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Exploring Discourses of Whiteness in the Mary Beard Oxfam-Haiti Twitterstorm

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Twitterstorm

Social media may have amplified the Black Lives Matter movement, but companies like Facebook are often accused of not doing enough to address online hate speech. These platforms nevertheless have the potential to facilitate informal learning about the color blind racism through which whites rationalize the inequalities and injustices experienced by People of Color (PoC). This paper adds to the emergent literature in this area by exploring a high-profile Twitterstorm in February 2018 following a tweet from Cambridge University Professor Mary Beard about the sexual misconduct of Oxfam aid workers in Haiti. Academics like Dr Priya Gopal faced much criticism for suggesting the tweet was evidence of the white fragility and privilege to which they were frequently subjected. A qualitative content analysis of 1718 unique tweets containing 'Mary Beard', posted between 16 and 20 February 2018, was conducted to assess whether there was much evidence of agonistic debate between critics and supporters of Beard about whiteness. Results indicate that there were twice as many tweets criticising Beard for her performative white privilege and frailty than those defending her. While the framing of the Twitterstorm was generally agonistic, there was little evidence of informal learning, with PoC conspicuously under-represented. Indeed, the burden of talking about racism and whiteness fell on the few PoC in the corpus, in much the same way as the 'pre-social media' era.

Keywords: social media; whiteness; computer-mediated-communication; qualitative content analysis

Introduction

Harrowing footage of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd reverberated around social media platforms such as Twitter in May

2020.¹ Hashtags including #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd were used by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists to draw attention to the persistence of institutionalized racism in the United States (Auxier, 2020). Previous research suggests such hashtag activism can facilitate large-scale informal learning (learning that occurs outside formal educational institutions and environments) about social movements; #OWS constituted such an informal learning space in which tweeters shared URLs and user-generated content that helped construct knowledge about Occupy Wall Street (Gleason, 2013). In the case of BLM, Twitter facilitated informal learning among conservatives about police brutality towards Black communities, with many recognising these injustices for the first time in tweets shared under relevant hashtags (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark, 2016). Nevertheless, there remain concerns about hate speech on Twitter, as demonstrated by the prevalence of racial slurs in tweets about the COVID-19 pandemic (Dubey, 2020). Both platform affordances and ineffectual regulatory mechanisms have increased the ‘spreadability’ of racist content online (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018).

This paper empirically explores whether social media facilitates informal learning about whiteness and racism through the Mary Beard Twitterstorm in the United Kingdom. The Cambridge Classics Professor sparked controversy in February 2018 for a tweet about the sexual misconduct of Oxfam workers in Haiti, which questioned how hard it was for them to “sustain civilised values” in a disaster zone (Beard, 2018a). Beard was heavily criticized by academic peers like Dr. Priya Gopal for perpetuating whiteness in this characterization of the Oxfam scandal.

While legacy media organizations often provide ephemeral coverage of these

¹ For more on this, see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52861726> (accessed 27 July 2020).

Twitterstorms, few have been empirically studied to date (see Roese, 2018 for example). This paper addresses this gap by qualitatively examining how Beard's tweet was framed by other users, which social groups were represented, and whether there was any evidence of informal learning about either the whiteness or colorblind racism it perpetuated. It does so by first providing an overview of the Beard incident, examining the rise of 'platformed racism', and presenting the results of a qualitative content analysis of 1718 tweets containing 'Mary Beard' collected between 16 and 20 February 2018.

The Mary Beard Oxfam controversy

To explore the representations of whiteness and racism in this Twitterstorm, one must first understand the context of Beard's tweet. On 9 February 2018, UK newspaper *The Times* reported evidence of sexual misconduct by Oxfam aid workers in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Haiti in January 2010; witnesses reported that the group had thrown parties involving sex workers akin to a "full-on Caligula orgy" (O'Neill, 2018). An inquiry by the UK government led to the suspension of the Oxfam operation in Haiti, with the charity also experiencing a decline in donations from members of the public (BBC, 2018).

Critics condemned the "white savior complex" of the aid workers, and the colonial attitudes of humanitarian organizations working in these countries (Hirsch, 2018). The Cambridge classicist took a different position on the scandal in a tweet posted a week later (16 February), suggesting it was difficult for the aid workers to sustain their 'civilized' values in Haiti:

Of course one can't condone the (alleged) behaviour of Oxfam staff in Haiti and elsewhere. But I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain "civilized" values in a disaster zone. And overall I still respect those who go in to help out, where most of us wd [sic] not tread (Beard, 2018a).

The tweet sparked a debate about whiteness after Beard's colleague Dr. Priya Gopal shared an article highlighting the "genteel and patrician casual racism passing as frank and well-meaning observations" she had experienced in Cambridge (Gopal, 2018a). This triggered a highly polarized debate in which supporters defended Beard from what they saw as an unnecessary 'pile on', while critics accused her of validating the sexual misconduct of the aid workers.

While few tabloid newspapers covered the incident, the *London Evening Standard* provided a platform for commentators to defend Beard from the "crazed social media mob" (D'Ancona, 2018). The right-wing UK broadsheet *Daily Telegraph* paradoxically mocked Beard's appearance in a photo she tweeted showing that she had been crying, whilst also accusing the 'far-left' of whipping up hatred towards her (Strimpel, 2018). The exchange between Beard and Gopal was also reported in several of the UK broadsheet newspapers. In an op-ed in *The Guardian*, Beard and Gopal were congratulated for being "combative, rigorous and respectful" to each other (Ramaswamy, 2018). However, right-wing newspapers such as *The Telegraph* mocked Gopal's suggestion that the 'national treasure' (Beard) was perpetuating "genteel and patrician casual racism" in her tweet (D'Ancona, 2018). One interpretation of this coverage was that these newspapers were suppressing the debate about whiteness raised by the two academics.

Whiteness and Colorblind racism

Beard's reference to "civilized values" was illustrative of the 'white insidious racism' seen in countries such as the UK during the past fifty years (Eddo Lodge, 2017).

Whiteness is a long-established social construct, having originally been conceived as a tool to "stabilize and organize colonial society by establishing poor white workers and farmers as a control stratum over the black bond-laborers working the plantations" (Martinot, 2010:16). The operationalization of racial differences continued after the Second World War; in the 1950s, the UK government did little to hide that its immigration policies were designed to "close the door to dark skinned migrants while keeping it open to 'whites' (Mason, 2000:29). This frame has been deployed by both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers in their coverage of immigration over the past six decades (Maddood, 2014). The demonization of immigrants contributed to the growth in support for far-right parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), particularly among 'left behind' white working-class communities who perceived they had been economically damaged by "European integration and mass immigration" (Ford and Goodwin, 2014:271). The narrow victory of the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 UK Referendum on the European Union (known colloquially as Brexit) further exacerbated racial tensions; there was a significant increase in the number of recorded hate crimes against ethnic minorities in the wake of the referendum result (Rzepnikowska, 2018).

Brexit focused attention on racism which was endemic in the UK but largely under-reported by the news media. The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAA) found the level of racial prejudice amongst the total population had remained unchanged since the 1980s, never falling below 25% of the population describing themselves as racially prejudiced (NatCen, 2017). This illustrates the hegemony of colorblind racism, the new

racial ideology that has emerged since the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s. As the title suggests, this refers to the phenomenon where whites insist they ‘see people, not color’, deploying “sincere fictions” grounded in economic and political liberalism to explain the inequalities experienced by people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2017:2). The practices associated with this ‘new racism’ are typically more subtle than the blatantly discriminatory ones deployed by previous generations. For example, the overt discrimination towards PoC in areas such as housing (where signs announced they weren’t welcome) has been replaced by covert behaviors, such as quoting higher rents to prospective tenants from ethnic minority backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva, 2017:3). Crucially, whites possess the same feelings of superiority towards PoC as they did during the colonial era. Rather, they learn how to hide their racial attitudes in public settings as they get older, with only those who are very prejudiced expressing their support for the old white racial frame (‘Jim Crow racism’) in the company of others (Feagin, 2013: 93). Colorblind racism is a flexible perspectival frame through which white privilege is sustained by racist structures; the phrase ‘I am not a racist’ being a “discursive buffer” used to preface statements that are racially prejudiced (Bonilla-Silva, 2017:75).

White people are often unwilling to accept that they perpetuate their privilege upon others (Nakayama, 2017). This sensitivity about discussing race can be defined as a form of ‘white fragility,’ in reference to the “discomfort and defensiveness on the part of a white person when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice” (White Fragility, n.d.) Hence, women of color (WoC) constantly express their disappointment at how white feminism’s support for minorities collapses when crises force them to choose between acting in their own interests and protecting those of marginalized groups (Romano, 2017). The tears of Beard and other white women when

confronted by WoC have been characterized as a form of white racial control (Hamad, 2019). However, there have also been brazen efforts by UK and US politicians to operationalize whiteness for political advantage since 2016. Most notably, former US President Donald Trump framed the past as “constituted by nations that were represented as ‘white’ into which racialized others had insinuated themselves and gained disproportionate advantage” (Bhambra, 2017:214). The rise of the far-right in these countries can be attributed to ‘methodological whiteness,’ where the focus on white working-class communities legitimizes “analyses that might otherwise have been regarded as racist” (Bhambra, 2017:214). For instance, the UK Government’s report on race and ethnic inequalities published in March 2021 was heavily criticized for disputing the prevalence of systemic racism and claiming that white working-class pupils lagged behind their peers from almost all other ethnic minority groups (Bhopal, 2021). While the rhetoric of many right-wing populist politicians is often inflammatory by nature, it is also shaped by the ideology of colorblind racism. For instance, Trump repeatedly claimed he was “the least racist person” when challenged on the racial overtones of policies such as the ban on people from predominantly Muslim countries entering the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2017:222). The same criticism can be applied to racially progressive political leaders, who publicly proclaim their anti-racist credentials while simultaneously seeking to preserve their cultural and ethnic dominance (Martinot, 2010; Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Overall, the structures of racial inequality have remained largely intact despite the efforts of racial progressives and anti-racist activists to focus attention on whiteness and white privilege.

Debating whiteness and race online

From cyberoptimism to cyberbalkanization

This paper uses the Beard Twitterstorm to explore the extent to which online platforms such as Twitter enable informal learning about whiteness. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on how digital technologies are used to perpetuate and challenge colorblind racism in societies like the UK. During the first iteration of the internet, there were both optimistic and pessimistic narratives about the role of ICTs in shaping race relations. The early (cyber)optimism about geographically dispersed ‘netizens’ being free to participate in online debates without fear of being judged by gender or race, proved short-lived (Hughey and Daniels, 2013:333). Individuals were not liberated from their ‘offline identities’ and appeared more sensitive to those social cues that were evident in online communities (Cho and Lee, 2008). Hate messages ranging from ‘light-hearted quips’ to ‘claims of self-preservation’ were identified on the Web (Rajagopal and Bojin, 2002). This wasn’t just a case of ‘offline’ prejudices being replicated online; rather, the affordances of information and communication technologies (ICTs) amplified such content (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). Indeed, the cyberbalkanization thesis popularized by Sunstein (2007) suggested that the internet was unlikely to encourage rational debate on issues such as race.

Growth of online hate speech

Racist hate speech online has intensified in the era of social media, defined here as “internet-based” applications “that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010:61). Platformed racism, a new form of racism linked to the design and affordances of online platforms, was identified in the context of Twitter debates surrounding whiteness and indigenous cultures in Australia (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017). Hate speech thrived on the microblogging site as tweeters deployed emojis, memes and humor to perpetuate negative stereotyping of

other cultures (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2018; Nakamura, 2014). During the 2016 US Presidential Election, for instance, far-right internet subcultures used memes like Pepe the Frog to promote white supremacist views (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Fake Facebook pages have also been created in countries such as Denmark to promote antagonistic stereotypes of Muslims which frame them as a threat to the values of the ‘civilized West’ (Farkas, Schou and Neumayer, 2018:477). The relative anonymity of online spaces, which was supposed to empower WoC, has often exposed them to abuse from ‘trolls’ (Amnesty, 2018). Contrary to the notion these are ‘neutral platforms’, platformed racism has been attributed to the libertarian ideologies of companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which revolve around the exploitation of user data by maximising the ‘shareability’ of their content (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017).

Spaces for informal learning?

Despite this intensification of hate speech, online platforms do provide opportunities for spontaneous and collaborative informal learning about whiteness, (Gleason, 2013). This might help facilitate the emergence of the ‘conflictual consensus’ theorized by Mouffe (2013), which normalizes antagonism within pluralist democracies but seeks to reframe the ‘other’ as legitimate adversaries not enemies. There remain concerns about the homogeneity and homophily of online social networks, with research indicating that some social media users only share fact-checking messages if they are congruent with their political ideologies (Shin and Thorson, 2017). However, despite moral panics about online platforms creating ‘partisan echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’, social media users are constantly exposed to alternative viewpoints and do not tend to get their news from only one source (Bruns, 2019). Accidental exposure to news stories on these platforms has the potential to “enhance political learning and participation” and broaden

the “range of voices that makes themselves heard” (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016:1858). Twitter in particular exposes citizens to oppositional views that challenge racial stereotypes and help movements like BLM focus attention on social injustices. Hashtags such as #icantbreathe, which discursively framed online debates about the police killing of Eric Garner in July 2014, facilitated “large-scale informal learning” about tensions between the police and Black communities, particularly amongst conservatives who acknowledged for the first time that these killings were ‘unjust’ (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark, 2016). There has also been playful engagement with racism in the form of seemingly flippant hashtags such as @WhiteProverbs which encourage citizens to reflect on their white privilege (Petray and Collin, 2017). While the impact of such activism should not be overstated, social media may provide spaces for difficult conversations about race and whiteness that are not available elsewhere. This paper explores these issues through the Twitterstorm caused by Mary Beard’s controversial tweet about the Oxfam aid workers in Haiti.

Specifically, three main research questions emerged from the preceding literature review:

RQ1: What groups were represented in the original tweets posted during this Twitterstorm?

RQ2: What discourses emerged on Twitter in relation to Beard’s Oxfam tweet?

RQ3: Was there any evidence of informal learning about whiteness among these tweeters?

Sample

Tweets containing ‘Mary Beard,’ posted between 16 and 20 February 2018, were purchased from Sifter before being downloaded to its sister text-mining software package Discovertext for analysis. An Excel spreadsheet was created to record field notes that assisted the analysis conducted in May 2018.² This method of data collection was chosen because Twitter’s streaming application programming interface (API) had a ‘hit rate’ as “low as 50 percent” (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2011:446).

The original corpus of 6899 tweets was reduced to 6436 after the removal of non-English tweets. There was a small amount of data loss with seven unique tweets inaccessible to the researchers. This left a total of 6429 tweets meeting the inclusion criteria, namely that they directly addressed the Beard controversy. The dataset consisted of 1718 unique tweets (27 percent), 595 @replies to tweeters (9 percent), and 4116 Retweets/Modified Tweets (64 percent). This was congruent with previous research, which suggested that as much as 65 percent of hashtagged tweets were Retweets (Bruns, Moon, Paul and Münch, 2016).

Self-evidently, tweeters began discussing Mary Beard on 16 February, the date of her initial tweet (see Figure 1). There was a further ‘spike’ on 17 February, when Dr. Priya Gopal posted a screenshot of the tweet alongside a comment confirming this was the “progressive “end of the institutional culture I have to survive day in day out.” (Gopal, 2018b).

(Figure 1 here)

² This research was conducted prior to changes in Twitter’s API restricting academic access to historic tweets. Sifter was decommissioned on 30 September 2018. For more on this, see: <https://texifter.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/sections/200581030-Sifter-FAQ> (accessed 16 October 2019).

In response to the furore, Beard posted a link to her *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) post explaining her position (Beard, 2018b), as well as a photograph showing her crying in response to the negative responses to her original tweet. This was the point in the ‘Twitterstorm’ where professional journalists and politicians intervened to either support or criticize the scholar, as demonstrated by the peak on 18 February.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was undertaken on the original or unique tweets in the corpus (N=2313) rather than retweets.³ This approach was congruent with previous research into how contentious political issues are contested on Twitter, (see O’Loughlin et al, 2017 for example), as well as studies exploring the manifest and latent meanings within texts (Drisko and Maschi, 2015). As per previous studies (Freelon et al, 2016; Gleason, 2013), informal learning was operationalized by examining how many tweeters publicly recognized white privilege and fragility for the first time. A specific focus was the extent to which tweeters, especially those self-identifying as being right-wing, acknowledged the historic racial injustices identified by scholars like Gopal during this Twitterstorm. In addition, the URLs shared by tweeters were analysed to identify the sources cited in responses to Beard’s controversial tweet.

Similar to previous research using QCA (Drisko and Maschi, 2015), a constructivist standpoint was utilized. Both deductive and inductive codes were developed to ensure that tweeters' opinions were adequately represented in the study. Each had categories and subcategories, the former referring to aspects where the researchers “wanted more information” and the latter specifying what was said about these main categories

³ There was a small amount of data loss from tweets scraped and those analysed. 2320 tweets were scraped, and 2313 analysed.

(Schreier, 2014:174). Actors participating in the Twitterstorm were analysed to explore who was represented in Twitter discussions about the Beard tweet. This coding framework was congruent with the approach taken by a study of anti-Islamic hate speech on Twitter (Miller and Smith, 2017), with actors categorized based on the information provided in their Twitter bios.

An iterative process was employed for the QCA. The coding framework was piloted on ten percent of the corpus before being finalized by the researchers and then deployed across the entire dataset. Once the initial coding had been completed, the tweets were re-coded to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Ethics

Ethics approval was received from the host institution in April 2018. Due to the impracticalities of obtaining informed consent, non-elite tweeters were afforded the maximum level of anonymity available by paraphrasing their tweets and not identifying them by their Twitter handles. Unlike public figures such as academics, journalists, and politicians, they lacked the agency and power to respond to any potential reputational and emotional harm that might arise from their identification in academic publications (Beninger, 2017). Public figures were identified, and their tweets reproduced verbatim where appropriate to do so, in accordance with the most recently published guidelines for online research (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess and Association of Internet Researchers, 2019).

Results

Citizens mainly responsible for unique tweets but PoC conspicuously absent

The users responsible for these unique tweets were divided into 12 distinct categories (see Figure 2). Citizens accounted for just over half (1199 tweets, 51.68 percent) of these, with the next most visible group being researchers (287 tweets, 12.37 percent) who weighed in on behalf of Beard or Gopal. Most of the political tweeters self-identified as being left-wing and expressed support in their bios for then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (#JC4PM). Tweets from those who voted Remain in the Brexit referendum frequently used #FBPE (Follow Back Pro-Europe) in their bios, while those who voted Leave tended to use #MBGA (Make Britain Great Again). It should be noted that the bots consisted predominantly of news aggregators, like @TweetMoreUKNews, directing tweeters towards media coverage of the Twitterstorm.

(Figure 2 here)

One interpretation of the relatively high number of ‘no bios’ was that tweeters were concerned about disclosing too much personal information online. However, it was clear that few tweeters in the corpus self-identified as PoC (42 tweets, 1.81 percent), perhaps due to the ‘platformed racism’ seen on sites like Twitter.

Beard is heavily criticized but public figures rally to her defence

The QCA found there were over twice as many unique tweets criticizing Beard (36 percent) compared to those supporting her (16 percent) (Table 1). However, nearly a third of the corpus (30 percent) did not articulate a specific position on the issues raised by the contentious tweet, with a further 18 percent coded as ‘Other’ due to the fact they had no obvious link to the Twitterstorm.

(Table 1 here)

Citizens accounted for most of those unique tweets (210, 54.5 percent) supporting Beard (see Figure 3). Political tweeters accounted for 55 of these tweets, including those who identified as 'Remain' in their bios (expressing support for remaining in the European Union) and left-wing accounts that expressed support for the UK Labour Party and its then leader Jeremy Corbyn. It should be noted that 39 tweets were attributed to accounts providing no bio information, making it difficult to establish the backgrounds of their authors.

(Figure 3 here)

Those supporting Beard focussed more on the Twitterstorm itself than the debate over whiteness and colonialism sparked by her tweet. The majority (225 tweets, 58.4 percent) defended the Cambridge Professor from criticism, with many of their tweets refuting claims she had demonstrated her white privilege and fragility through her tweets (see Figure 4). There were three times as many tweets offering Beard personal support (12) compared to those supporting her ideologically (40).

(Figure 4 here)

Public figures were quick to portray Beard as the victim of the intolerance being displayed by her critics. Her plight was frequently contextualized against the broader issue of the misogynistic abuse experienced by women on social media. For instance, Channel 4 news correspondent Cathy Newman (2018) expressed her sadness at her

“being trolled off Twitter once again” and called for an improved “tenor” of debate to “prevent women being silenced”. There were also echoes of colorblind racism insofar as it was frequently claimed that Beard could not possibly be expressing racist views due to her being a ‘national treasure’ whose credentials were beyond reproach. Journalist Ian Dunt (2018) encapsulated this in a tweet describing her as a popular historian who was “basically unsurpassed, combining storytelling, vivid colour, impeccable research and eye-opening analysis”. In a similar vein, historian David Olusoga (2018) called the suggestion that his “friend Mary” was “some form of neo-colonialist” ridiculous, expressing his horror at the attacks she had received. The same level of respect was rarely extended to academic colleagues like Gopal and Duong-Pedica, who were criticized for suggesting that the Twitterstorm highlighted the whiteness that persisted in the UK. Tweeters used derogatory terms, such as #SJW (social justice warrior), to dismiss their credentials. Indeed, a large number of the tweets (88, 22.85 percent) supporting Beard attacked her critics, followed by those encouraging a ‘pile on’ by naming them (56) and those acknowledging the tweet was ill-judged but did not merit online abuse (34) (see Figure 5). Conversely, more of the tweets supporting the academic were attributed to those self-identifying as left-wing than those condemning her.

(Figure 5 here)

It was perhaps no surprise that the most shared URLs in the Pro-Beard corpus included her TLS essay, in which she defended her controversial tweet but offered apologies for anybody who had taken offence (Beard, 2018c). The ‘Response to Mary Beard’ essay authored by Gopal (2018a) was even shared as a modified tweet by *Telegraph* journalist

Anne-Elisabeth Moutet (2018), suggesting Beard deserved “ support from the ferret-faced little commissars of the New Orthodoxy” (presumably referring to left-wing critics of Beard). In this way, academic responses to the Beard controversy were ‘weaponized’ by right-leaning journalists intent on making the Twitterstorm a ‘free speech issue’, rather than a conversation about the UK’s colonial past.

Those coded as taking neither side included tweets linking to media coverage of the controversy without any additional commentary, humorous posts about reactions to the tweet, and those posted by users who were clearly unaware of who Beard was and what had happened. This category also included tweets criticizing a thread on white fragility created by researcher Anaïs Duong-Pedica (2018), which characterized the picture of Beard crying as “a typical white woman’s move to innocence”. Doung-Pedica was accused of racism for using the term ‘white’ in tweets that simultaneously demonstrated the sensitivity of white people when discussing racism and their lack of understanding of whiteness. For example, a tweeter self-identifying as a student wrote “If you replace this person’s use of ‘white’ with ‘black’, you’d consider that tweet racist. If that’s the case, then this tweet is racist for using ‘white’”. The ideology of colorblind racism was evident in many of these posts, which perpetuated a false equivalency between whites and PoC in terms of their experiences of racism. There were also examples of more overt racism towards researchers of color. Duong-Pedica was a particular target for Twitter accounts expressing support for the Vote Leave campaign and the UK Conservative Party, who ‘othered’ her by calling for her to ‘go home’.

Researchers use Beard controversy to open discussion about whiteness.

Citizens were also responsible for most of the tweets criticizing Beard (425 tweets, 50.65 percent) Political tweeters (58 tweets) and those identifying as feminists (49

tweets) were also represented in this subsample. Olusoga was in the minority of academics defending her, with 148 of these tweets attributed to researchers such as Gopal and Duong-Pedica (see Figure 6). There were proportionately fewer ‘no bios’ (39 tweets, 4.6 percent) compared to the tweets supporting Beard.

(Figure 6 here)

Tweets coded as opposing Beard were predominantly agonistic (64 percent), except for those expressing support for Gopal. These tweeters appeared to be debating issues around race and whiteness rather than being abusive towards Beard. There was little evidence of the scholar being ‘trolled’ in the corpus, although this was probably due to the sampling strategy excluding tweets directed towards her. Most of those criticizing Beard condemned the personal attacks she had experienced on the microblogging site (262 tweets, 31.2 percent), with 207 tweets (24.67 percent) focussing on Gopal’s response rather than the Cambridge academic (Figure 7). This apparent focus on personality was further evidenced by the finding that fewer tweets focused on whiteness (154) and the controversial tweet itself (141).

(Figure 7 here)

Historian Dr. Caroline Dodds Pennock (2018) was among those to express their admiration for Beard while noting that she had “badly misjudged” the Oxfam scandal. Other tweeters were less sympathetic towards the Cambridge scholar. Comedian Ava Vidal (2018) pushed back on suggestions Beard had been silenced, arguing that this had in fact been the outcome for those Black women who had “called her out”. Gopal (2018b) also expressed her confusion at Beard tagging her in a tweet sharing her TLS blogpost, noting that she had already responded to the controversy on Medium. Whether

intentional or not, this had the effect of encouraging a ‘pile on’ in which WoC like Gopal were subject to much abuse from Beard’s supporters.

Elsewhere, there was evidence that Beard was being subject to abuse, albeit for a variety of seemingly contradictory reasons. Far-right US commentator Dinesh D’Souza was responsible for one of the few antagonistic tweets in this category, characterising the Cambridge scholar as having a “sick mind” that would fit in with the “mercenary perverts at the Clinton foundation”. The implication here was that her tweet was emblematic of the ‘moral bankruptcy’ of left-wing politics, rather than white privilege. Her reaction to the Twitter backlash was highlighted by others, with some using the ‘milk shake duck’ meme to express their disappointment at her inability to understand the whiteness conveyed by her original tweet.⁴ Others went further in suggesting Beard had condoned the rape and sexual abuse of WoC through her framing of the Oxfam sex worker scandal.

There was nevertheless some evidence that the controversy was being used by researchers to spark debates about whiteness and the colorblind racism experienced by women of color (WoC). Public figures like Newman and Olusoga were criticized for their unequivocal support of the scholar and apparent indifference to the white fragility highlighted by Duong-Pedica. However, these tweets tended to be agonistic rather than

⁴ The milk shake duck meme describes a person who “becomes extremely popular on the internet for some positive reason, but as their popularity takes off and people dig into their past, they quickly become an object of outrage and hatred.” See: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/milkshake-duck/> (accessed 26 July 2020).

antagonistic in nature. Gopal's 'Response to Mary Beard' piece was shared and endorsed in many of the tweets condemning Beard (175 tweets, 20.85 percent), ahead of those asserting that the controversial tweet condoned rape (104 tweets) and those using the incident to highlight white fragility (80) (see Figure 8).

(Figure 8 here)

For example, Cornell Professor Rachel Weil (2018) suggested white women like herself "gotta shut and up and listen", acknowledging she "learned something" from Gopal's essay. Weil was one of several researchers to share this essay and acknowledge that their own white privilege perpetuated the racism experienced by WoC within the academy and elsewhere. Legal scholar Nadine El-Enany (2018) praised Gopal and compared her blogpost to a letter from US activist Audrey Lorde to Mary Daly in 1979, challenging the feminist philosopher for not acknowledging the experiences of WoC. Tweets such as these were typically accompanied by links to the Gopal essay, the Duong-Pedica white fragility thread, or media coverage of the controversy in outlets such as *Pink News*.

Little evidence of informal learning

There was little evidence that the Beard Twitterstorm had helped whites acknowledge their own privilege, as well as the various forms of racism experienced by PoC. There were a few white women who acknowledged their racial biases; researchers like Weil encouraged others to listen to the experiences of Gopal and Duong-Pedica. However, her friends within the academy were quick to defend her character and refute accusations that she perpetuated white privilege. Overall, there appeared to be little evidence that the Beard Twitterstorm was facilitating informal learning on the scale seen during the BLM protests a few years earlier. Those supporting Beard could not understand how her tweet was considered racist, often failing to acknowledge the

experiences of researchers of color like Gopal, and even accusing them of being racist themselves. It was not just those on the right who vehemently denied the racial and colonial connotations of Beard's tweet. While right-leaning newspapers framed Beard as the victim of a 'leftist' war on 'free speech', left-wing tweeters tended to support the scholar.

An alternative but not mutually exclusive interpretation was that many tweeters were simply reluctant to publicly acknowledge their whiteness. Media portrayals of the UK as being more inclusive than other countries were reflected in tweets describing Beard as a 'national treasure', who could not possibly have condoned colonialism in her original tweet. Beard herself responded to the criticism by temporarily leaving the microblogging site, arguably demonstrating the white fragility highlighted by Duong-Pedica and others. In these circumstances, there were fewer opportunities for informal learning compared to the video footage of police killings which led conservatives to acknowledge the injustices experienced by Black communities in the US. Those wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating whiteness were the most likely to offer unequivocal support for the Cambridge scholar and shut down any meaningful conversations about these issues.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, replies to tweets were likely not included due to the sampling criteria and it was not possible to fully analyse conversations about the controversy that did not namecheck Beard. A related issue was that many tweets may have been deleted in the intervening period between the controversy and the data collection, thus being inaccessible to the researchers. Second,

the categorization of Twitter groups was based on the information disclosed on user bios, which often didn't mention specific political affiliations and thus made it harder to complete this task. It was impossible to capture the responses of watchers (or 'lurkers') who did not leave a digital trace of their opinion on Beard's tweet. Additionally, it should be noted that Sifter was a 'black box' tool, which meant that the processes through which it generated data were unknown to the researchers. Finally, recent research has shown that Twitter is over researched in studies of race online, with researchers in the US and Europe dominating the field (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2021). Therefore, future research should examine whether other platforms, including IM apps like WhatsApp, facilitate informal learning about whiteness and colorblind racism.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study found that citizens were predominantly responsible for the unique tweets posted during the Mary Beard Twitterstorm. While high-profile academics like David Olusoga defended their friend and colleague, other academics used the controversy to begin a conversation about whiteness. Political tweeters were represented in tweets supporting and condemning the Cambridge scholar, however the relatively high number of accounts providing no bio information made it difficult to generalise about the groups mobilized on the site during this incident.

In terms of the discourses that emerged on the microblogging site, there were nearly twice as many tweets condemning Beard for her Oxfam tweet as supporting her. Much of this criticism focussed on the whiteness, white privilege and colonialism which underpinned this controversy. The analysis provided evidence of the importance of

opinion leaders in online discussions around race. Gopal was a leading voice amongst those using the Beard tweet to spark conversations about these issues, encouraging WoC to share their experiences within the academy and elsewhere. Her Medium essay, along with Duong-Pedica's white fragility thread, provided a focal point for the publics mobilized by this Twitterstorm. They invited researchers to reflect on their own whiteness and encouraged others to listen to the experiences of WoC. Perhaps inevitably, the cost of this leadership was the abuse directed at Gopal and Duong-Pedica, which illustrated the whiteness raised in their contributions.

The qualitative analysis of these tweets showed little sign that the incident had provided a space for informal learning and about whiteness. For the majority of tweeters in the corpus there was little acknowledgement of the racial injustice experienced by PoC, as demonstrated by the treatment of Gopal and Duong-Pedica. Additionally, left-wing tweeters were unequivocal supporters of Beard. This resonated with the argument put forward by Eddo-Lodge (2017), which suggests that whiteness persists due to the failure of those identifying as left-wing or liberal to acknowledge their own prejudice. In this context, Beard's supporters not engaging in discourses of race could be characterized as further evidence of not only colorblind racism, but also the denial of their own white privilege.

While there was no evidence of hate speech in this study, tweeters frequently invoked colorblind racism. Many perpetuated the 'minimization of racism' frame identified by Bonilla-Silva, presuming things were better for people of color than they are and failing to acknowledge Gopal's experiences as both a researcher and person of color. The burden of talking about whiteness fell on PoC, suggesting that Twitter perpetuated racial

structures. The Audre Lorde letter was shared to highlight the importance of involving PoC as equal participants in conversations about race. Nevertheless, the study suggested Twitter retains potential as a tool for resistance and change when it comes to whiteness, especially when opinion leaders such as Gopal engage in these debates.

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

The coding framework can be obtained directly from the researchers.

	Number of Tweets	Percentage
Supporting Beard	385	16%
Opposing Beard	839	36%
Neither Side	687	30%
Other	409	18%

Table 1: Breakdown of views on Mary Beard

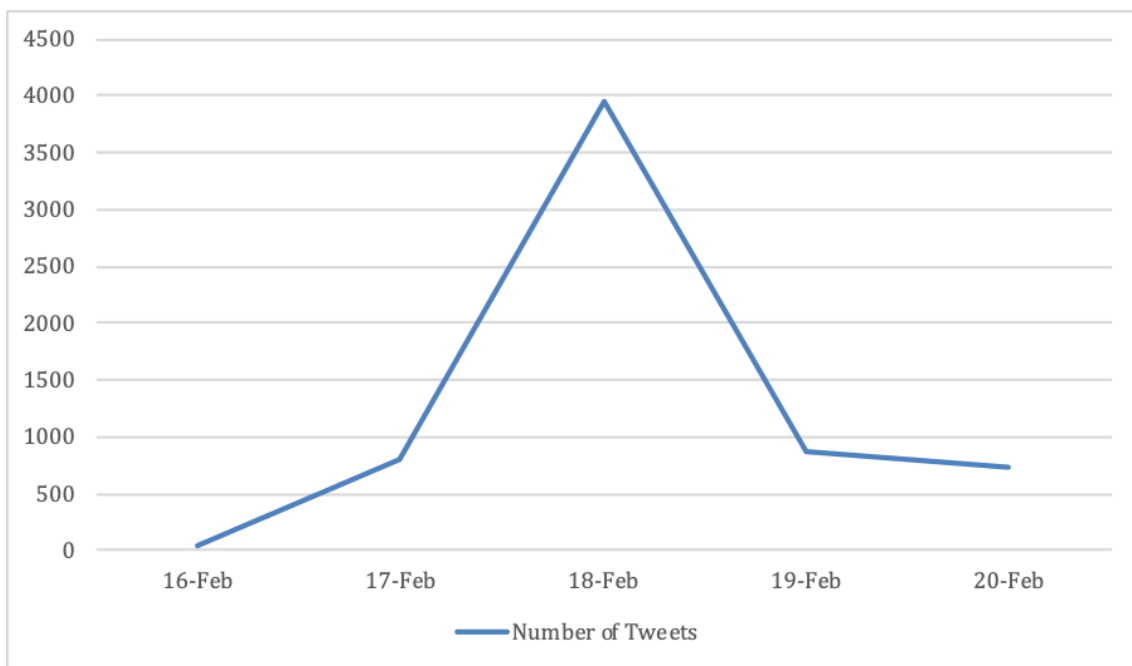


Figure 1: Number of tweets mentioning 'Mary Beard,' 16-20 February 2018

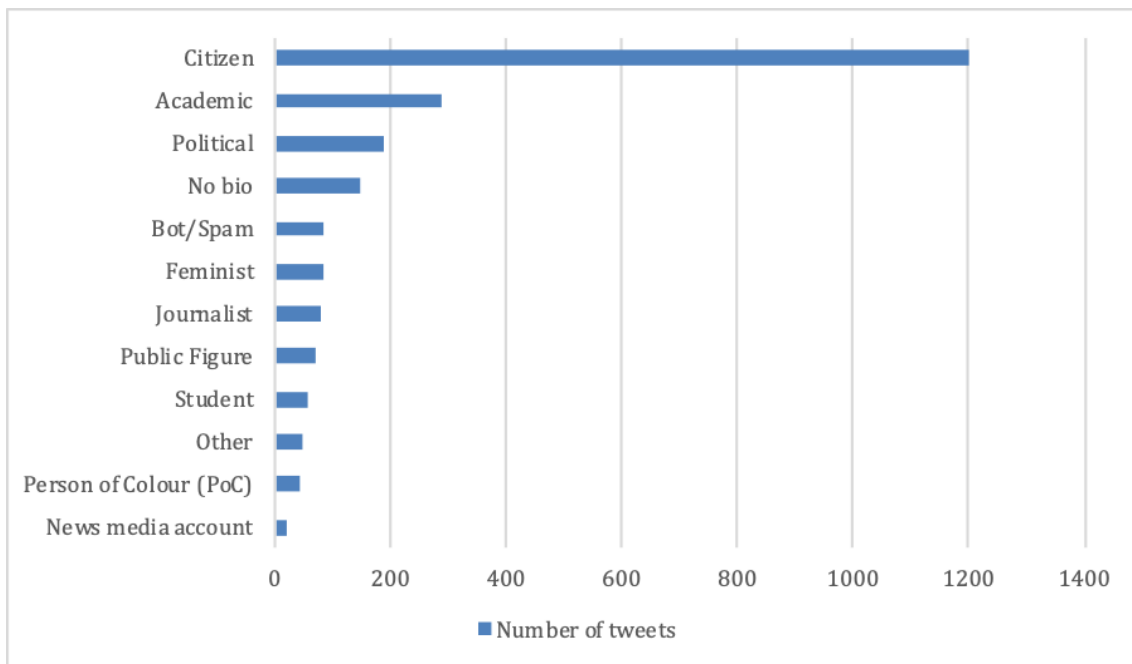


Figure 2: Groups present in unique tweets

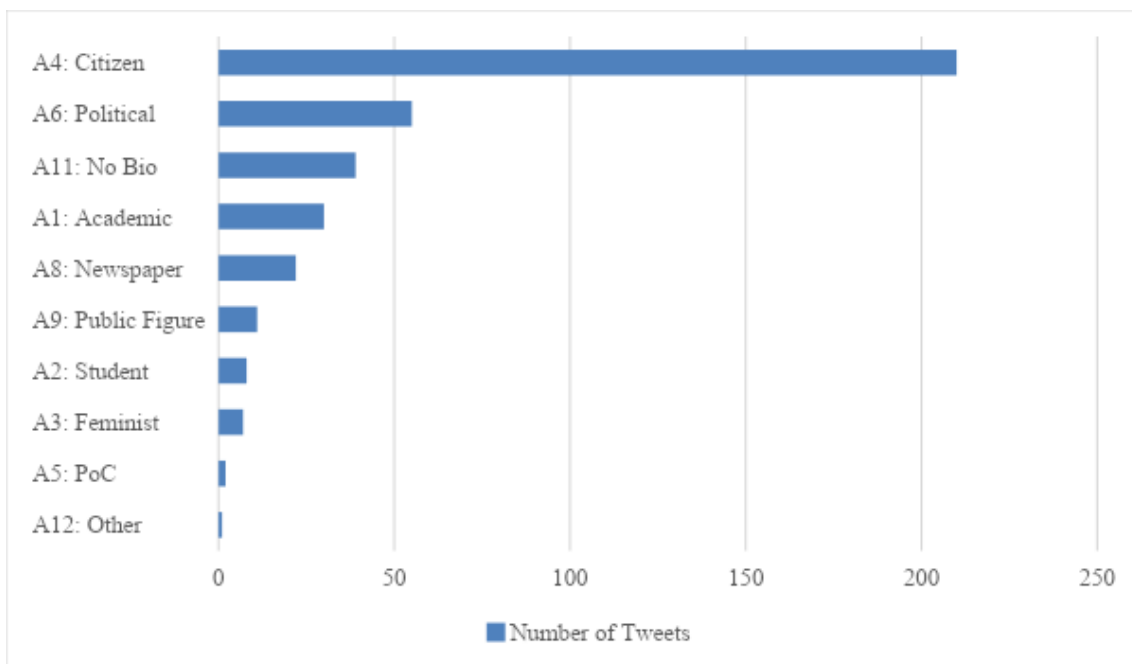


Figure 3: Groups present in tweets supporting Beard

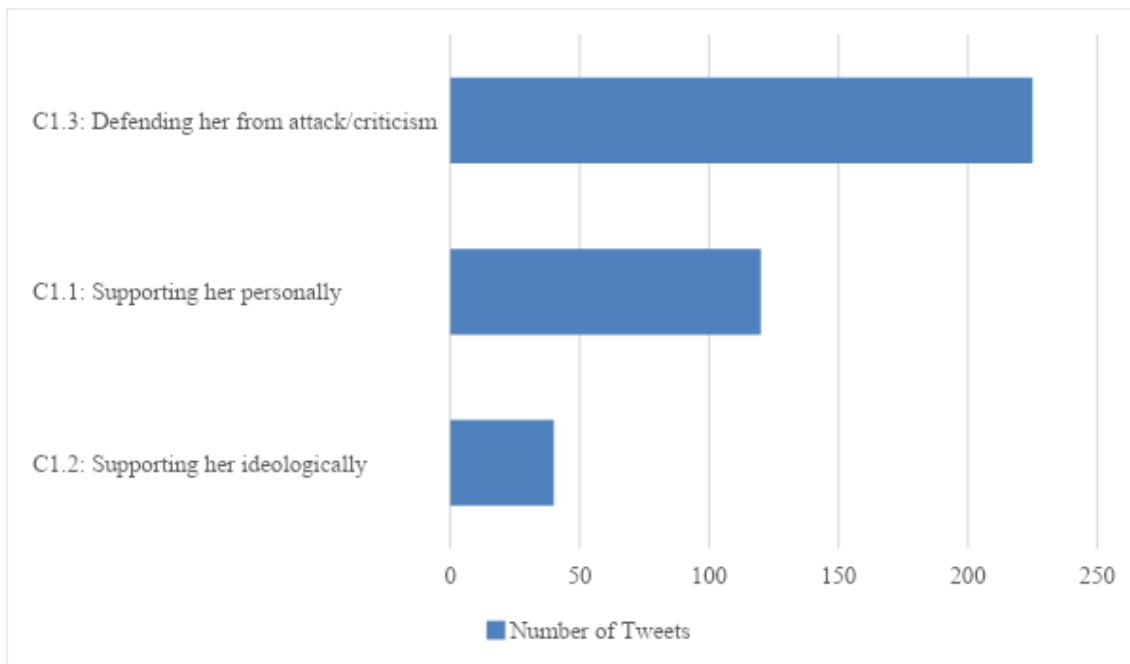


Figure 4: Themes present in tweets supporting Beard

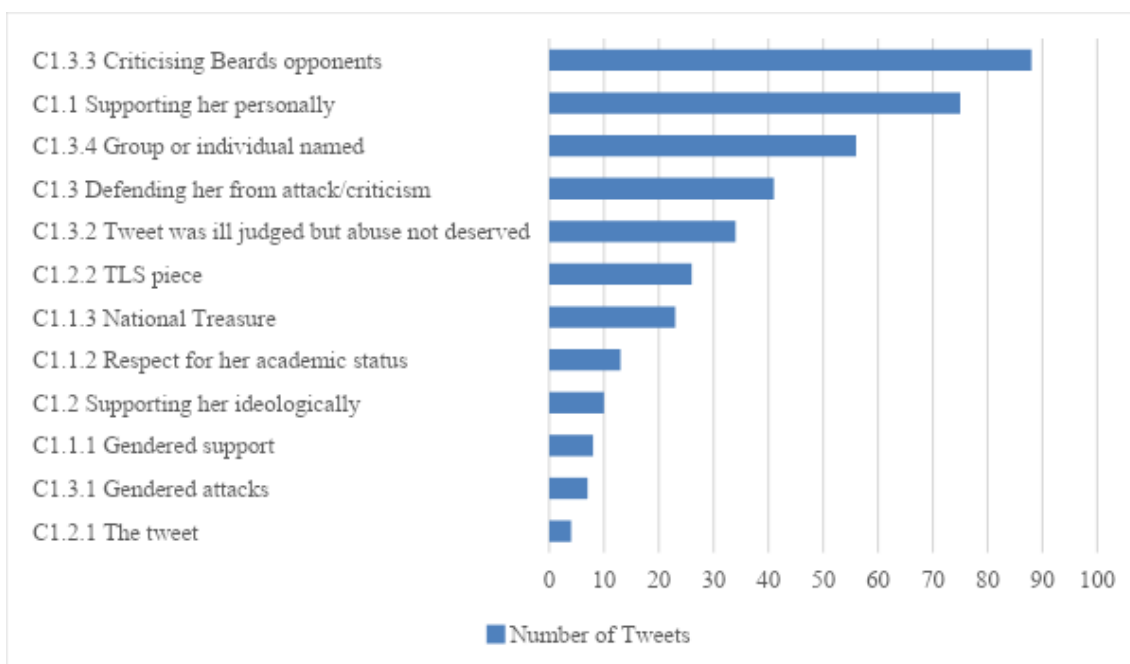


Figure 5: Sub-themes present in tweets supporting Beard

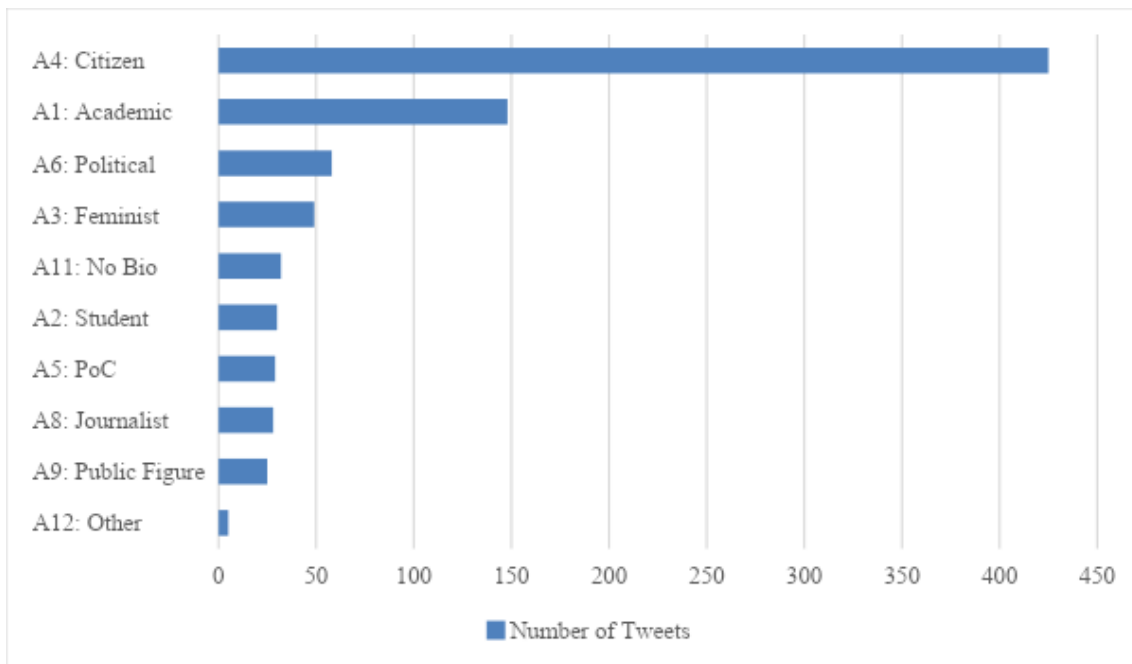


Figure 6: Groups responsible for tweets criticizing Beard

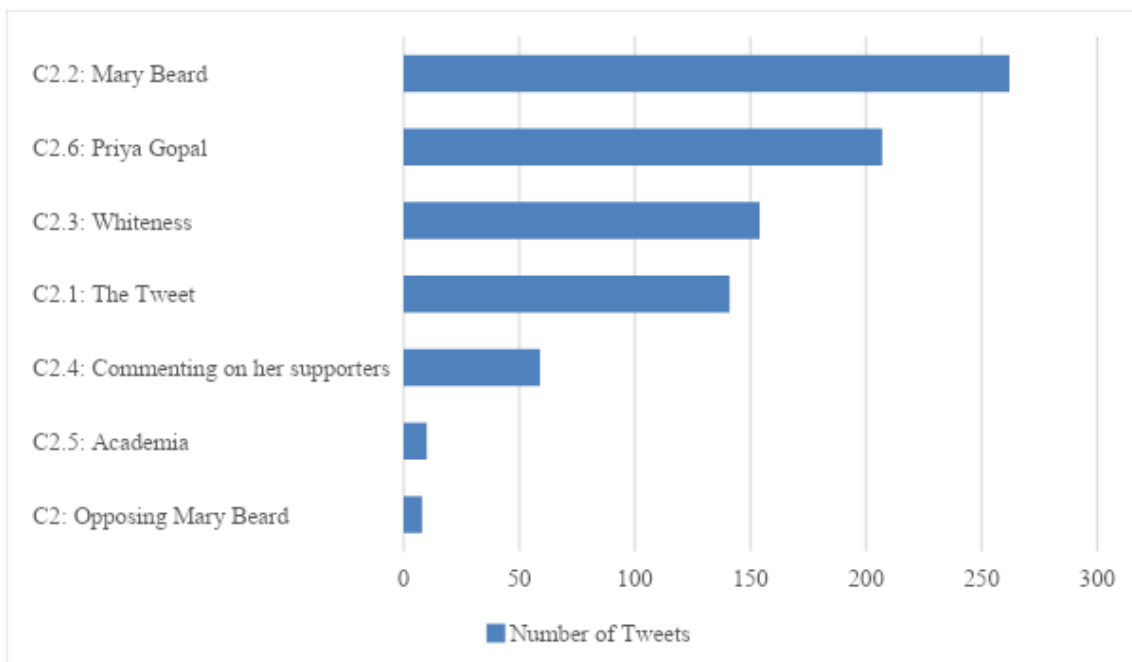


Figure 7: Themes present in tweets criticizing Beard

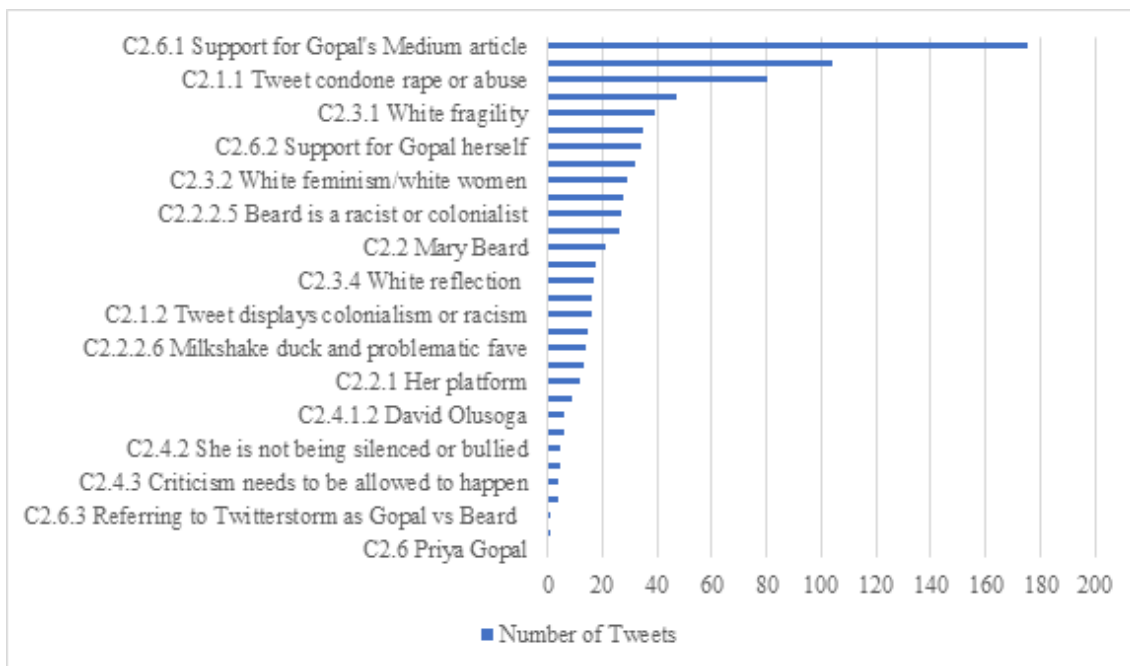


Figure 8: Sub-themes in tweets criticizing Beard