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#ProtestPolicing: Intersecting Race and Social Media Activism in the Mile High City

Nancy Rios-Contreras
Department of Sociology, Chapman University, Orange, California
rioscontreras@chapman.edu

Demonstrations addressing police use of force stress the importance of revisiting the organizational strategies of social movements. Fatal use of force against individuals of color continues to tarnish police-community relations. Social media helps elevate the political movement addressing police use of force, but understanding social media as an activist resource remains underdeveloped. Resource mobilization theory is applied to the conceptualization of protest activities to describe how activists use social media as a resource to initiate and create local community change. This exploratory study consists of 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with activists over 18 years old and fieldwork observation. While social media provides versatility to social activism, is a resource for community awareness, and unifies acts of resistance, divisiveness exists about the role of online activism. Social media does not replace in-person protest activities, but supports accessible organizing. Research implications identify the need for social media and in-person holistic approaches that work towards racial healing.

Keywords: Social Media, Activism, Social Movement, Race & Ethnicity, Policing

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The criminal justice system grants law enforcement officers the power to employ discretion in their use of force. Police officers have the authority to use nonlethal or lethal force when they perceive an individual as a threat. Police use of force cases, combined with the publicity of social media, have led communities to believe that police officers are engaging in excessive use of force. Some online postings suggest high distrust and undermining confidence between police and community members. Activists have the technology to record militarized police practices and share their videos on social media. The role of activists has changed with the introduction of social media. Activists from marginalized groups have access to social media platforms.

When police officers confront activists in high-tension environments, frustrated community members organize and protest the perceived unfair policing. Confrontations between the police and community activists have become constant media headlines. Activists use social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, rebranded as X, to disperse videos and images of perceived police misconduct during protests, and consequently, communities' trust in law enforcement is questioned. Facebook was introduced in 2004, before X's (formerly Twitter) launch date in 2006.

Social media is instrumental in spreading awareness regarding cases where people of color are victims of violence. The Facebook platform allows users to create groups "to support a social/political goal and gather support" (Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 260). X (formerly Twitter) also allows "internal community-building capabilities (Raynauld & Greenberg, 2014, p. 414)." According to Kidd and McIntosh (2016), revolutionary social movements use social media or may need it if they do not already use it. Social media can deepen passionate engagement and creativity (Evans, 2022). Social media can also harm movements advocating for racial justice. Clark, Bland, and Livingston (2017) find that social media users "co-construct" a visual of what police brutality and misconduct look like that prevents seeing Black unarmed children as victims. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the role social media use plays in organizing the racial justice social movement.

Activists' use of social media is an area that requires further research. Previous literature on social movements has analyzed social media as a technological innovation and often includes a communication perspective. The current study, grounded in social science, explores activists' perspectives on social media and police-community relations. Previous activism and social media studies focus on international movements or cities with high-profile police-community confrontations. In 2010, Chopae, an online Twitter community in Korea, arose to terminate a conservative newspaper known for its bias (Choi & Park, 2014). In 2011, the movement known as the Arab Spring motivated several democratic uprisings on Facebook (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013; Harlow & Guo, 2014). In 2011, the Spanish Indignados [outraged] movement utilized Facebook and Twitter to mobilize (González-Bailón et al., 2013). In 2011, activists in the Egyptian uprising also used Facebook for recruitment and Twitter for live updates (Clarke

& Kocak, 2020). Even though social media and social movements transcend borders, it is crucial to understand how the national context shapes local social media use. In the United States, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag sparked protests following the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. #HashtagActivism empowers historically underserved communities to create counternarratives and build dissent networks on social media (Jackson et al., 2020).

Mundt, Ross, and Burnett (2018) conducted a mixed-method study, including interviews with Black Lives Matter social media administrators, and found that social media is essential for building connections and coalitions, mobilizing participants, generating internal and external resources, and amplifying narratives. Mislán and Dache-Gerbino (2018) conducted a mixed-method study, including interviews with local activists from St. Louis, Missouri. They concluded that social media provides a space of cultural resistance through live streaming but misses economic justice narratives. Petitjean and Talpin (2022) conducted ethnographic studies on Black Lives Matter in Chicago and Los Angeles. They revealed that different group styles, actions, and organizations lead to competition and distinction among community organizers. Cobbina et al. (2019) interviewed protesters from Baltimore and Ferguson, revealing that protesters demonstrate various levels of commitment that shape how they respond to repressive police tactics. These studies demonstrate the critical role social media plays in social movement organizing.

The current study is based on the United States protest mobilization in Colorado. On January 26, 2015, two Denver police officers fatally shot Jessie Hernandez, a 17-year-old Latina/o/x, in a moving vehicle. #Justice4Jessie was trending on social media, and protests over police use of force continued in Denver because Hernandez self-identified as a member of the LGBTQI+ community (Gurman, 2015; Presente.org, 2015). Considering the anti-immigration rhetoric impacting Latinidad and the rising protests addressing racial justice, there is evidence of a social crisis and the need for accessible social media spaces (Hordge-Freeman & LoBlack, 2021).

Several questions remain underdeveloped concerning research addressing police use of force in a local community urban context. How does social media influence activism? How do protest activities help or harm social movement solidarity?

This manuscript begins by recognizing resource mobilization as a guiding framework. Then, a literature review covers social media platforms, social movement construction, and internet-enhanced activism. The paper continues with an explanation of the exploratory methodology of the study. A thematic analysis of the original data follows. Finally, the discussion and conclusion identify research implications.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK

Social media can influence the mobilization of social movements. Edwards and Kane (2014) published a typology of five resource types to understand social movements: material, human, cultural, moral, and socio-organizational. Material resources include money and physical items (Edwards & Kane, 2014, p. 212). Activists use money to print banners, fliers, souvenirs, and to pay legal counsel, funeral services, and bail. Human resources include individuals with diverse experience, skills, expertise, knowledge, and roles (Edwards & Kane, 2014). Cultural resources include activists who have previous activist experience.

Cultural resources "facilitate the recruitment and socialization of new adherents and help movements maintain their readiness and capacity for collective action" (Edwards & Kane, 2014, p. 216). Forming and maintaining a collective identity is a prerequisite for mobilization (Fuist, 2013). Social media use spreads awareness but does not lead to a meaningful cultural understanding (Tucker, 2018). A study about memes posted after the murder of George Floyd finds that most of the memes are negative in tone, question Floyd's character, or fall into the harmful rhetoric that Black people are associated with looting and criminality (Moody-Ramirez, Tait, & Bland, 2021).

Digital life does not replace the cultural value in social interaction (Norquist, 2024). Moral resources include solidarity from activists, community members, or individuals in positions of power. Edwards and Kane (2014) describe moral resources as "legitimacy, authenticity, solidarity support, sympathetic support, and celebrity" (p. 217). For example, "fast responsiveness, affirmative validation, and emotional support for others' opinions" helps form a collective identity (Choi & Park, 2014, p. 142). Socio-organizational resources include strategies implemented to organize and create relationships between activists. Edwards and Kane (2014) explain that socio-organizational resources are produced when movements form organizations, "cultivate networks of allies, form issue coalitions,

establish communication networks with web pages and blogs, or use social media to maintain Facebook pages and Twitter feeds" (p. 220).

Finally, Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) note that "social movement organizations wanting to mobilize for a mass street demonstration make extensive use of the internet to enhance coordination and mobilize efforts" (p. 1152). Online organizing requires only a few individuals to take significant action to enable the masses (Earl et al., 2014). Pre-existing social relationships facilitate "the emergence, mobilization, varied activities, and spatial distribution of social movements" (Edwards & Kane, 2014, p. 215).

SELECTIONS FROM THE LITERATURE

Protest activities vary. Ratliff and Hall (2014) identify various types of protest activities. Activists use literal, symbolic, aesthetic, and sensory protest activities, which include holding signs, verbal speeches, theater performances, and destroying objects. Edwards and Kane (2014) suggest cultural resources can be created through "music, literature, blogs, web pages, or films/videos" (p. 216). Protest activities utilize "marches, parades, picket lines, and bicycling" (Ratliff & Hall, 2014, p. 281). Solemnity and sacred activities include "vigils, prayer, protests in a church service format, candle lighting, cross carrying, hunger strikes, laying wreaths, moments of silence and dedications" (Ratliff & Hall, 2014, p. 281). Civil disobedience activities include "withholding obligations, sit-ins, blockades, building occupations, bannering, and camping out" (Ratliff & Hall, 2014, p. 282).

Die-ins consist of lying on the ground in streets, parks, and other locations. Institutional and conventional activities include press conferences, lawsuits, lobbying, and meeting candidates (Ratliff & Hall, 2014). A legal advice teach-in to avoid arrest can be a protest activity. Violence and threat protest activities include "pushing or shoving, hitting or punching, damaging property, object throwing, other physical force, verbal threats of violence, and use of incendiary devices or bomb threats" (Ratliff & Hall, 2014, p. 283).

Constructing a Social Movement

Protest activities can create the collective consciousness necessary to construct a social movement. Social movements are "networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural

conflict based on a shared collective identity" (Diani, 1992, p. 13). Activists addressing police use of force, for example, share common perspectives concerning policing.

Gerlach and Hine (1970) describe significant components of an authentic social movement. First, a social movement needs to be comprised of diverse groups with social ties. A shared belief in the movement addressing police use of force is that the militarization of law enforcement influences an officer's decision to use less-than-lethal or lethal force (Kappeler & Kraska, 2013; Kraska & Cubellis, 1997).

Second, recruitment is based on social relationships. Third, people need to commit to changing something based on acquired values. Fourth, a social movement needs an ideology that creates structure by arranging a system based on goals and means to move toward progressive change. Last, social movements need opposition from those who establish an order in society or communities (Gerlach & Hine, 1970).

Internet-Enhanced Activism

The Internet and social media revolutionized the activism process. The Internet makes activism and social movement organization and coordination easier and more efficient (Earl et al., 2014; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 1148). Youth construct an activist identity online, engage in protest online and offline, and create a call to action through emotional narratives on social media (Wielk & Standlee, 2021). However, the immediacy of social media presents some difficulties in constructing a collective identity (Ferrari, 2022).

Internet usage can vary. Online Participation creates a space or a "group against/or in favor of a particular case and invite[s] other members to 'sign' this cause by becoming a member" (Earl et al., 2014; Earl et al., 2010; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 1156). Online participation includes electronically signing a petition or donating money on a secure website. Online Organizing allows mobilization in websites, blogs, or listservs (Earl et al., 2014; Earl et al., 2010).

Online Facilitation of Offline Activism consists of presenting information, organizing, and coordinating upcoming offline protests (Earl et al., 2014; Earl et al., 2010). Online facilitation includes scheduling meetings, sharing information about the protection of tear gas, and legal information (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) explain through dissemination, "organizations provide detailed information on

time, place, and perhaps even a practical field guide for activists to inform people on how to organize, on their rights, and how to protect themselves from harm" (p. 1153).

METHOD

This study is an exploratory approach to examine activist ideology, social media practices in organizing protests, and perceived community relations with law enforcement. Institutional Review Board approval was received for this study. Most scholarly research on activists or social movements is based on a quantitative or mixed-methods methodology. A qualitative study introduces the possibility of unique data by providing a rich local narrative. Qualitative research is best conducted "when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between the researcher and the participants" (Creswell, 2013, p. 48).

Sample

Fieldwork access to protest activities was based on following social media accounts of organizations and community groups known for their active roles in the movement against police use of force in local Colorado cities. The current study is not about Black Lives Matter. In this research, "the movement" refers to the collective efforts of organizations and unaffiliated activists to address the issues surrounding police use of force. The names of all organizations are not disclosed to protect the confidentiality of the participants affiliated with small organizations. Large national organizations represented in this study include Black Lives Matter, Showing Up for Racial Justice, Anonymous, Occupy, and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán.

In total, 18 organizations were followed. Twenty activists from one or more organizations agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The interviewees were 55% Black, 20% Latina/o/x, 15% White non-Latina/o/x, and 10% Pacific Islander. All the activists who responded agreed to participate. Eleven people failed to respond to the email requests. Purposive snowball sampling provided logistical and geographical convenience.

Procedure

The primary investigator began by "following" organizations' newsfeeds on Twitter and, if possible, "liking" the group's Facebook account profile page. The investigator paid particular attention to "Facebook Posts" or "Twitter Tweets" regarding public community events that became ideal sites for non-participant observation.

In observational research, "the researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance" (Creswell, 2013, p. 293). The investigator could observe the participants without altering their behavior in the protest activities. The primary investigator also contacted activists through email for individual interviews. Contact information can be found easily on activist community groups' Facebook and Twitter profiles. Community organizers willing to participate in the study responded with their cell phone numbers, email addresses, or Facebook contact information.

Non-participant observation. Protest events vary in type, but all aim to address police use of force. The events include vigils, demonstrations in front of symbolic buildings, street marches, boycotts, petition signing, and riots. Cases where people of color died because of fatal police use of force often prompt citizens to engage in sacred protest activities. Approximately 20 to 50 activists typically participated in the ten observed events, ranging from one to five hours.

The activists' ages appeared to range from 18 to 60. The non-participant observation was not disclosed to the activists during the protest activities. The participants in protest activities were in public spaces, so their expectation of privacy was minimized. The potential for harm from being a study participant was improbable. Field notes were taken on cell phones during the events to reduce the likelihood of memory recall errors.

Interview. Twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews with adult activists were conducted, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes. An information sheet was provided to the participants to obtain verbal consent. Before the interview, the participants received relevant background study information and were reminded of their rights. The participants were assured that any information gathered would remain confidential and available only to the research team. Each participant selected the location for their interview.

Interview locations included offices, campuses, and coffee shops. Five interviews were conducted by phone. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview and entered into a Word document with additional observations. The interview questions explored activist ideology, social media practices in organizing protests, and perceived community relations with law enforcement. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions

and allowed further probes when necessary. After rapport was established through introductions and casual conversation, the participants were asked to reflect on the goals and means of their activities related to law enforcement. Although existing literature guided the development of the interview protocol, the observational research, high visibility of media-related events, and sociological imagination described by C. Wright Mills (1959) were essential in creating the questions. Data were analyzed by identifying significant themes from the non-participant observation fieldnotes and the semi-structured interviews. A manual thematic analysis was conducted using Saldaña's (2015) codes-to-theory model. Findings are presented using verbal coding, ranging from none, few, some, many, most, and all to refer to participants (Sandelowski, 2001).

FINDINGS

Data analysis of the 20 activist interviews and ten non-participant observations revealed five major themes. First, the versatility of social activism allows activists with different backgrounds and skill levels to participate in movements. Second, using social media as a resource has facilitated organizing protest activities. Third, the goal of activists is to spread awareness in their communities, which further encourages people of color to mobilize. Fourth, the unification of acts of resistance creates a collective activist identity. Fifth, divisiveness among activism methods impacts activists' solidarity. The following section further explores these six themes.

Versatility of Social Activism

Each participant has their own definition of what social activism means to them and considers themselves an activist. During an interview, a Latina community organizer stated, "Activism cannot be measured." The interviewees acknowledged that there are a variety of different ways in which a person can participate in social activism. For example, an activist scholar described social activism as "an individual or collective effort that seeks to change things for the better for a particular group of people or all people." A Latina college graduate identified examples of justice work, which include marching, posting on Facebook, talking within your family about these types of issues, educating your friends, being involved in a student organization on your campus or in your high school, and checking your friend when they say something.

Most activists believe that social activism requires some involvement. The type of participation varies because, for some, activism is "involved in events or organizations," for others, it can be "engaging in uncomfortable conversations." In addition, people with more activist experience suggest that "getting involved online and making that a gateway to offline work" is something that a new activist can embrace. However, there is no expectation that people doing justice work need to participate in traditional protests or demonstrations. For reasons such as safety, potential supporters can educate people by "separating myths from facts," engaging in civic duties, or volunteering in their community to show support for the cause, according to many of the participants.

The various opportunities for justice work allow individuals with different skills to take on the role in the movement that best suits them. A Latina political scientist described that there are "supporters, leaders, and guiders" in the movement. Some people can take on many roles. A Black college student described the roles at the events he attended: "[there are] people who help plan out how you're going to do activism, people who have good networking skills, people who know, people who understand knowledge, and who know how to present." People use their skills to add something to the movement because they believe in the cause.

Social Media Tools

Activists use social media to organize and mobilize the movement because, according to the participants, it "can cross class, culture, and race boundaries." A Latina community organizer described that "increased access, the internet, and devices" help overcome obstacles to organizing. Therefore, participants can focus on building relationships and "have a moment to reconnect and to unify." Activists have mastered the use of social media to organize. A white graduate student expressed her appreciation for social media, which connects her to other activists. A middle-aged Black participant also appreciated that he could learn about and contact other organizations he had never known existed before social media.

In addition, social media is beneficial for people actively participating in protest activities because it is "quick, it's instant, and they can write immediately what they're thinking." Activists described their power to "disseminate" their perspectives by having the opportunity to "share information like news articles, posts." A successful social media

campaign "becomes viral," which means that the information shared has reached an immense audience, where the attention to the issue is at the national or international level. Not only is social media allowing community members to connect, but it is also "serving the same role that television did in the 60s and that radio did in the 20s and 30s" as a form of communication.

Many activists want to create a separate information outlet rather than depend on "mainstream corporate news sources," and social media allows people to share information. Spreading knowledge empowers people using social media because they create their own sources of information. A Latina community organizer stated, for example, "what we do is we take pictures at our protests, at our actions, at our events, and we make films because we're taking back the media and making our own stories." Participants often want to portray their accounts of the events to further their cause. Consequently, a Black radio host who was interviewed coined the phrase "democratization of social media" to describe how activists can distribute their news separate from mainstream media.

The influence of social media on the movement addressing police use of force leads activists to believe that "for the very first time, there is a real description, depiction of what police do in the media" because the information is being distributed in independent, free public sources. Residents acquire knowledge about new cases regarding police use of force because "everybody has a phone, everybody has a camera on it, and everybody has some sort of link to social media." Technology and the advancements in social media facilitate the dispersion of information.

Many participants believe social media indirectly addresses police use of force because "everyone feels like they are being watched, and therefore, it's influencing how people act." Therefore, police might alter their behavior because they never know when their actions are being filmed. A Black attorney said that when "social media is coupled with technology, you can't hide the garbage." People are forced to see other communities' nationwide problems with local police departments.

In addition, one activist credits social media with "shedding light on people who refuse to remove their blinders." This comment is referencing people who are in denial that police officers are incapable of excessive use of force against poor people of color.

According to a white activist, a valuable contribution of social media is to "public outrage to motivate people" to act. Most people, for example, feel the need to do something when they see a problem. Therefore, participation in the movement might be increased in times when a clip of an officer shooting a person of color goes viral.

Facebook is a crucial component for organizing protest activities. Of the 20 study participants, 80% favor Facebook over other social media platforms. Activists described Facebook as better for planning protest activities than other social media sites. Participants prefer this platform because "Facebook is where people are looking." Almost all activists have a Facebook account, even if they like a different social media platform. Facebook is "more known," specifically, "that's where the eyes are." Several participants preferred Facebook because they are "old-fashioned" or "old school." Table 1 illustrates the different ways activists use Facebook according to the data analysis of the interviews.

Table 1. Common Uses of Facebook by Activists

Offline Organization	Online Activism	Information Diffusion	Relationship Building
Get followers Encourage turnout Invitation to events Planning Event promotion	Share: • specific cases • activist posts • campaigns • activism music Post photos or videos Engage in dialogue Follow other media Sign petition Share to incite response	Share: • links • quotes • articles • research • memes • pictures • posters • stories Reading source News source Bookmark post	Contact preference Follow other users Connect with others

Another social media networking site prevalent among activists is X(Twitter). Out of the 20 interview participants, 20% preferred it to Facebook. A valuable feature of X that was repeatedly mentioned during the interviews was the ability to retweet, which means that the user can forward the same post as another user on their profile feed with the click of a button. There are concerns, however, with the structure of Twitter. A typical response from activists was referencing Twitter's 140-character limit in posts. A research scholar

stated, "I can't say it in that short number of words." However, a few activists describe a positive view of the limitation by saying that "the character limit on Twitter allows for more discussion with less words." People can be concise on this social media platform.

X users, for the most part, network with those who follow them or those they follow. Activists have an opportunity to "engage strangers." Another positive aspect of X is that users "learn outreach from other things that are going on, not in your circle." Therefore, participants can connect with other people involved in justice work whom they may not know in person. A Black male activist commented that he follows "close to 200 different activists" on X. X provides a platform where users can learn from each other.

Participants identify that they use X as a news source. A Black college student stated, "Whether it's police brutality or news, I always get it on Twitter first." Activists believe that "Twitter is better for getting information." People participating in a protest can tweet their observations, photos, or videos in real-time. The tweeting feature allows Twitter to become "more of a primary resource."

Disadvantages. Social media use by activists is revolutionary, but activists have noted some inconsistencies. Social media is an excellent resource for spreading awareness, but activists said it has a saturation point. A Pacific Islander attorney experienced how Facebook can plateau, and she believes that "you start to not follow certain people, or you start to unfriend certain people, and you start to befriend new people." Also, a white photographer shared that "not all posts are created equal." Social media users are diverse, and the quality of posts can vary. The participant indicated that there is a "gray area of posts about social justice that can actually negatively affect the problems." A posting that uses derogatory language and negative stereotypes about police officers might not lead to the desired change. In addition, when the public sees a post about an event concerning a police officer's choice to use fatal force, they can be "removed from the reality of it because of the computer experience." Perceptions of those who experience protest events vary. Therefore, a video of an incident that goes viral might not depict the situation accurately, and the viewer might not have all the information they need to form reasonable conclusions. Social media users might "misinform" activists because they might commit to attending a protest on Facebook events but not attend. A Pacific Islander attorney expressed her frustration when she said, "we're thinking we got a whole army to march

out, and it's only three of us." The number of protest attendees affects a protest event's attention, and attendance is highly encouraged.

Community Awareness

Community awareness is a common goal shared by most participants. An activist expressed the importance of this goal by saying, "we can't bring change if people aren't aware." Participants want the public to learn about their cause and what they hope to accomplish. A b radio host commented that engaging community members in conversations makes them become educated and, therefore, are "activated."

In the movement addressing police use of force, activists want people "to know what's going on." Participants are referring to spreading awareness of cases where police execute excessive use of force toward a person of color. The movement is giving attention "to bad policing, more so than in the past." Activists want to educate their communities not only on the cases of alleged excessive use of force by police but also on their rights and duties. The acquired awareness and knowledge can empower communities of color to demand what they perceive as just. Most activists express that education and empowerment can lead to the symbolic acknowledgment that people of color have a voice that matters and can create systemic change.

Unifying Acts of Resistance

Activism requires people to participate in different activities that lead to the desired change. During protest activities, "visibility is increased" for the cause because communities can "recognize" the issues. Activists notice the patterns of what they perceive to be unjust police behavior, particularly towards men of color. Protest activities can "take people out of ignorance," and they give people the "opportunity to share their rage."

Participants are passionate about claiming their space and a physical presence in history. A Pacific Islander attorney believes that she will accomplish a "manifestation of resistance" by amplifying her knowledge, history, and stories through protest activity. Community members may not be aware of the hardships that people of color encounter, and "protests are finally opening peoples' eyes to say no things aren't great." Even when people disagree on controversial views expressed in protests, activists believe there is always an opportunity to "learn and analyze" the perceived problem. There are a

multitude of activities used to protest. Activities range from artistic rap to traditional marches.

Protest activities tend to unite the people who participate. When activists unite for a common struggle, it gives "a sense of solidarity, it's a sense of camaraderie, it's a sense of we are una comunidad [a community], we are one people." People who participate feel united in the struggle. The co-leader of a Black organization stated that "when tragic things, or frightening things happen in communities, you have relationships established that allow you to trust who you're in the street with, or protesting with, or grieving with." In addition, participants interact with others who have the same views and opinions. A Pacific Islander attorney commented that the unification experience of protesting is "healing, it's validating, it's freaking empowering." Participants value that they have similar perspectives on controversial issues but have vastly different life experiences. One activist, for example, commented:

> We need a plethora of voices. We need the young white male talking about his privilege and how he's seeing how he's able to walk down the street without being accosted by the police, while at the same time witnessing a Black male not able to have that same privilege. We need the voice of the young African American male that talks about being accosted by the police. We need the voice of the young African male's mother who talked about her fear every time she lets her son leave the house.

Having more supporters can empower individuals to act in an environment where tensions are high. A Black activist said, "We have a louder voice when we are together." The number of people in a group amplifies the volume of chants, but a protest group also inspires individuals to speak up about what they perceive as unjust. When a group of people unite, it gives individuals "that ability, that courage to speak up," especially when their goal is to "dismantle every single social norm."

People are uniting not only now but also across generations. A Latina community organizer described the different generations: "In these events, we are seeing children, like straight-up children 5 years old to 12, we are seeing young people 12 to 18, and then we are seeing adults, and then we're seeing elderly." People of all ages are encouraged to participate in whatever way they can.

The unification of activists creates connections with previous movements. The movement addressing police use of force is seen as a continuation of struggles faced during slavery and the civil rights movement. Participants reference chattel enslavement because, according to a Latina college graduate, the origins of policing stem back to when the police force was established to bring enslaved people back to their masters. A major reference made by many activists is that police officers helped to enforce the Jim Crow laws (Alexander, 2012).

Many participants reference Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panthers. People who participated in the civil rights movement are also part of the movement addressing police use of force. During non-participant observation at a community event with roughly 2,000 attendees, the co-leader of an organization stated, "The [name of organization] family stands before you at the feet of this giant, this radical, Dr. Martin Luther King." A Black research scholar made the connection during an interview that the national Black Lives Matter organization is like the Black Panthers of the 1960s, where the negative actions of a few participants are "negatively painting the entire movement." She provided examples of good acts the Black Panthers were doing, such as "feeding the community, making sure that there is equitable education for the kids." The movement is trying to unite because "there is a history that FBI informants were sent into the Black Panthers." A Latina community organizer stated, "Martin Luther King Jr. was all about changing legislation peacefully." Activists are embracing historical figures and using them as examples of how to keep the movement peaceful and united.

Divisiveness and the Role of Online Activists

The participants use social media as a tool; however, the perspectives regarding the balance between online participation and in-person activism vary. A Black attorney believes "there is value in people who are more the online warriors." Other terms participants mentioned to describe an activist who participates online include ghost liker, Internet activist, Facebook activist, media warrior, and armchair activist. The primary concern with people who participate online is that some people use social media to "misrepresent their capacity." This statement refers to people who have the ability and the means to have a presence in the movement outside their online participation by "getting off your ass," according to one respondent.

A Black attorney further mentioned that "it rings hollow if all you do is share an article, and you don't have any sort of critical thought behind it." A Latina participant expressed frustration with online activists who are "people that complain and bitch and share stuff of memes or pictures that have provided no information or provided no solution." One organization's director provided examples of meaningless actions: "you are just on Facebook. You are clicking likes all day, every day. You don't even read the articles. You don't even copy and paste the quote." A young college graduate beginning his activist journey suggested, "in addition to talking about it on Facebook, take it a step further actively doing something." A Black radio host cautioned that people involved online can try to "put some boots on the ground" to "be in touch with the movement." Similarly, a computer paralegal expressed this perspective in her comment:

> I was that person who only sat behind my phone or only sat behind my computer…I didn't get research. I didn't get up. I didn't move. I didn't go to a library, at least to try. I didn't turn on the news to see what's going on. I just saw what was trending.

In some circumstances, most activists believe a primary online presence is appropriate. Most participants repeatedly identified DeRay Mckesson as a nationally well-known social media activist. Some participants criticized McKesson for having primarily an online presence and becoming a celebrity. They believe the recognition and followers he acquires are valuable to spreading awareness. Online participants were labeled as "hypocrites or lazy." However, a Pacific Islander attorney believes that "it's a privilege" for people to be in-person activists for monetary reasons, such as having the "means to be able to not go to work."

Activists are not expecting supporters to make unrealistic sacrifices that can lead to an extreme burden on their personal lives. A Latina community organizer stated that she is unwilling to "vilify people who are either anti-social, or can't get out of their house, or maybe have warrants that they can't be at protests, they can't be at actions, they can't have police interaction." The interviewees noted one social media participation method that most activists respect. An organization director indicated, "If you're going to be a social media social justice activist, then you need to be engaging people in conversations;

you need to be posting your thoughts and your commentary." Another participant shared this perspective in the following response.

Whether it's folks with certain types of disabilities, folks with small children at home, or folks in rural areas who cannot show up in a big city, there's a place for all of us in the movement, and online has allowed that place for everyone.

DISCUSSION

Previous research studies on social movements set the foundation for understanding how activists use social media to mobilize and express themselves about political social issues. The current research qualitatively provides rich online and street activism examples. The movement addressing police use of force is often misunderstood as a political issue, and hearing the voices of activists adds depth. The key to de-escalating hostile situations between police and community members involves understanding those affected by the incident.

The study's results not only enhance the public's knowledge of who the protesters are but also the academic significance concerning social media use and its influence on the criminal justice system. Many citizens have lost their trust in law enforcement, but activists believe law enforcement can undergo a cultural and organizational change. Findings suggest that social media facilitates social movement building and making activists' demands known. Activists' perspectives differ, but they are willing to work to address policing in communities of color. Findings indicate that creating a collective cultural consciousness surrounding the valuable qualities of social media will connect and empower once-marginalized groups. The visual recordings of cases of alleged police brutality can be disseminated through social media platforms, which give the public the power to form conclusions and voice opinions.

Activists value social media and utilize the Facebook platform to network, organize, spread awareness, and influence change politically. Not all social media platforms are structured the same, but Facebook and Twitter are revolutionary resources for people interested in racial justice policy. Even though social media is a contemporary social phenomenon, it is ironic that Facebook users feel they are old-fashioned compared to other platforms. Social media evolves the role of what it means to be an activist and facilitates the distribution of information. However, some still believe activist work should consist

primarily of in-person interactions and relationships. Being able to have conversations and sway minds is a feature of justice work that is diminishing because of the structure of posts, such as a 140-character Twitter tweet. The potential for harm is present when people physically protest in their communities. Experienced activists struggle in recognizing the credibility of online activism. Social media is a cultural resource that does not replace in-person social interactions when engaging in politically charged discourse.

Findings reveal not all activists utilize the same resources. Therefore, police departments are encouraged to respond to protest differently depending on the organization of the protest activity. Not only is it intimidating to see officers arrive in riot gear, but as the current study and other studies conclude, most protests organized are peaceful (Kappeler & Kraska, 2013). This observation contrasts with the distorted framing of "thugs" and "looters" that viewers have seen in mainstream media sources and negative social media portrayals (Moody-Ramirez, Tait, & Bland, 2021). The political conflict concerning police use of force and weapons is racialized.

Activists are affected by the historical oppression of people of color, and they carry the trauma. Conversations regarding the racial tension and politics between activists, community members, and law enforcement occur in local communities. Protest efforts benefit from creating protest activities that capture the complexity of white privilege and subconscious biases. For the most part, activists in the movement focus more on political issues, such as the demilitarization of the police force, the availability of institutions that can hold officers accountable, and the continuous struggle to restructure the criminal justice system. Social media allows activists to express their demands because, according to activists, the mainstream media fails to have their best interests in mind in reports. The distorted representations of activist violence increase ratings, while the peaceful neighborhood meetings fail to garner attention.

CONCLUSION

The present study provided qualitative accounts of an emerging movement that attempts to improve community and police relationships. The findings added substantially to the literature on social media and social movements. The knowledge gained from conducting this research benefits community members, scholars, politicians, and police departments. Activists need information that can better guide their interactions online.

Aggressive confrontations with police and a perceived lack of political accountability are fueling the negative perceptions of activism, and it can lead to a negative social media portrayal. This research illustrates how activists can better understand social media activism and guides a more considerate implementation of online protest activities. Activists will continue to claim their space and voice their opinions on social media platforms. It is also necessary to look at social media organizing beyond policing because communities are impacted by other manifestations of racial harm (Jackson, 2023). Racial violence and racial justice manifest in diverse ways. Activists demonstrate contemporary methods for inciting or initiating political social change can start on social media. The pursuit of political change can benefit from social media and in-person holistic approaches that work towards racial healing.

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Online Connection

X: @DrRiosContreras