



Increasing Black Female Representation in Entertainment

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INTRODUCTION

How can black female characters in the entertainment industry become a norm?

And why is the television industry closer to this goal than the movie industry?

Two sides to the entertainment industry's outlook on black female representation have arisen in the past years. The "#Oscarssowhite" phenomenon has appeared in the movie industry (McNamara), while on television more and more leading roles are played by black women. In 2012, Kerry Washington on *Scandal* (IMDb) became the first black woman in 50 years to play a leading role on television (Carroll). Since then, Tracee Ellis Ross of *Black-ish* has been nominated for an Emmy, the first black woman in 30 years (Kimble). The television industry seems to be moving forward in their appreciation of black women, while the movie industry is stuck in place. Why is that? What factor could be present in television and not film that is inviting more and more African American women to portray emotional, human characters? Could television be motivated by a want of change, or is it just business? This project aims to answer these questions through analysis of historical text regarding the entertainment industry as well as primary sources such as films and episodes of television shows. Once television's motivation to create black female characters is exposed, it may be used to influence the film industry's treatment of black women.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Black women have always had a stigma of inferiority attached to them. In modern society, those images are largely enforced by the media; particularly performance arts media like movies and TV.

Historically, Black women play the drug-addicted mothers, the sexual objects, the secretaries and servants; the background, one-dimensional characters.

Is this changing in the television industry? How?

6.97% of speaking roles on *network television* in 2015-2016 were played by African American women, gone up a full 3 percent from 2013. Black women in *film* only accounted for about 4.29% of speaking roles, going down about a percent from 2013 (Lauzen). *It becomes clear that in terms of black female representation, television is further along. But why?*



To answer this question, this project delves into reports through the ages of the *history* of black characters in television and film, as well as looking into the *mechanisms of the industries* themselves. This project approaches the issue as it is; given enough time, a *solution* could be found to create equal representation of races and genders. It resulted in a *hypothetical plan* for a movie, incorporating the "how" of television's rising representation of black women into the film industry's biggest selling storylines.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

My project is based upon extensive qualitative, observational research. Focusing on the works of others and the conclusions I have drawn myself, I have not devised an experiment to come to my conclusions. I had no literal sample group, but the themes I searched for came from minds both behind the entertainment industry and its consumers. Looking at previous studies, articles, and video examples of the black female experience, certain themes continued to arise. Finding similarities in these themes, I consolidated them into groups and frequencies, gleaming a broad understanding of the black female experience in television and film.

RESULTS OF CODED DATA

Below are the results of the sources I coded. Many of the terms in these sources tied together into several overarching themes, consolidated into one graph, depicted by Figure 4.

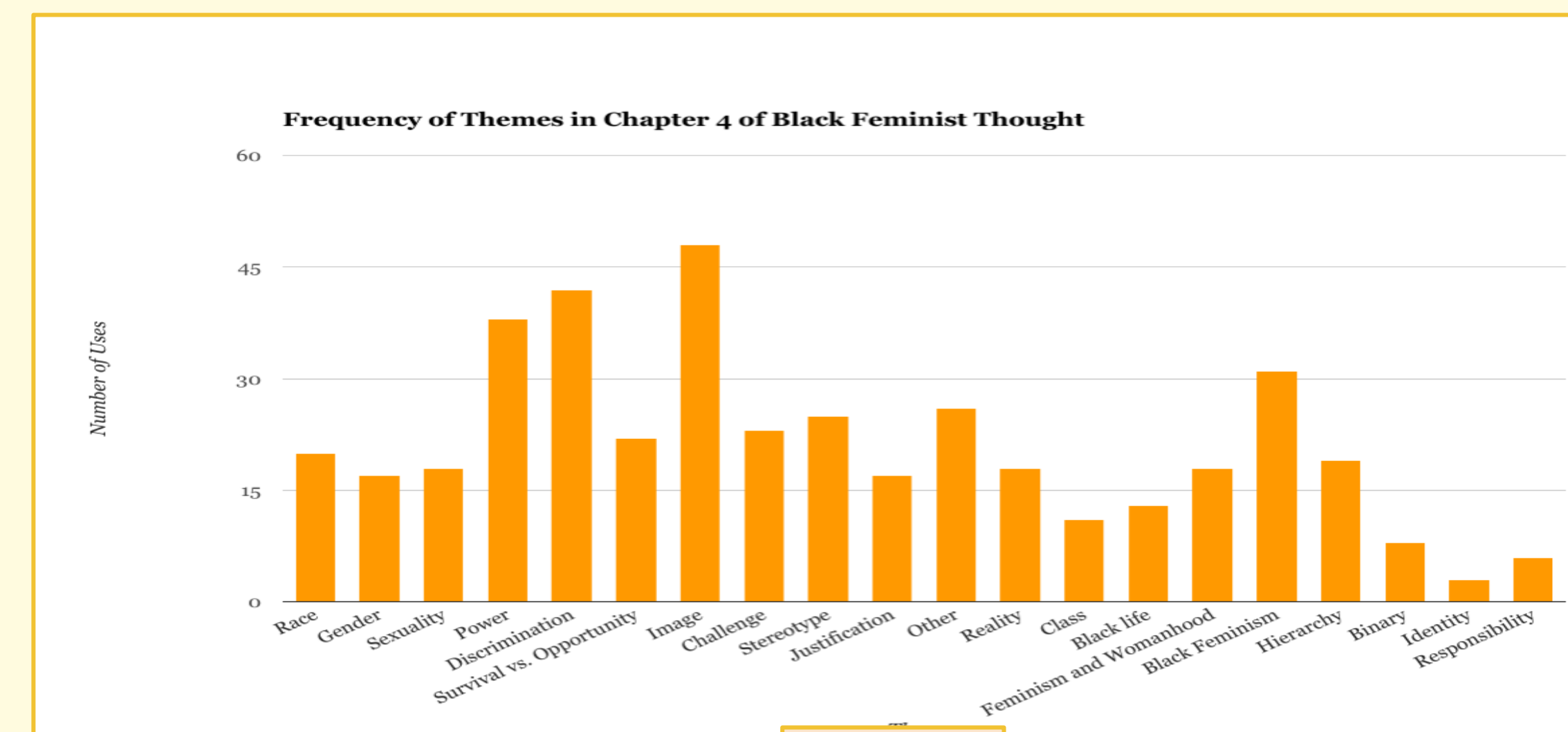


Figure 1

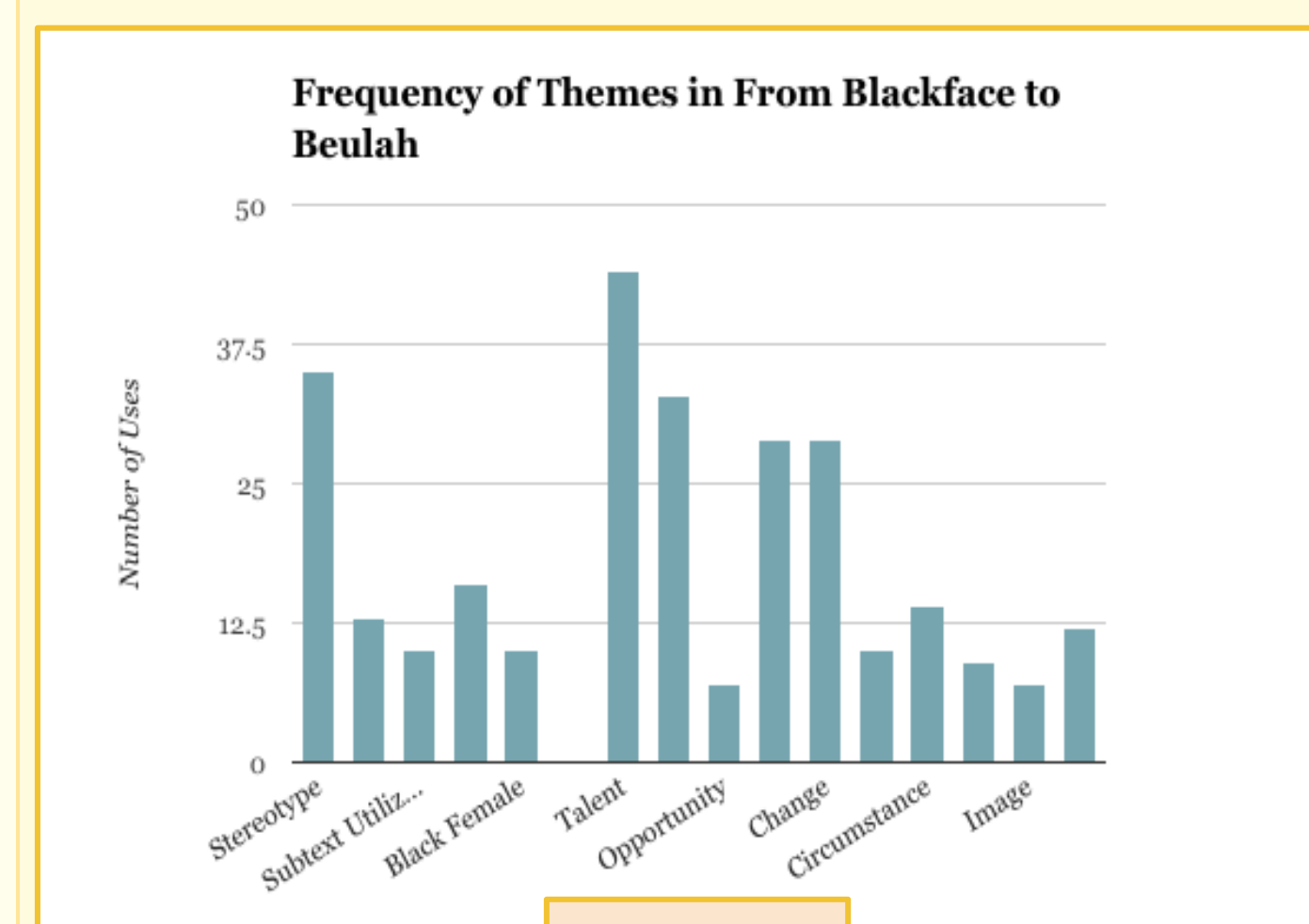


Figure 2

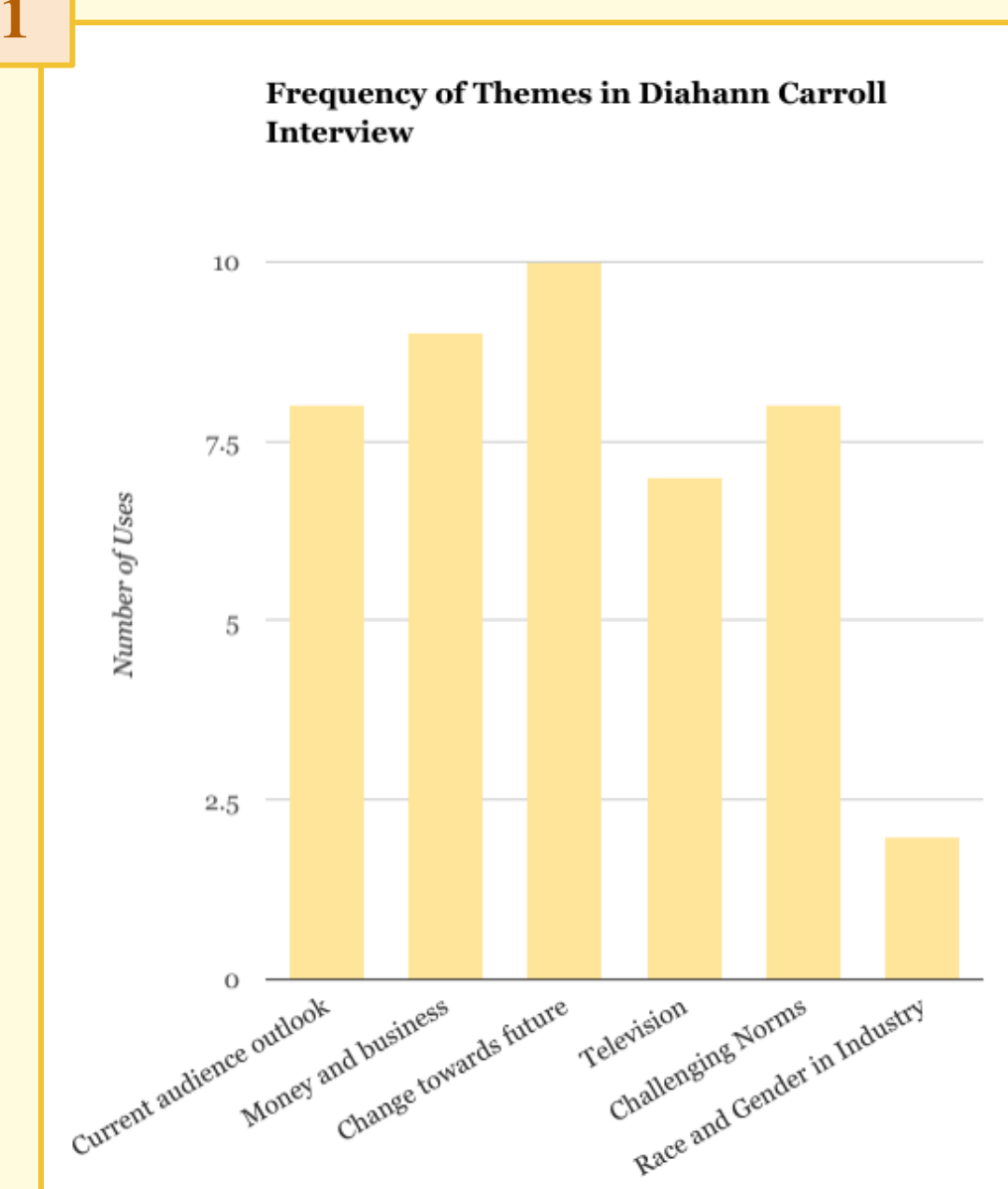


Figure 3

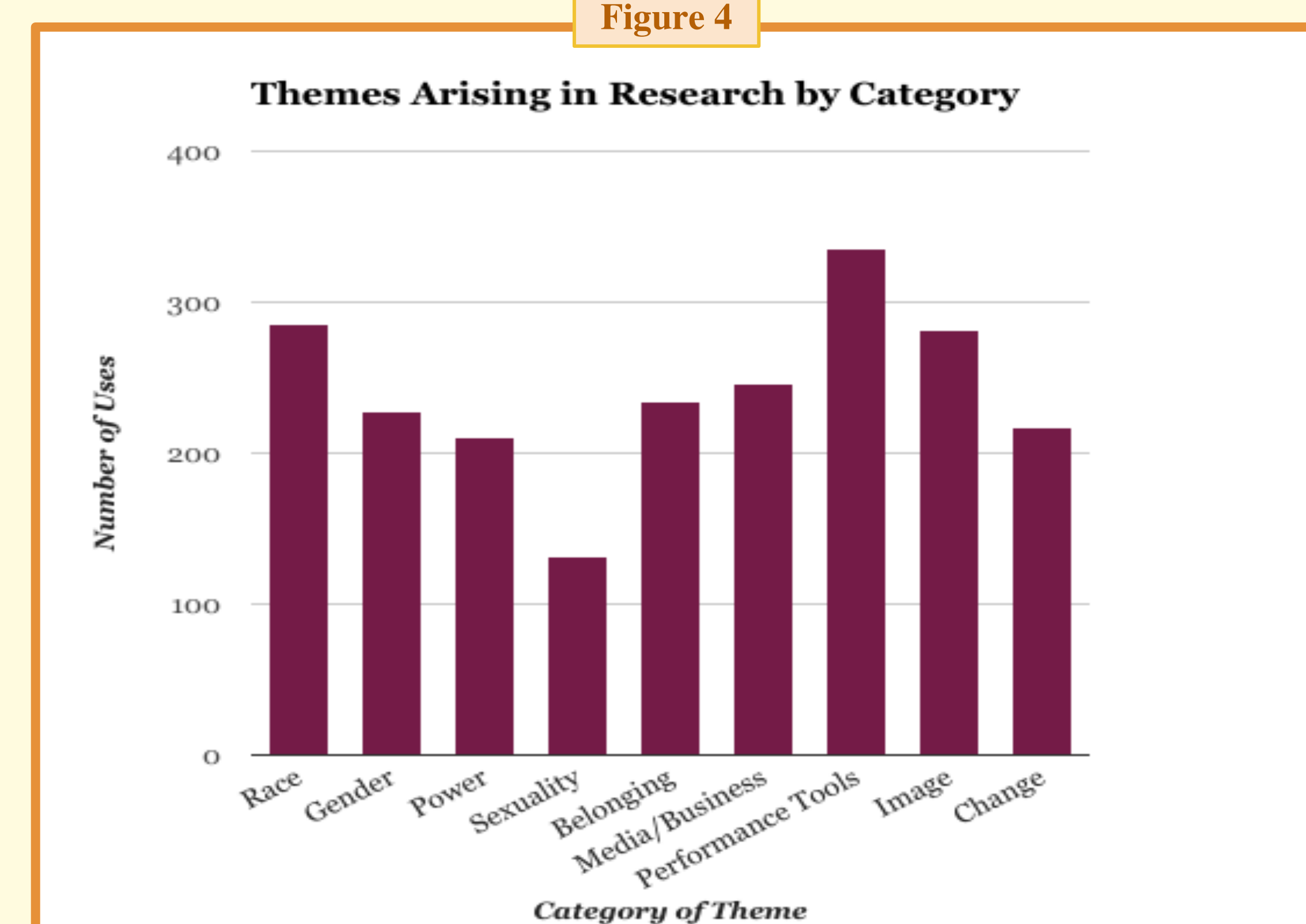
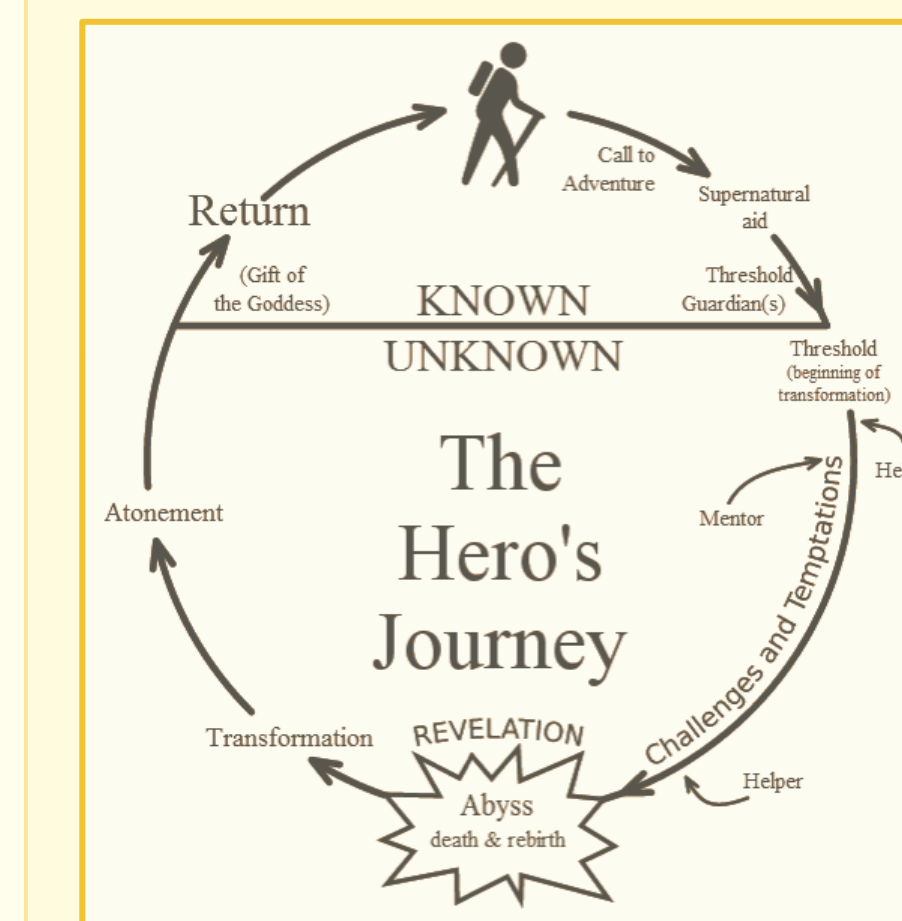


Figure 4

CONCLUSIONS

In all examined sources, the theme that occurs the most by far is that of image. The portrayal of a character determines her fate in the hands of her audience, and what message she brings to them. In our current society, this underlines the influence of stereotypes. But the entertainment industry depends on what the viewers like to see and want to see more of. To get more representation in movies, my solution is to get a character on screen who exemplifies the performance tool of *empathy*. To the point that the audience is no longer conscious of the main character's black womanhood (Gieseemann), empathy would jumpstart the movie industry's demand for black female characters.

This project concludes with a hypothetical screenplay, starring a black woman, using the science fiction genre and hero's journey outline, both very common in box office hits.



Protagonist: AVA



The story centers around a young woman, Ava, whose brother has gone missing. She discovers that he was part of an experiment to understand the human brain through the unconscious. She dives in after him, meeting parts of her own unconscious in the process.

NEXT STEPS

The full synopsis was part of a survey about the preferences of audiences in terms of black female characters.

For future continuation of this project, a trailer would be made for the hypothetical screenplay, and, if time and resources allowed, a full movie would be distributed to American audiences.

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