Online Performance: Evaluation of Appropriating AAL for Humor

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Background/Introduction

What is African American Language (AAL)?
- An intentionally broad term meant to encompass all varieties of language use in African American communities
- Reflecting "differences in age/generation, sex, gender, sexuality, social and socioeconomic class, region, education, religion, and other affiliations and identities that intersect with one's ethnicity/race and nationality"
- Historically labelled differently reflecting ideologies
  - Black English, Ebonics, African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE)
- Scan this QR code for further information on the definition and usage of AAL:
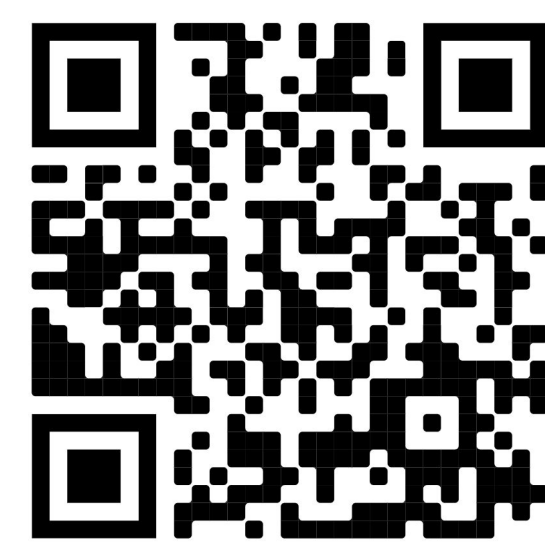
Appropriation and inauthentic use of AAL by non-Black people has led to disapproval.
- "Dear Non-Black People, AAVE Is Not 'Stan' or 'Internet Culture.' The use of African American Vernacular English has become increasingly popular on social media, but ultimately, it exploits Black expression" (Benberry, 2020)
- Linguistic minstrelsy: commodification of AAL and stereotypical, inauthentic portrayal of Blackness for capital gain or personal benefit, much like blackface minstrelsy.
  - Australian rapper Iggy Azalea "crafts her rap lyrics around content stereotypically associated with hip-hop, African Americans, and the imagined ghetto, which helps fuel her own success and monetary gain." (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015)
  - In tweets from British gay men, "the prevalence of AAVE features across all linguistic levels signals that users appropriate the indexical capital of Blackness," to create the image of a "Sassy Queen" (Ilbury 2020)

Research Question and Hypothesis
- This study investigates: When reading humorous tweets, does the perceived authenticity of the tweeter's use of AAL affect readers' perceptions of the tweets?
- We assume that humorous tweets using AAL will be perceived as authentic AAL use when presented with a Black profile picture.
- Thus, we hypothesize that tweets written in AAL and presented with a Black profile picture will receive more positive feedback via higher humor rankings than those presented with a non-Black profile picture.

Research

Materials and Methodology
Norming Study
- 26 participants (UNC students age 18-26)
- Task: rate 24 tweets for how funny they are (Likert scale 1-7)
- Tweets used were published online
- 10 funniest tweets were used as critical items for the main study

Main Study
- 111 participants (UNC students age 18-26)
- Task: rate 16 tweets for how funny they are (Likert scale 1-7)
- There were 10 critical items, 6 filler items, and 3 attention-check questions
- Critical items were presented as tweets written in AAL with the profile picture visible, but username and handle censored (Figure 1)
- Critical items were in two conditions: Authentic (Black profile picture) vs. Inauthentic (non-Black profile picture)
- The survey was given in two different lists with items in the same pseudorandom order, with half the tweets having a Black profile picture and half with a non-Black profile picture
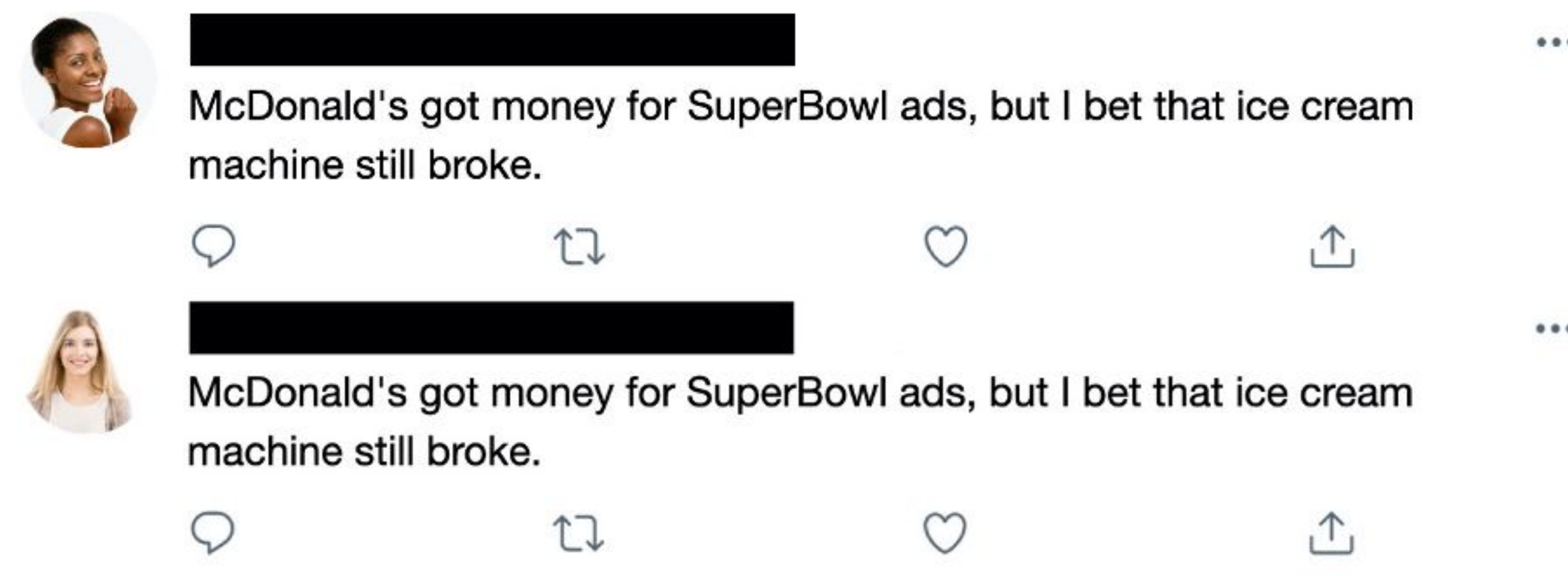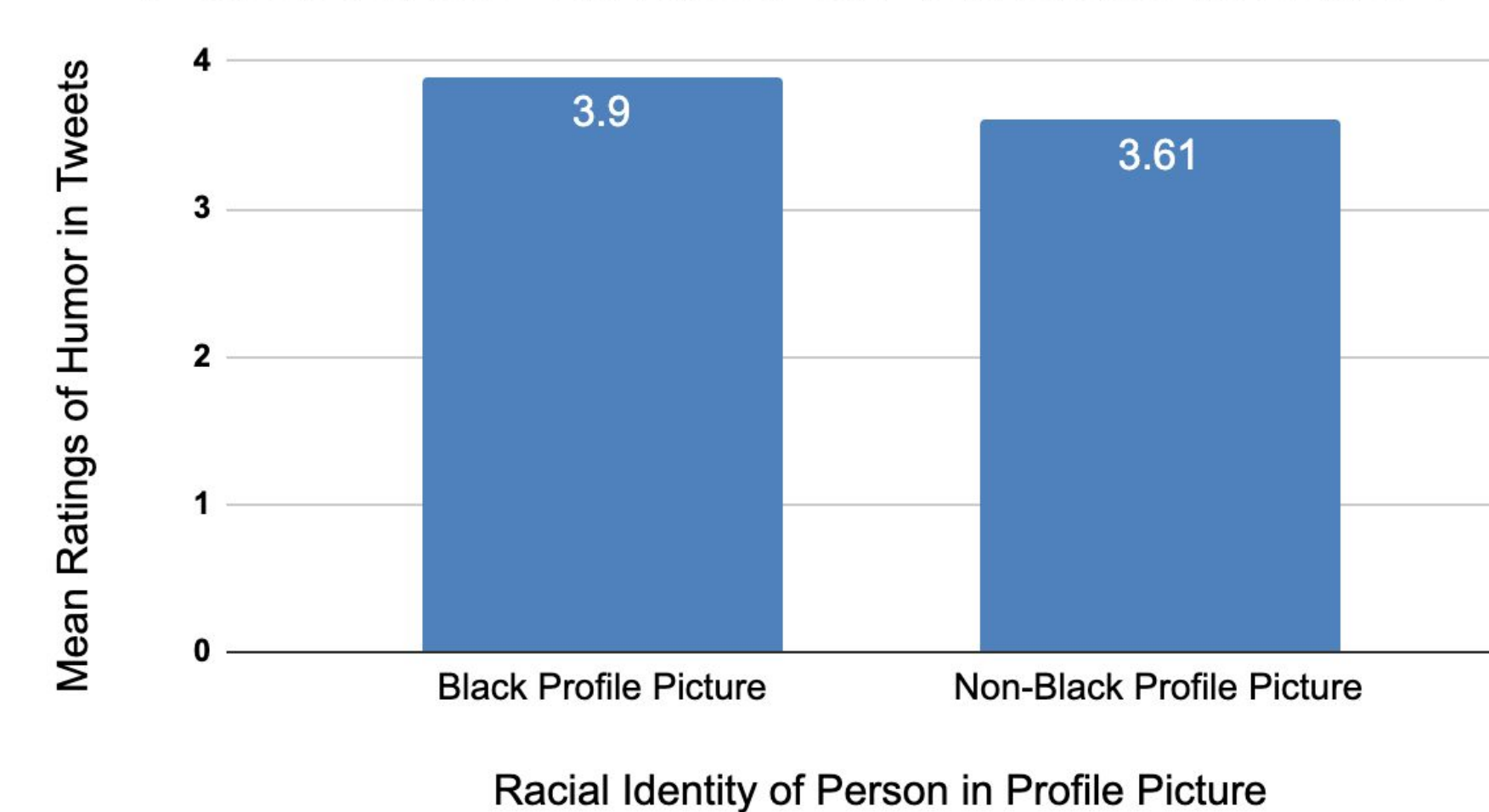- Conducted through Qualtrics

McDonald's got money for SuperBowl ads, but I bet that ice cream machine still broke.

McDonald's got money for SuperBowl ads, but I bet that ice cream machine still broke.

Figure 1. Example stimuli of the same item in each of the two conditions (Authentic vs. Inauthentic AAL use).

Results

Perceived Humor of Tweets in AAL

- Tweets in the Authentic (Black profile picture) condition achieved significantly higher humor rankings than tweets in the Inauthentic (non-Black profile picture) condition (p=0.000059).

Conclusion

Discussion
- Our hypothesis was supported since participants found AAL tweets to be funnier in the Authentic condition than in the Inauthentic condition.
- The issues of linguistic appropriation and minstrelsy are the main focuses in this experiment.
- Participants' potential motivations include:
  - Perceived authenticity of the Black tweeter's AAL use leading to greater approval
  - Perceived inauthenticity of non-Black tweeters' AAL use leading to greater disapproval because participants found the appropriation of AAL to be offensive
  - Desire to be seen by the researchers as more racially sensitive or politically correct in their responses

Looking Forward
- Our assumption is that perceived appropriation of AAL informed participants' responses to certain tweets.
- However, further research and evidence is required to support this assumption.

References
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