in one of her campaign videos rather than using the positive one as suggested by the previous research. This kind of narrative could benefit the candidate if she uses it to place herself in the same position as her constituents.

C. Girl from the Bronx: Defining “Good” Female Politicians

In her campaign videos, Ocasio-Cortez tries to manipulate the stereotype of what is considered a “decent” female politician through her choice of linguistic markers and style. Being a female politician is not an easy thing to do, especially when it comes to self-portrayal in public. The portrayal of female politicians is still embedded with the elements of masculine traits, for politics are still seen as a male-dominated field [20]. However, Ocasio-Cortez tries to negotiate the elements of masculine traits specifically in linguistic markers by using predominantly feminine ones. One way to identify the dominance of feminine linguistic markers by Ocasio-Cortez is through Jones’ [18] study that provides data of linguistic markers that are used by female and male politicians.

| Feminine | Masculine |
|----------|-----------|
| Pronouns, especially first-person singular pronouns | First-person plural pronouns |
| Verbs and auxiliary verbs | Articles |
| Social references | Prepositions |
| Emotion words | Anger words |
| Cognitive mechanisms | Big words (>6 letters) |
| Tentative words | Swear words |

Table 1. Linguistic Markers Table by J.J. Jones, 2016, August 17, Perspectives on Politics, 14(3), 625-642, p.7. Copyright 2016 by American Political Science Association

The table demonstrates that Ocasio-Cortez tends to use feminine linguistic markers rather than the masculine ones in her several campaign video on her YouTube channel. From her “Alexandria on ICE” video, Ocasio-Cortez uses “emotion words,” verbs and auxiliary verbs, and feminine social references such as “moral problem,” “danger,” “need,” “been,” “communities.” Evidence from another video titled...
“Courage to Change” also show Ocasio-Cortez’s tendency to use a feminine style. In the video, Ocasio-Cortez uses many first-person singular pronouns, such as “me” and “I.” However, Ocasio-Cortez also uses first-person plural pronoun such as “we” and “us” in both videos. The use of feminine linguistic style indicates Ocasio-Cortez embedded only a few masculine traits, specifically linguistic markers, within her video campaign, and this can also be interpreted that the predominant use of masculine traits in terms of language is not always utilized by female politicians.

The style of a politician is also consequential in presenting oneself. Jones’ study further explains female and male candidate styles: “Female politicians rely more on personal and social references. Talking about oneself in a personal way and talking to and about other people implies the use of pronouns and social references, both of which are included in the feminine linguistic style. Meanwhile, references to external objects like statistics, expert reports, and policy issues tend to rely on the use of articles (object references), prepositions (spatial and temporal hierarchies), and big words, which are similarly included in the masculine linguistic style.” [18]

Ocasio-Cortez’s style, according to Jones’ study, is still predominantly using feminine style such as using social references and personal experiences. This is apparent through her campaign video titled “Courage to Change” and “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez featured on NowThis” In the “Courage to Change” video (00:00:03–00:00:18), she uses her personal experiences as a working-class woman who is not supposed to run for office. Ocasio-Cortez uses pronouns in describing her opponent and another personal experience in “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez featured on NowThis” video. She describes her opponent using “he” and the phrase “people who take million dollars from Wall Street.” Even though she tends to use a feminine style, Ocasio-Cortez does engage in masculine style in the “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez featured on NowThis” video while describing the demographic of NY-14 and the current composition of Congress. Ocasio-Cortez’s feminine linguistic markers and style suggest that a female politician does not have to dominantly embody masculine traits to be acknowledged in public.

IV. Conclusion

Using tactical repertoire and collective action frame, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign videos construct collectivism among NY-14 residents and assert the diversity of her district through audiovisual elements and the use of several languages. The diversity that is shown in Ocasio-Cortez’s video campaign indicates the inclusion of communities in a particular district, and Ocasio-Cortez uses herself as an example of an alternate portrayal of working-class people as spirited and determined rather than hard scrabble. She fortifies her stance and identity by using personalization. Moreover, she emphasizes female linguistic markers as a woman who is a newcomer in the Congressional race rather than using the masculine linguistic markers that have traditionally been considered successful in female politicians’ political campaigns.

The results of this research have opened up new discussions concerning female minority politicians, particularly in the Trump era, which is fueled with tension regarding race, social class, and gender issue. During the upcoming presidential election in 2020, political campaign can be used as a space to bring forward issues concerning minorities that have been constantly problematized during Trump’s administration. Interestingly, there is an emerging wave of progressive and socialist candidates who oppose the dominant values in the current American government. Campaign videos such as the ones used in this article reveal that the strategy of acknowledging people’s diverse races and social classes through grassroots, inclusive campaigns is successful. Since Ocasio-Cortez’s victory in the mid-term election, inclusive political campaigns have opened the door for other diverse representatives in America’s government. This could become a phenomenon of America’s political climate in the upcoming presidential election, and it is important observation area for future research concerning political campaign.

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