I got all my sisters with me (on Black Twitter): second screening of How to Get Away with Murder as a discourse on Black Womanhood

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To cite this article: Apryl Williams & Vanessa Gonlin (2017): I got all my sisters with me (on Black Twitter): second screening of How to Get Away with Murder as a discourse on Black Womanhood, Information, Communication & Society, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1303077

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1303077

Published online: 06 Apr 2017.

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I got all my sisters with me (on Black Twitter): second screening of How to Get Away with Murder as a discourse on Black Womanhood

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ABSTRACT
In addition to performing racial identity on Black Twitter, Black users also use the platform to host discourse on Blackness. Tweets, hashtags, and trends associated with the television show How to Get Away with Murder are used to demonstrate that second screening and co-viewing of the series on Twitter enables a technocultural discourse on a shared cultural history of Black womanhood. Specifically, we address scenes portrayed in HTGAWM and highlight the intersection of race and gender. From a critical Black feminist lens we analyze the response on Black Twitter.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 November 2016
Accepted 1 March 2017

KEYWORDS
Black Twitter; Black feminism; co-viewing; second screening; HTGAWM

Analise taking off her wig and makeup was Shonda saying fuck y’all and your views on Black female beauty.
I Live. #HTGAWM
- HTGAWM Fan

Introduction
Black women are frequently portrayed in media as unattractive, threatening, hypersexualized, and inferior to all others (Chavez, 2013; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Feagin, 2013; Morales & Bejarano, 2008; Nagel, 2003; Slatton, 2015). Overcoming negative stereotypes can be achieved through networks and support systems which may be engaged in person. But previous research suggests that support networks may also be facilitated online. We argue here that Twitter facilitates discourse on racial representations on television. In turn, Black users connect with their own community members online. In this way, Twitter may be analyzed as an online microcosm of US society, in which Black members seek out others with whom they racially identify and draw support.

Further extending the depth of online discourse, the use of a second screen (i.e., a tablet, smart phone, or computer) allows users to communicate with each other as they are watching an episode together or ‘co-viewing’ (a collective viewing experience; often facilitated by social media – Doughty, Rowland, & Lawson, 2012). Using a form of critical discourse analysis, we analyze the relationship between viewing audiences’ second screen and
co-viewing practices. Ultimately, we argue that communal viewing of the television series *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM) and resulting discourse on Twitter demonstrates insider access to a shared cultural history of Black womanhood, culture-specific nostalgia, and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Discourse enabled by discussion of HTGAWM on Twitter is particularly significant because it stars a strong Black female lead and in that it carves out a space for Black women to connect and find support networks.

**How to Get Away with Murder**

The American drama series HTGAWM airs on Thursday nights weekly throughout the season, excluding mid-season breaks. Our analysis focuses on season 1, which aired from September 2014 to February 2015. Produced by Shonda Rhimes, the series stars a Black female leading actress, Viola Davis, as a powerful attorney and law professor. In addition to teaching students at a prestigious law school how to defend clients accused of murder, Professor Annalise Keating employs a group of her students to help defend her own clients, who may have committed murder. The cast is diverse regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation.

This television series is a particularly useful case to consider because of Davis’ representation of a Black woman. Davis herself has Afrocentric facial features, a dark complexion, and kinky hair. This is directly oppositional to common contemporary portrayals of Black femininity on television, which typically depict lighter skinned Black women with curly or straightened hair (i.e., *Girlfriends* aired 2000–2008, *Scandal* aired 2012-present, *Blackish* aired 2014-present, and *Empire* aired 2015-present). Davis plays a dynamic character that is both strong and vulnerable, confident and scared; she adds a nuanced depiction of Black women on television.

Scenes of vulnerability portrayed by Davis highlight the intersectionality of race and gender that is lacking in most television series. Black feminist scholars emphasize the relative invisibility of Black women in general (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1989). The conceptualization of Black women as ‘only good for their bodies’ is depicted contemporarily in American media: Black women, if they are represented at all, are often portrayed as tough, unattractive, and undesirable or sexually immoral and hypersexual (Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992; Nagel, 2003; Springer, 2008).1

Producer Shonda Rhimes defies this unidimensional stereotype by allowing viewers to see a multifaceted Black protagonist that they can identify with, as we demonstrate by the response on Black Twitter to such a portrayal. Our analysis focuses on interactions centered on two events. The first, what we term the big reveal, represents the moment when Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) removes her makeup and wig, portraying a ritual that most women perform deal with daily. The imagery of taking off the wig to reveal natural, kinky hair underneath is something specific to Black women. The next point of observation focuses on the mother–daughter grooming ritual – a poignant scene in the series in which Annalise’s (Davis) mother combs her hair out. The representation of the arduous process of detangling Black hair is specific to Black womanhood as evidenced by the long-standing discourse on Black hair care that is passed from generation to generation (Lester, 2000; Mercer, 2000). Black hair is often portrayed on television; cut, styled, and costumed at the hands of producers – most of whom are white. When haircare is discussed
in film and television, it is often done in a humorous manner. Thus, as a Black producer, Rhimes’ nuanced portrayal of Black hair care in primetime television is groundbreaking.

**Literature review**

Our research lies at the intersection of many bodies of literature, and necessitates a Black feminist intersectional approach between race and gender. With a critical lens, we attempt to summarize the most salient research in each, pausing along the way to highlight connections and heretofore missing links. We proceed by first framing viewer participation on Twitter within the existing literature on second screen use and co-viewing. Next, we examine the digital expansion of Black support networks. Finally, we discuss the cultural implications and limitations of using Black Twitter as a space for discourse on Blackness and Black womanhood.

**The second screen and co-viewing as technocultural tools**

We understand technoculture to connote the reciprocal exchange between the social and the technical. Culture influences and is influenced by technologies and our technologies are influenced by the way our culture uses and talks about them. As viewers watch television, a second screen can allow individuals to connect with others on social media platforms. In this context, the second screen is a technocultural tool that is capable of hosting ‘deliberative discourse,’ exposing users to multiple viewpoints in a wide social sphere (Trilling, 2015, p. 260). Viewers tweet, text, and post along with each other as they consume media. Television viewing is no longer a unidirectional process (Trilling, 2015).

In addition to co-viewing television with a second screen, users can also view shows later, while still participating in second screen discussions of the show. Viewers can tune in from practically anywhere and at any time that they choose. The second screen offers benefits that television cannot. For example, the hashtag acts as a cataloguing system so viewers of the original broadcast can still communicate with later viewers who stream the show. Users may participate in conversations at different times of the week, month, or year. Additionally, Twitter is optimal for co-viewing because following other users can be, but is not expected to be, bidirectional; Twitter accounts can be private but are not necessarily private; and users do not have to exist in the same network to engage with each other – hashtags provide a coalescing point (Trilling, 2015).

For all the reasons mentioned above, the co-viewing process is liberative in that it diminishes discourse interruption. Liberative digital spaces such as Twitter have been theorized as networked publics (boyd, 2011; Ito, 2008). When television programming is consumed via the second screen in networked publics, ‘we observe the emergence of new practices enabled by widespread technologies such as Internet, Wi-Fi, mobile devices, and smart TV sets’ (Giglietto & Selva, 2014, p. 260). We observe that the second screen can act as a gateway to discursive dialogue.

**Connected viewing and co-viewing**

Instead of co-viewing, Pittman and Tefertiller (2015) argue that connected viewing or mediated television viewing with a second screen should be called ‘co-connected viewing,’
implying a combination of connected and co-viewing. Their study suggests that there is some difference between traditional broadcast viewing and the consumption of streamed content. In our opinion, this difference is minimal. In their study, Tweets gathered over a period of 72 hours for both streamed and broadcasted content differed in that broadcast tweets spiked during the show but evened out relatively quickly, whereas viewers using streaming services tended to tweet in more steady, continuous streams. We argue that the cataloguing aspect of the hashtag allows viewers of the original broadcast to communicate with post-broadcast viewers, minimizing this distinction.

Piers de Sá (2015) offers an alternative moniker for co-viewing as a technocultural practice. In this conception, ‘co-viewing 2.0’ refers to all of the backchannels of communication that can be associated with second screening. Finger and De Souza (2012) also consider the relationship of social network websites to the second screen. Second screens act as backchannels because they allow users to watch television on one main screen, and seek alternative sources of information and opinions at the same time. Second screens can facilitate collective meaning-making— all participate in the process of producing knowledge together (Piers de Sá, 2015).

**Audience engagement and participatory culture**

Even when viewers have already viewed an episode, they often return to Twitter to continue previous conversations or join new dialogues (Schirra, Sun, & Bentley, 2014), suggesting that co-viewing via the second screen has the potential to draw audiences into important discourse on identity politics over time. Schirra and colleagues (2014) also offered several possible user motivations to live-tweet while co-viewing on the second screen. Most relevant to our discussion, participants were prompted to tweet about certain events if scenes were sad or humorous, if they felt the need to connect with others while watching the show – ‘especially when they are watching television alone’ (Schirra et al., 2014, p. 6), or if they wanted to affirm personal opinions. Interestingly but unsurprisingly, their results also revealed that co-viewing strengthened previously existing offline relationships. These findings offer support for theorizing co-viewing via the second screen as a discourse-enabling, technocultural tool.

The second screen has also promoted greater audience engagement and a growth in participatory culture (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). But we must question the social constructions of the affordances of participatory culture. Who benefits from these conversations and who gets left out (Deller, 2011)? Are there certain social constructions built into our technoculture that influence the ability to participate? Certainly – second screen viewing is only ‘dialogue-enabling’ (Laursen & Sandvik, 2014) to certain users. Given that second screen co-viewing is ‘parasocial,’ unequal distribution of second screens limits the access of some, while others lack the technocultural and economic capital to engage in dialogues on Twitter due to an inability or unwillingness to navigate the platform.

Digital inequality reflects existing economic inequality (those with lower incomes encounter greater difficulty when purchasing non-essential technology). Thus, digital inequality becomes even more important in light of the power that producers have recently yielded to audiences. Television producers are responding to the second screening process by changing the content of shows (Cameron & Geidner, 2014). Groups which have not always had adequate representation on television are speaking up about the representation of their identities. Previous research suggests that users’ opinions are influenced by
trending topics (Cameron & Geidner, 2014). Therefore, the power of a trending topic like #HTGAWM to shift conversations about race representation should not be underestimated. But the discourse-producing affordances of Twitter are not evenly distributed. In our study of Black women’s discourse surrounding HTGAWM, we acknowledge that only women with access to second screens can participate in this particular meaning-making process. Thus, the discourse may be absent of subsets of Black women viewers including those lacking the means to purchase digital technologies and older generations of Black women who are unable to, or choose not to, engage with social media. Consequently, their narratives may not be as readily represented in programming catering to young, middle class audiences.

**Black social networks and support systems revisited and expanded**

Black social networks can be helpful and necessary for Blacks to persevere in a predominantly White environment. For example, Evans (2013) found that Black flight attendants and pilots are publicly disrespected and questioned about their work ability. Evans’s respondents found comfort in talking about racialized experiences and took relief in the inevitable fact that they were not alone in their experiences.

Sharing hurtful racialized experiences can be done via face-to-face networks, as Evans (2013) describes, but it can also be done through social media. Black women are able to validate their experiences by empathizing, sharing collective memories, and feeling connected to people they have never met. Without these connections it is common to feel alone and vulnerable (Evans, 2013). Black Twitter can be used to expand interpersonal networks and allow users to feel understood by and unified with a community. For example, Black feminists have successfully used Twitter to expand networks that provide encouragement for Black women that are sexual assault survivors in specific locales where support networks may be limited (Williams, 2015). Moreover, when mainstream news media fails to report issues relevant to Black women, Black feminists on Twitter often share news and engage in critical discussions about it (Williams, 2015). Similarly, Black NFL players used Twitter to share sentiments and engage in discourse on Travon Martin and George Zimmerman. Though they were spread across the country, 125 Black players discussed the anticipation they felt before the trial, shared opinions about the justice system in America, and responded to fans who also engaged the discourse (Schmittle & Sanderson, 2014). Thus, twitter can transverse class and status divides to provide expanded support networks for Black users.

**Making and marking racial boundaries**

Because our online lives and offline lives often converge to create an ongoing identity negotiation, Twitter acts as a stage on which identity claims are made, including racial identity claims. Marwick and boyd (2011) contend that Twitter users know that their audiences are potentially limitless and use cultural cues to visualize an audience. In the co-viewing process, the imagined audience becomes particularly important; users construct tweets for an audience that is viewing the same television show. They develop a conception of the people who will view their tweet. In the case of HTGAWM, we will demonstrate that Black users envision an audience that looks like them.
Black Twitter users enjoy connecting with other Black users but they remain aware that Twitter is not a homogeneously Black space. Coded interactions are used to demarcate boundaries in the Twitterverse. Papacharissi (2012) and Florini (2013) propose that users of color use distinct language to mark social boundaries. Signifyin’ online operates similarly to the way people code switch offline. However, Black Twitter uses ‘indirectness, doubleness, and wordplay … for the performance of Black Cultural Identity on Twitter’ (Florini, 2013, p. 2). Black users intentionally signify to convey multiple layers of identity. Users who do not understand the sociohistorical implications of coded tweets are excluded, thereby ensuring some semblance of group solidarity (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Williams, 2015; Williams, 2016a). For example, in our study, viewers use #Dat-Murda in addition to #HTGAWM. The former, originally created by ‘Black Girl Nerds,’ use common vernacular to speak to a specific subset of viewers.

Beyond racial boundary making, Brock (2012) argues that the alternative, distinctive marking of Black Twitter acts as a ‘social public’ – a community that was formed on Twitter by those with insider and outsider status (p. 530). Black Twitter is bound by the technocultural norms associated with the mainstream narratives of Twitter (i.e., White users believe that Twitter is predominantly used by White users even though empirical evidence suggests otherwise; see Smith, 2011) and cannot be completely representative of or inclusive of Blackness (Brock, 2012). Thus, users often code switch to enact insider status.

**Data and method**

Tweets were collected using Crimson Hexagon (CH), a social media analytics company that uses software developed at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University (Breese, 2016). We collected and analyzed tweets relating to HTGAWM that were posted between 1 September 2014 and 15 October 2016. CH’s user platform, Fore-sight, allows the researcher to set up parameters for data collection using keywords to control ‘monitors.’ Monitors act as the user interface for the backend data collection via trained algorithms (Jamal, Keohane, Romney, & Tingly, 2015). For this study, we wanted to capture as many tweets as possible that were related to the series. To do so, we used the terms ‘HTGAWM’ or ‘htgawm’ or ‘how to get away with murder.’ Using these parameters yielded a total of 8,017,877 tweets over a 25-month period (1 September 2014 to 15 October 2016). Because CH monitors data from the Twitter Fire-hose (data provided by Twitter on every public tweet that has been ‘sent around the globe’, Breese, 2016, p. 6), this number represents the entire corpus of public tweets using any variation of the hashtag HTGAWM, groupings of the letters HTGAWM, or the phrase ‘how to get away with murder.’ We furthered refined our sample by focusing on two of the most discussed episodes of the season, as shown by specific peaks in conversation. The two cases that we present below (Graph 1) represent times of peak conversation in their respective seasons (excluding the season premier and season finale which naturally have higher viewership).

With this narrowed focus in mind, our analysis centers on two specific time periods: 16–17 October 2014 and 19–20 February 2015. These dates correspond with the original air date of the episodes and the following day because we wanted to capture the initial viewers and any who may have joined the discussion the following day. Therefore, using the same monitoring parameters as the overall data set, 115,496 tweets were sent
between 16 and 17 October 2014 while 153,489 tweets were sent between 19 and 20 February 2015.

We use CH data to provide a broad overview of the number of users talking about HTGAWM and to capture tweets that we would not have access to were we to use the same search parameters on Twitter without the aid of CH’s monitoring of the Twitter Firehose. Once the tweets were collected, we used search terms specific to the discourse being employed (‘wig,’ ‘hair,’ ‘mom,’ and ‘comb’) to further parse relevant tweets. A computer-generated random sample of the 12,537 refined tweets (using the search terms above) was then hand coded for emerging themes. Once themes were established, representative interactions were chosen and have been reproduced (Graphs 1, 2).

If tweets are geotagged, CH provides data about the geographic origin of each tweet as well as the inferred gender of the author of each tweet. CH data project that 65% and 64% of the tweets in our sample were sent by women during the two time periods being analyzed. Further, out of 82,665 tweets with identifiable geotags sent on the days of peak conversation, it was determined that the most tweets originated from New York, Georgia, Texas, Florida, California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina – all states with the highest percentage of Black residents according to 2010 Census Bureau data (US Census Bureau, n.d.).
Using the demographics function of CH, we found that the majority of users in our sample are using an image of a person of color in their personal profile, suggesting that the majority of users in our sample are people of color. Once keywords were confirmed, we checked the accounts of users included. For example, out of 210 randomly sampled posts using the keyword ‘hair,’ 166 profile pictures were hand coded as having originated from a Black user. Using the keyword ‘comb,’ 76 out of 123 were coded as Black. Both researchers checked the profile page and avatar of the author of each representative statement that we have included below (names and avatars have been removed as per institutional IRB guidelines). We acknowledge that visual coding of avatars can be unreliable because people can use images of others to fool or ‘catfish’ their networks (Williams, 2016b). But our analysis focuses on the representation of Black womanhood on television and the discourse about that portrayal. Although we cannot verify the race and gender of each user in our sample, we focus on the public discussion of topics within an online space as perceived by participants as Black and female. How the user is presenting themselves to the rest of the network is more important than whether or not each individual user is verifiably Black and female. Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson (2014) have established precedent for this treatment of visual analysis of race-presenting avatars in their study on racial and gendered performativity in trending topics.

On Twitter, several hashtags can trend at once. Even within a set of hashtags, some are more important to our discussion than others. Previous research suggests that trending hashtags can act as a type of instant community (Fitton, Gruen, & Poston, 2009). At times, these instant communities can become longer conversations about themes that reoccur. Regarding HTGAWM, themes that arise in one episode often re-emerge during the next, causing a season-long or even series-long conversation. Previous research suggests that these communities coalesce around identity politics or interests (Small, 2011). For instance, #gladiators is used by viewers of Scandal to connote the community of viewers that co-views Scandal together (Williams, 2016a). Similarly, the viewers in this study use the hashtag #HTGAWM to connect the community of viewers following the show. Hashtags facilitate conversations beyond the immediate timeframe and allow viewers to communicate with other users that they may or may not follow. Hashtags also serve as a reference point for users who may be encountering the conversation for the first time. Thus, hashtags are an instrumental part of technoculture.

We use critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to examine the symbolic and written content of tweets associated with co-viewing of HTGAWM. CTDA works to subvert instrumental and deterministic accounts of interactions between people and technology, by looking at the artifact’s interpellation (Althusser, 1971) by its users (Brock, 2012). CTDA can be used when conducting online discourse analysis of discussions held on Twitter, and has been used to understand representations and social constructions of race on blogs (Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010), in videogames (Brock, 2011), and on Twitter (Brock, 2012).

CTDA is perhaps best understood as a technique, rather than a method. Nakamura (2006) and Brock (2012) argue that Internet researchers should consider the user and the interface, being careful to consider the social construction of the user’s race, gender, and so on as well as the social construction and constraints of the platform. Going a step further, we argue that the same principles that are used when understanding technology may be used to understand audiences’ interaction with television media when the
discourse occurs online. Specifically, the technocultural aspects of this article are the co-viewing and second screening process as well as the technologies that allow users to participate in those processes. Concerning the critical in CTDA, we also consider the absence or presence of representation of race in media that are consumed during the co-viewing and second screening process.

In summary, CTDA is grounded in interpreting the meaning and meaning-making process in digital spaces concerning a discourse. As researchers, we interpret society; we cannot report on it exactly as it exists in a particular moment. We choose to interpret our findings based on convincing evidence that the ongoing dialogue surrounding HTGAWM moves beyond character drama. However, as Gee (2014) notes that, concerning discourse analysis, ‘validity is never “once and for all.” All analyses are open to further discussion and dispute’ (Gee, 2014, p. 141). This discourse may and likely will shift over time. We welcome and look forward to new interpretations.

**Critical technocultural discourse analysis: #HTGAWM and Black Womanhood**

Coding of tweets in association with the television series HTGAWM revealed several themes within the discourse surrounding Black womanhood. Dominant themes are categorized by episode (Table 1).

**The big reveal**

The episode ‘Let’s Get to Scooping’ originally aired on 16 October 2014 during the show’s first season (season 1, episode 4). The moment that we focus on begins when Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) returned home and found evidence that implicated her husband in a murder. In response, Annalise began her evening ritual and waited to confront him. She removed her wig, makeup, eyelashes, and earrings. The two points that Twitter users seem to be most taken with are the absence of any makeup, revealing a darker complexion, and the removal of the wig, revealing natural kinky hair, something not often represented on primetime television. Removing the wig was extremely important because Black hair styling and care have historically been sites of political action (Lester, 2000; Mercer, 2000). Natural Black hair is viewed as deviant, unattractive, and unsophisticated (Hutchinson Miller, 2016; Leeds Craig, 2002; Mercer, 2000), leading Black men and Black women to alter their hair to make it appear more White, such as using heat and chemicals.

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Episodic information and emergent themes.</th>
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<td><strong>Episode title</strong></td>
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to straighten it, adding pressure and weight to their scalps by braiding hair, or covering their hair with a wig (Lester, 2000). Showing natural hair is associated with Black pride and rebellion against mainstream White norms (Hutchinson Miller, 2016). Therefore, watching a Black woman remove her straight wig to reveal her natural kinky hair on national television was cause for discussion.

**Joy at breakthrough in media representation**

Twitter users indicate that a Black woman taking off her wig on national television is novel and overdue. As seen in Graph 3 below, a random sampling of all of the tweets in our data set showed that discussion of Viola’s wig occupied 33% of the dialogue on wigs, indicating that Viola’s hair continues to be discussed by Twitter users throughout the series as demonstrated by trending topics during the most recent season.

On the date that the episode ‘Let’s Get to Scooping’ aired, this scene (and its variations) occupied 17% of the conversation. The idea that the scene was powerful dominated the conversation. Removing a wig to reveal natural Black hair sparked intense emotions via the co-viewing discourse of tweeters. Some of the most prevalent words associated with Annalise taking off her wig include *real, raw, powerful, and inspiring*. The strong emotions connected to this moment on television are tied to the lack of televised precedence and the recognition that Black hair is stigmatized. As one Twitter user explicitly states (Figure 1).

![Graph 3. Topic Wheel of Tweets Associated with #HTGAWM.](image-url)
This fits precisely with why actor Viola Davis pushed for a scene in which she removes her wig. As Davis explains,

So often I see women on the screen, and I don’t recognize them. They’re not women that I know. It’s like a woman who’s been through a filter, and then she comes out, and there’s pieces that I recognize, but mostly it’s a Mr. Potato Head of male desirability. (Newnam, 2016)

Users concur that taking off the wig was significant specifically because of the lack of current representation (Figure 2):

Removing a wig that generally conforms to a more Eurocentric sense of beauty is a ritual activity for many Black women, yet this aspect of Black life is rarely represented on television. The participatory nature of co-viewing allows for Black women to communicate with each other about the lack of representation.

**Viewers’ emotional, personal connections**

Our findings support those of Schirra et al. (2014) who found that users participated in co-viewing when they wanted to feel connected to other viewers. Viewers of HTGAWM not only make connections with other users but they also negotiate their own identities through the process of second screen participation (Figure 3).
These tweets suggest that co-viewers not only have identified with the character, but they also saw themselves in her. Even when viewers participate via the second screen after the original episode has aired, they still participate in the ongoing discourse. Thus, the second screen acts as a technocultural tool that allows users to commune with others about feelings of underrepresentation but also rejoice with those with similar marginalized experiences.

**Constructing and reifying Black authenticity through natural hair**

Users also highlighted the reality of the moment when Annalise took off her wig. Entwined with ‘being real’ was a sense of freedom, signifying that natural hair is tied to authenticity. To be natural is equated by viewers as being more authentically Black. Annalise does not actually become darker once she removes her wig, but the association of natural hair with a more authentic level of Blackness suggests that viewers connect authenticity and natural hair discourse. The word ‘real’ is used multiple times by Twitter users responding to the scene in which Annalise removes her wig and her makeup. At times ‘real’ means authentic. Sometimes ‘real’ means exciting or dangerous. Still at other times, real means relatable (Figure 4).

Authenticity is negotiated as users define and redefine ‘real.’ The tweets written by users indicate their definitions of what it means to be a ‘real’ Black woman. The user defines taking off the wig as an indicator of being a #realBlackwoman (Figure 5).

Users intentionally code language in tweets to signify Blackness. They cite the wig removal alongside other signifyin’ language and combine them to accentuate what it means to them to be Black, and how Blackness is displayed in this scene (Figure 6).

‘Dis so Black!’ is an intentionally humorous play on signifyin’ language; it is specifically coded to express insider group status while excluding people do not identify as Black from the discourse. Even though ‘outsiders’ still have access to tweets, allowing other groups to view the conversation as it unfolds, they lack the shared sociohistorical understanding. Co-viewing facilitates meaning-making between ingroup members.

**The dissenters: wig haters and internalized racism**

Not every Twitter user was of the opinion that Annalise’s natural hair reveal was a positive image. As seen above, users again emphasize the heightened level of perceived Blackness achieved by wearing natural hair, but this time they are revolted by it (Figure 7).
This user argues that if Annalise’s love interest saw her natural hair, he would not find her attractive; that one feature, natural Black hair, would be enough to drive him away. This user’s comment suggests that they have internalized the dominant Eurocentric

**Figure 4.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the wig scene’.

**Figure 5.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the wig scene’.

**Figure 6.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the wig scene’.

**Figure 7.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the wig scene’.

This user argues that if Annalise’s love interest saw her natural hair, he would not find her attractive; that one feature, natural Black hair, would be enough to drive him away. This user’s comment suggests that they have internalized the dominant Eurocentric
view of beauty. Other users are reminded of slavery when they see Annalise’s natural hair. This accentuates the lack of representation in the media (Figure 8).

By connecting natural hair to slavery, users conjure up images of the first Africans in America. Their sentiments construct natural hair as being closer to a derogatory depiction of Africans. Furthermore, equating natural hair to slavery puts those who wear natural hair in a subordinated position. The lack of representation of Black women and natural hair in media is especially evident here as multiple users have a reference point of negative representations of Blackness.

The mother–daughter Black hair ritual

The episode ‘Mama’s Here Now’ (season 1, episode 13) originally aired on 19 February 2015 and guest-starred Cicely Tyson as Annalise Keating’s mother (Figure 9). The co-viewing moment that we are most interested in occurs toward the end of the season. Annalise’s mother comes to take care of her when she cannot care for herself. In a central moment of the episode, Keating’s mother soothes her adult daughter by combing her hair. Over the time period of our analysis, conversations about viewing the show with mom occupied 24% of the dialogue (including variations of ‘murder with my mom,’ ‘mom wants to watch,’ and ‘mom is watching HTGAWM’). Co-viewing audiences had an overwhelmingly personal response to viewing the mother–daughter interaction.

Intergenerational transfer of knowledge and co-remembering

We want to highlight the utility of co-viewing and the use of the second screen to participate in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge described below. The transfer of knowledge is twofold here because of the scripted representation of intergenerational communing as well as the actual dialogue across generations of Black women that occurred simultaneously on Twitter (Figure 10).

Black women celebrated the hair ritual by seeking to emotionally connect with other Black women. In our analysis, this discourse is specific to Black women because the

Figure 8. Twitter audience’s response to ‘the wig scene’.

Figure 9. Twitter audience’s response to ‘the mother-daughter grooming ritual’.
scene depicts a mother combing her daughter’s natural Black kinky hair. Black women are reminded of the experience they had with their mothers. Importantly, this ritual is not confined to age, as one of the tweets above explicitly demonstrates. Black women across generations are able to connect via the second screen co-remembering process online via Twitter and offline in person. As the tweet below demonstrates, one woman states that she feels good watching this episode with ‘a room full of Spelman’ women.” However, because she is tweeting, she is also participating in the conversation about this particular scene with thousands of other Black women (Figure 11).

**Negotiating our representation**

As Black women connect across generations, they again negotiate authenticity. This time, the focus is on the production of the scene, not Keating’s Blackness. Viewers argue that the scene does not truly portray Black hair care because kinky-coily hair was combed incorrectly; it was combed dry instead of wet, with a wide-toothed comb instead of a fine-toothed comb, and without moisturizer to provide the necessary slippage to avoid hair breakage (Figure 12).

By arguing that this scene did not accurately portray Black hair care, Twitter users question the validity of the on-screen performance. While experiencing joy and emotional connection to the hair care routine, users also articulate that they expect to be represented accurately and indicate how that can be done (i.e., add moisture to curls before combing).

**Figure 10.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the mother-daughter grooming ritual’.

**Figure 11.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the mother-daughter grooming ritual’.
Responses to this mother–daughter hair scene emphasizes the emotional connection viewers have to on-screen portrayals of Blackness, highlights the importance of accurate Black representation, and indicates the importance of co-viewing and connecting with other Black users to recall shared experiences.

Discussion and conclusion

CH estimates project that 67% of the users in our overall data set are women, suggesting that women are the primary drivers of discourse centered on HTGAWM. We have identified six themes that contribute to the ongoing discourse on Black womanhood. Users’ participation in this discourse does not exclude or prohibit them from participating in other discursive frameworks. Co-viewers and second screen users contribute to discourse over time and across television programs. As we discovered in our study of the viewers of HTGAWM, many viewers also mentioned the role portrayed by Kerry Washington in Scandal – another strong Black female lead. The ‘effect of “interdiscursivity” – the layering of different discourses’ (Hood, 2014, p. 131) facilitates discursive action with a wider group of co-viewers. Viewers who may have only tuned into one show or the other, now work together to further various discourses on identity politics.

Using Twitter as a space to engage in identity politics and discursive action highlights the need for representation. Beyond speaking with other viewers of the show, users who participate in the discourse on Black womanhood also dialogue with show producer, Shonda Rhimes, and lead actress Viola Davis – having a direct impact on future portrayals. In fact, ‘chance to woman up’ and ‘Viola Davis’s idea’ were dominant trends on the day the episode ‘Let’s get to Scooping’ originally aired. Co-viewers are specifically commenting on an article in which Davis discussed her motivations for wanting to portray ‘real life’ in the scene, stating:

**Figure 12.** Twitter audience’s response to ‘the mother-daughter grooming ritual’.
Well, I didn’t want to be the Vogue woman … I did not want to be that woman because I don’t
know that woman. And I’ve been watching that woman in movies for several years. And I felt
like this was my chance to woman up. Because I think that how we are as women, just in real
life, is very interesting … It’s not always about being pretty. But it is about uncovering and feel-
ing comfortable with the way we are and the way we look when we’re in private. You know, as
soon as you walk through the door, what do you do? You take off your bra, you let your titties
sag, you let your hair come off – I mean my hair. I mean, I don’t have any eyebrows. I let my
eyebrows be exactly what they are. And it’s me. And I wanted that scene to be somewhere in the
narrative of Annalise. That who she is in her public life and who she was in her private life were
absolutely, completely diametrically opposed to one another. Because that’s who we are as
people. We wear the mask that grins and lies.

Implicit in her words is the idea that she is portraying a real Black woman. In turn, as
we have demonstrated above, users repeatedly negotiate authenticity and realness as part
of the discourse on Black womanhood. Similarly, Black identity is negotiated on Twitter
among users – challenging the notions of authentic Blackness and the portrayal of that
Blackness. This begins to meet the need for fuller representations of Black women that
challenge the typical media portrayals of women of color as threatening, hypersexualized,
and inferior to all others (Chavez, 2013; Collins, 2004; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Feagin, 2013;
societal ideas both shape and are influenced by print media on Black women; television
and social media are the contemporary media forms in which ideas of Black womanhood
are expressed. Both the originator of a tweet and the reader of that tweet are exposed to
this particular discussion of Black identity. Twitter is used by some as a platform to
reify cultural norms and expectations of Blackness, and by others as a space to challenge
these norms. Thus we return to our earlier statement, that co-viewing acts as a technocul-
tural tool that is community-engendering. Twitter users express their views on Black iden-
tity, are exposed to potentially opposing views, and have the opportunity to discuss these
ideas with an online community.

However, there are several limitations associated with conducting research on race in
digital spaces that we would like to discuss. We were hesitant to assign racial identity to
those we include in this study. Our total data set includes more than 8 million tweets.
Thus to provide some validity to our claims, we took a random sampling of tweets associ-
ated with key words on episode air dates. We then reviewed every avatar and profile of
those in the random sampling. Out of 210 randomly sampled posts on the episode air
date related to the trend word ‘hair,’ 166 had avatars that were coded as Black with the
remaining 44 containing 2 images that were coded as non-Black. The remaining 42
were coded as non-human images (i.e., a flower, brand logo, meme, etc.). Similarly, out
of 559 randomly sampled posts associated with the mother–daughter ritual, 471 were
coded as Black. It is important to recognize that though the tweets represented herein indi-
cate explicit engagement in discourse, this number is not truly representative of the full
discourse. HTGAWM boasts 18 million viewers that tune in on season premiers and
finales and our data only includes 8 million tweets. We do not suggest that every tweet
represents a unique individual. Conversely, our data are based on primary authors of
tweets. So those who retweet are not explicitly represented but they can indicate their
interest or solidarity by favoriting or liking the tweet. Thus it is difficult to truly determine
what proportion of Black viewers engage in these conversations.
Black women have historically been and continue to be depicted in popular culture as tough, unattractive, and undesirable or sexually immoral and hypersexual. Twitter users respond to a new portrayal of Black femininity that is usually not displayed. Second screening grants the opportunity to collectively remember and bond across generations. Twitter users recall shared past experiences, which provide social support for Black women who are able to connect with others online regardless of physical distance. Second screening also provides a space in which to demand a more multifaceted depiction of Black women in media.

We do not intend to be unreasonably optimistic about the power of second screening and co-viewing to engender critical discourse on Blackness. However, our analysis confirms that these discussions are taking place. We are encouraged to find overwhelmingly positive reactions to representations of a generally marginalized type of Black femininity in HTGAWM.

Notes

1. For media examples, on television see the *Wild N Out girls* and *Basketball Wives*, and in films see *Straight Outta Compton*.
2. Older Black women may not participate directly because they do not or cannot use social media such as Twitter, however, as we demonstrate later, they are still represented in our study because they watch with sisters, daughters, and nieces that participate in the discourse via the second screen.
3. The Twitter Firehose contains all tweets whereas a simple search on Twitter is bound to top tweets or dates of peak conversation.
4. CH automatically generates a random sampling when results are too large to display.
5. CH infers gender from linguistic markers, patterns, and profile data.
6. ‘Following’ someone on Twitter refers to the act of publicly subscribing to an account. Following allows a Twitter user to view new tweets when they are posted to an account. This account may be that of a person, group or organization, or fan group.
7. CH uses algorithms based on human coders to generate linguistic trends (Runge et al., 2013).
8. The keyword ‘getting’ (as in getting away with murder) was the only trend with a greater number of mentions at 68%, which is the top repeat since it is in the title of the show, but does not represent any other significant discussion, whereas ‘wig’ does.
9. Spelman College is a historically Black college for women.

Acknowledgements

The authors are extremely grateful to Harmony Institute for providing access to Crimson Hexagon. We also thank Mary Campbell for her suggestions on early versions of this manuscript as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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