

An Analysis of George Floyd-Themed Memes

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Protests took place worldwide in response to the death of George Floyd who police officers killed in Minnesota on May 25, 2020. In response, people created, posted and shared memes to frame Floyd's death based on their view of his guilt or innocence. This study employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the frames that surfaced following the pivotal historical moment. Study findings indicate memes went beyond "just the facts" and humor to spread misinformation, political ideology and negative stereotypes about Black people. Building on the literature, the three dominant frames that emerged from the study were conflict, human interest

and responsibility. Frames used to justify Floyd's death included depicting Black people as criminalistic, violent, and immoral. Themes related to responsibility were explored to highlight the effectiveness of the present criminal justice system and presidential administration. Study implications highlight the importance of CRT and how memes are used to tackle and address the deep wounds of systemic racism that exist in America.

Keywords: critical race theory, social media, memes, George Floyd, protests.

Protests took place around the world in response to the death of George Floyd who police officers killed in Minnesota on May 25, 2020. Floyd died after a police officer knelt on his neck for what was first believed to be 8 minutes and 46 seconds while he was in handcuffs. Prosecutor's later corrected the length to 9 minutes and 29 seconds, marking it as an indication of police brutality (Levenson, 2021). Floyd's suspected crime? He allegedly used a counterfeit \$20 bill.

Floyd's death became a tipping point for race-relations in the United States. Following his death, Americans began to acknowledge and eliminate racist symbols in American culture. Major companies (e.g., Quaker Oats, Aunt Jemima maple syrup) began to consider rebranding their products that are perceived as racist. Gibson (2020) noted the Land O'Lakes butter logo, which featured a skimpily clad Native American woman, "had long been criticized as racist and stereotypical" and "the image goes 'hand-in-hand with human and sex trafficking of our women and girls.'" Institutions and individuals also

removed Confederate statues. City officials renamed streets, replacing them with various versions of Black Lives Matter (BLM) street/boulevard. Critics analyzed the structure of police departments across the country—seeking methods of improvement. A month after Floyd’s death, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which outlines major reforms in policing, such as banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants in federal cases. The act also makes lynching a federal crime, establishing a national registry to track law enforcement misconduct, and requiring racial bias training (Zhou & Nilsen, 2020).

In the midst of these changes, citizens took to the streets all over the country to protest Floyd’s death and to indicate they were fed up with systemic racism. The protests spanned more than 70 countries in the United States. More than 7,750 demonstrations were associated with the BLM movement during the summer after Floyd’s death, with more than 93% involved non-violent protesters in this nation, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (known as ACLED). According to mappingpoliceviolence.com, Black people make up 28% of U.S. citizens killed by police since 2013, despite comprising only 13% of the national population.

To highlight various systemic racism issues, people began creating, posting and sharing memes related to racism, oppression, peaceful versus violent forms of protests and historical parallels to Floyd’s death throughout history. To get a sense for the primary themes that surfaced regarding Floyd, this study looked at memes shared during the month after his death. Previous study findings indicate memes have the power to change public opinion (Sci & Dare, 2014; Hristova, 2014; Harlow, 2013). Scholars have analyzed memes from various perspectives including defining the term and identifying the role memetic texts play in influencing political debate, protest and online conversations (i.e., Dawkins, 1992; Shifman, 2013, Hristova, 2014).

Memes, according Shifman, (2013), “are (visual) pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person” (p. 18), generally through social media platforms. These visual sources of communication, “gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon” (p. 18). However, a review of the literature revealed few studies to date that specifically focused on internet memes through the Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. To help fill this void in the growing body of research on memes, this study employs CRT to study the

public conversations that emerged in 2020 following Floyd's death. Specifically, through a qualitative content analysis, this article examines memes that emerged in 2020 following Floyd's death.

CRT examines how messages portray underlying ideologies that reflect social relations of domination based on a pervasive yet unobtrusive racial hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1998). Scholars Delgado and Stefancic (2017) outline three basic tenets of CRT in an American context as: 1) racism is "ordinary" thus is difficult to address because it is not acknowledged; 2) an "interest convergence" because racism advances a large segment of society there is little incentive to eradicate it; and 3) a "social construction" which highlights that race is product of social thought and relations (pp. 8–9). Additionally, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) make the case that CRT expands beyond race, racism and power to also examine the economics, history, cultural context, as well as the emotional impacts of race, racism and power in understanding social and political issues. In direct opposition to emerging discourses that assert we live in a colorblind and a post-racial society, critical race theorists argue that social relations are fundamentally racist due to legal, social and historical traditions (Bell, 1992). LeDuff (2017) notes, "Media critics have used CRT (originally a legal theory) to better understand American audiences and the impact of mediated messages on their view of race in America" (p. 1). Colorblindness often allows people to ignore racist policies that perpetuate social inequality.

Because of the uneasiness affiliated with talking about race, analyses of critical race humor offer a viable alternative that allows individuals to engage in conversations about racial truths and trends (Rossing, 2014). Yoon (2016) found that "the majority of internet memes about racism perpetuate colorblindness by mocking people of color and denying structural racism" (p. 92). The reductionism of social media allows for the framing of social issues through oversimplified and self-perpetuating stereotypes. For instance, Dobson and Knezevic (2018) analyzed the way the media story of Kimberly Wilkins known as "Sweet Brown" developed over time. They concluded social media and legacy media framed "Sweet Brown" as the news. They identified how the narrative used to frame the story built upon historical stereotypes of black women as loud and sassy that were quickly linked to her. The stereotyping of "Sweet Brown" eventually overshadowed and outgrew the importance of the small local disaster.

Continued analyses in this area of research are important, as studies have indicated a third of people worldwide now rely on social media as their main source of local news. It is hoped that studies such as this one will serve as a springboard to support and encourage imperative discussions on the tenets of CRT, particularly in light of recent legislation in many states that push to remove CRT from K-12 curriculum.¹

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores memes and their framing of the protests following Floyd's death using a CRT lens. Legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Richard Delgado, among other scholars, studied race, racism and power and placed them in a broader context to include economics, history and other factors. Parker and Lynn (2002) characterize CRT as incorporating three goals: a) to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in law and society; b) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct; and c) to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination.

A primary goal of CRT is to re-center inquiry and experience from a marginalized perspective. CRT is concerned with consciousness-raising, emancipation and self-determinism. As a CRT tactic, Scholar Derrick Bell advocated for using "interest convergence," which maintains that the "majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interests to do so." Interest convergence is the "merging" of interests between what persons of color seek and what dominant policymakers perceive they or the country needs. Researchers have examined media coverage of social problems such as police brutality, stereotyping of Black men and other race-related issues from a media framing perspective (see Gamson, 1985; Entman, 1992). Such studies generally support the idea that journalists and editors select, package, disseminate news and mediate it through organizational processes and ideologies (Watkins, 2001). People of color are concerned about representation because stereotypes create mistrust among Blacks and

¹ In 2020-21 state legislatures across the country advocated for limiting what public school teachers may teach regarding critical race theory and the nation's historical subjugation of people of color.

other groups and may result in “misandry,” which refers to an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men, created and reinforced in societal, institutional and individual ideologies and behaviors (Smith, 2010). For instance, Hurwitz and Peffley (2010) discovered a strong relationship between Whites’ images of African-Americans and judgments of crime and punishment. They concluded that much of the public opinion in this domain is influenced by racial concerns and cultural narratives found in mass media.

The basis of framing theory presumes the prevalent media will focus attention on newsworthy events and place them within a sphere of meaning. In his landmark study, Entman (1992) discussed how journalists embed frames within a text and thus influence thinking. He defined the term by noting that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (p 52). Kilgo and Harlow (2019) studied protest reporting among Texas newspapers in 2017 and found four common frames in the coverage: riot, confrontation, spectacle and debate. Kilgo (2020) wrote, “Texas papers were more likely to write positively about the aims of protests related to health and immigration, compared to those about racism,” and she posited how the media frames the 2020 protests will shape the public’s view.

Memes and Social Media Outlets

Social media outlets, or user-generated content sites, have created an avenue by which the public can post messages that have the potential to reach and impact large audiences (Curnutt, 2012). Memes are particularly noteworthy for analysis of the framing of race using humor, as they provide both visual and textual content about a topic. Shifman (2013) and other scholars have concluded memes employ one of three forms of inward-looking humor. They usually combine a mixture of “playfulness (making light of dominant ideals), incongruity (pointing out conflicts in situations) or superiority (emphasizing the opinion stated in the meme as superior to alternative views or interpretations).” According to Dawkins, memes propagate when a good idea (or song, phrase, style, etc.) is repeated. As scholars suggest, participating in the creation and adaptation of memes can be both playful and political (Ekdale & Tully, 2014).

Another concern with internet memes is that they make it easier to spread misinformation, as exemplified during the 2016 presidential campaign when memes circulated highlighting the idea that Hillary Clinton was severely sick and lacked the stamina to serve in the role of US president. Adding to the literature on social media and memes, Campbell, Joiner and Lawrence (2018) explored how memes serve as unique communicative artifacts, which tend to promote problematic messages about religion within digital culture. The authors concluded internet memes use humor to highlight outsider assumptions about religious doctrines and identities, frequently targeting inconsistencies between religious beliefs and practices.

As with other memes, they combined images from popular culture and media with succinct and easily discernible catchphrases. Internet memes about religion presented a range of frames that offer distinct understandings of how religion is viewed in American culture. They focused on the reductive nature of Internet memes and how they tend to condense religious individuals and beliefs to simplistic terms. They concluded memes function on the basis of stereotyping because this condensed medium is unable to represent complexity or to present nuanced ideas about religious theology or culture. In addition, bias and misunderstandings are easily introduced in such memes.

Social media platforms were instrumental in fueling grassroots efforts that included protests because of the ease of coordination, speedy exchange of information and low expense to launch a social media campaign. Common CRT tenets such as “colorblindness doesn’t exist;” and the “permanence of racism” (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998) are often illustrated in the content of social media platforms. Citizens use racial stereotypes as tools to characterize the victims of police brutality negatively (e.g., Drummond, 1990; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Dates & Barlow, 1993; and Pilgrim, 2012).

Social Media and Activism

Scholarly articles reveal citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes. Similarly, Poell (2014) explored the dynamics of activist social media via a case study on the social media reporting efforts of the Toronto Community Mobilization Network, which coordinated and facilitated the protests against the 2010 Toronto G-20 summit. The network urged activists to report about the protests on Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, tagging their contributions #g20report. The investigation indicated the use of social

media brings about an acceleration of activist communication and greatly enhances its visual character.

Ekdale and Tully (2014) examined one of Kenya's first internet memes of a vigilante named Makmende, an action-hero-inspired protagonist of a music video. During the phenomenon, a group of mostly young, male, urban Kenyans took an existing idea as an insult—and reappropriated it as ambitious. Through a band's decision to resurrect and personify the character as an actual tough guy, not a wannabe, he was reimagined and redefined a symbol of weakness into a symbol of strength. The researchers concluded the Makmende meme was not cynical or imitative, instead it was a meme of aspiration, in which participants celebrated the successes of the original video that projected their desires for the nation. Through this meme, he became more than a fictional superhero—he became a symbol of Kenya's present and future.

In another study, Cabalin (2014) considered the relationship between new social media and youth political actions during the 2011 Chilean student movement. His content and textual analysis of Facebook's page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) in 2011 revealed the group utilized Facebook mainly to call for protest actions, to highlight the achievements of the movement and to indicate their opponents. However, most of the content published on this Facebook page was produced by traditional media, showing that conventional communication strategies of social movements are interrelated with new innovative practices.

Similarly, Harlow (2013) analyzed online social media's importance in the Arab Spring. The author conducted a preliminary exploration of the spread of narratives' spread through new media technologies via a textual analysis of Facebook comments and traditional news media stories during the 2011 Egyptian uprisings. Her study's exploration of "memes" suggests that the telling and re-telling, both online and offline, of the principal narrative of a "Facebook revolution" helped involve people in the protests. Thorson looked at videos stored on YouTube to study publics interested in the Occupy movement. In addition to harvesting metadata related to view count and video ratings on YouTube and the number of times a video was tweeted, a probability sample of 1,100 videos was hand-coded, with an emphasis on classifying video genre and type, borrowed sources of content and production quality.

Other studies have examined its use in response to police brutality. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, founded by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, was popularized on social media platforms. The movement served as a call to action and a response to racism in the United States. While the BLM protests intensified over the summer of 2020, Pew researchers found that support for the movement among U.S. adults declined from 67% supporting the protests in June 2020 to about 55% in September 2020. However, it is important to note that support for the BLM remained strongest among Blacks between June and September with more than 86% saying they strongly or somewhat support BLM, while support declined among Whites and Hispanics (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020). President Trump described New York City painting the BLM rallying cry on Fifth Avenue a “symbol of hate” (Cohen, 2020, para. 1).

Michael Brown’s 2014 death has been examined from many perspectives, including riots and “hashtag activism” (e.g., Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Bowen, 2015). Bowen’s (2015) study on media’s framing of Ferguson, Missouri, following Michael Brown’s death concluded that the common overarching frame was the conflict between the Black community and authorities. News segments offered details about the riots and unrest resulting from the shooting first, followed by the facts of the case. Similarly, Blackstone, Cowart and Saunders (2017) found evidence to suggest that protesters were framed as troublemakers. Mina (2019) studied how meme culture has led to major protest movements such as the #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter campaigns that erupted after Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson Missouri in 2014, to Hong Kong’s #UmbrellaRevolution protests the same year calling for democratic rights and universal suffrage in China. Although the two movements were continents apart physically, Mina posited the two movements voiced concerns about the “harmful encroachment of the state into aspects of daily life” (p. 2) and both gave way to viral memes. According to Mina, “Memes can be silly, they can be harmless, they can be destructive, they can be extremely serious, and they can be all these things at the same time” (p. 6). Furthermore, Mina discussed the performative and “-ing” memes in which a noun is turned into a verb and becomes a mockery. A memorable example cited by Ming involved the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin in Florida: #Travoning emerged to transform the symbols central to #IAmTrayvon and turn into something else: a mockery. Performers put on hoodies, lay flat

on the ground as if shot, and scattered Skittles and an Arizona Tea can around them. While die-ins are a common protest tactic, where activists lie on the ground to protest deaths from a ward or from police violence, this particular action was designed to make fun of the way Trayvon died. (p. 69).

In their article on “hashtag activism,” Bonilla and Rosa (2014) characterized #Ferguson in this manner: “As opposed to someone who might post about Ferguson on Facebook, users on Twitter felt like they were participating in #Ferguson, as they tweeted in real time about the unfolding events, rallied supporters to join various hashtag campaigns....” Bonilla and Rosa (2014) concluded that social media platforms have become powerful tools for recording and inspiring episodes of police brutality. “Within this context, social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations” (p. 4).

Scholars Moody-Ramirez et al. (2016) also observed how social media became one of the platforms for protesters to express their feelings regarding police brutality. This study extends the literature to memes, which played an important role in framing Floyd’s death after police officers killed him on May 25, 2020. Using the following research questions, researchers examined the frames that surfaced once people began sharing memes to highlight Floyd’s death:

RQ1: What frames emerged in #George Floyd memes following his death and protest?

RQ2: How did memes in the wake of Floyd’s death build on previous cultural narratives to frame the protests?

RQ3: What impact do memes play in organizing and mobilization counter narratives?

METHODS

This study involved reviewing 197 memes to understand the tone and framing of Floyd-themed memes. Using similar techniques of Dobson and Knezevic (2018), we considered memes to be “powerful tools for rallying support for a social cause, political mobilization, and social commentary” (p. 381). Using the keywords “memes” and “Floyd,”

the top 200 results were sought via the Google search engine one month following Floyd's death, during the peak of the media coverage of the event. The rationale for using Google to collect the top memes was they were commonly shared across social media platforms—including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The memes featured in an anonymous Google search provide a general idea of the most commonly shared immigration-themed memes during this period. A total of 200 memes were collected, downloaded and placed in a Word document. Note we eliminated three memes because they were clearly unrelated to the study. Memes were the unit of analysis. We included images that had been altered in some way through Photoshopping or adding text regarding Floyd's death.

Following the methods used by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), this study listed common frames often found in memes and coded occurrences of these frames in the memes that focused on Floyd's death. We investigated the prevalence of five frames—conflict, responsibility, human interest, economic consequences and morality, in memes on the Floyd incident. Frames were established by asking how meme creators want audiences to view their content. To identify frames, the investigators analyzed memes for certain patterns to answer the question how does the meme make you think about Floyd's death? Patterns were determined to be frames. This approach, adapted from Campbell and Wiggins (2014), worked particularly well because of the brevity of thoughts included in the memes. The discussion section offers implications of the prevalence of these frames.

We participated in three training sessions regarding the categories selected for each meme. We first worked on the coding scheme together, using 10 percent of the data. The three researchers then independently coded 20 percent of the memes to determine consistency of frames. Differences were discussed until 90% agreement was reached. In sum, 70% of the memes in our sample were categorized by one individual; however, 30% of articles were coded by two individuals to establish intercoder reliability. This method of analysis proved a viable framework for coding the memes that surfaced in 2020 to frame George Floyd's death.

RESULTS

The first research question asked what was the overarching tone of George Floyd-themed memes following his death and protest? The tone of the memes we coded was

mixed: positive, 59; negative, 108; and neutral, 30. A larger percentage of memes in the sample fell in the negative category. Viewing the memes through a CRT lens, we coded negative those that questioned Floyd’s character or depicted Black people as looters and criminals as negative. Also negatively coded were those that discussed Trump’s inability to make “America Great Again.”

Table 1
Overarching Themes in Floyd-Themed Memes

Systemic racism is justified. Floyd’s death was justified for various reasons, including his race, personality and perceived criminal nature.
Black people fit the stereotypes perpetuated in mass media messages; They are looters, criminals and violent by nature.
Floyd’s death was a tipping point in the Black Lives Matter movement. Memes indicated people are fed up with police brutality and the mistreatment of Black people.

Referring to CRT, which places an emphasis on race, the overarching themes found in the majority of negative memes in our sample (Table 1) were: 1) systemic racism is justified. Floyd’s death was justified for various reasons, including his race, personality and perceived criminal nature; 2) Black people fit the stereotypes perpetuated in mass media messages; They are looters, criminals and violent by nature; 3) Floyd’s death was a tipping point in the Black Lives Matter movement. Memes indicated people are fed up with police brutality and the mistreatment of Black people.

Table 2
Tone for Floyd-themed memes

Tone	Number
Positive	59
Negative	108
Neutral	30
N=	197

In the next most popular category of meme tone—positive—we found that creators used memes to highlight the importance of the BLM movement, to use Floyd’s death as an example of why Americans should be concerned about police brutality and to identify how Black people are treated by law enforcement. Memes that fell in the positive category frequently framed Floyd in a positive manner—as a life taken too soon—or labeled his death as an example of systemic racism that Americans must address. We found the fewest memes in the final category—neutral. We coded neutral those memes that focused on “just the facts” or highlighted news articles and images published by the media that focused information regarding Floyd’s death.

Mememes in this just the facts category, as mentioned previously, highlighted the facts of the case and news coverage, and were the second most common found in this research study. Mememes frequently featured the original photo of the police officer placing his knee on Floyd’s death. Very few memes fell in this category. Neutral memes were less common because they present original information regarding a topic without adding a frame or personal perspective. The primary purpose of memes in our sample was to make a statement about a topic from a certain viewpoint—either positive or negative.

Frames Found in Floyd-Themed Mememes

The second research question asked what frames emerged in George Floyd-themed memes following his death? The three most prominent frames found in the memes studied were conflict (stereotyping, oppression, systemic racism) , 44; morality (evaluation of the morality of demonstrations), 38; and responsibility (Trump’s role in oppression, history of freedom in America), 20 (Table 3). A fourth category was coded as “just the facts,” 39. Mememes in this category focused on the facts of the case.

Conflict frame. The conflict frame frequently highlighted issues related to systemic racism, including stereotyping/mistreatment of Black men and violence directed toward people BLM protestors (Figure 1). Stereotypes of Black people included representations of them as ignorant and criminal; often featuring members of the group as looting and destroying property. The memes in this category varied in scope. For instance, one meme in our sample included an image of the Statue of Liberty superimposed with an image of Derek

Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck (on the lower part of the frame). The meme symbolized how the foundation of America has its knee on the necks of Black people.



Figure 1 . Systemic racism-themed memes

A meme featuring a police officer talking with a group of protestors with text that reads, "Shoot every BLM protester and then the remaining black lives will matter" offers another example of systemic racism. While the First Amendment guarantees the right to peaceably assemble, the memes in this category frequently devalue the tenants of the constitution.

Table 3**Themes and descriptions of memes by prevalence in sample**

Theme	Description	Total
Conflict	Systemic racism/ Stereotypes of black people; looting and destruction Stereotypes of Black people, i.e., representations of them as ignorant and criminal.	38
	Total	38
Human Interest	Tipping point: Floyd's death is the last straw in police brutality, systemic racism and oppression of Black people.	15
Responsibility	Who is responsible for freedom/lack of freedom in America?	15
	President Trump is making/not making American great again	16
	Total	31
Morality	Denial: People are not protesting	14
	Moral judgement of protesting	34
	Memes of Colin Kaepernick kneeling	6
	Copycat memes: Young white men mocking Floyd	3
	Total	57
Just the facts	News coverage	35
Other	No particular theme	21
Total		197

The conflict frame was prevalent in many of the memes we coded. Implicit in many of the memes in this category was the idea of Floyd's death serving as a tipping point in history. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, while many Americans were quarantined

or working from home for several months, they became keenly aware that the U.S. is dealing with another crisis—systemic racism—one that has been going on for centuries and that we can only hope it will one day be resolved. Memes highlighted the idea that Floyd’s death indicated a tipping point in systemic racism. Individuals who created memes highlighted the demonstrations that took place around the world after Floyd’s death. Such memes built on the idea that his cry for his mother was poignant and the nature of his death—merely being accused of using a counterfeit \$20 bill—was trivial.

Human Interest frame. Memes containing the human-interest frame emphasized the empathy people felt for Floyd’s untimely death. Memes in this category featured beautiful murals of Floyd and the various tributes that people set up to commemorate his death, including paintings, banners, memorials and candles. Memes also indicated people of all races must speak up and try to help Black people. They highlighted numerous other instances of racism against Black people and the pain it causes in the Black community. This pain has led to demonstrations against police brutality and systemic and institutional racism that many people believe have gone unchecked for decades.

Morality frame. The third most common frame involved instances of judging the morality of protests and how to categorize them. Meme imagery included a range of protests, demonstrations and expressions of support for Floyd. Peaceful protestors who were often shown marching, kneeling or sitting. For example, one memorable image shows a group of largely white protestors with linked arms blocking a highway with law enforcement officers and vehicles in the background (Figure 2). In another image, a largely Black crowd in business suits and dashikis are marching past a sign labeled “Terminal market.” These memes are significant because they speak to the fact that the majority of the protests around the globe have been peaceful, according to ACLED research cited in this paper’s introduction.



Figure 2. Memes containing a morality frame.

Mememes that were coded as containing the “morality” frame appeared to be skeptical that people were actually protesting in Minneapolis. One such mememe includes a side-by-side photo in which a journalist is reporting on the protest in Minneapolis in support of George Floyd. The mememe depicts the protest as more of a riot, as it includes burning buildings in the back of journalists in the photo (Figure 3). Although chaos is emphasized in the mememe, the journalist appears to be downgrading its intensity. The photo at the bottom of the news clip highlights a man who appears oblivious to the chaos going on behind him. This mememe may symbolize the lack of attention and acknowledgement that the media is giving to the protest. In other words, the protesters are rioting in anger for the loss of an unarmed black man who was a victim of police brutality, while the journalist is downplaying the situation. This mememe suggests news outlets attempt to hide the truth from the public. The mememe may be considered an example of how social media helps viewers question the news we are seeing. It helps the public determine what is real and what has been altered to fit what the news media wants to show. It shines light on how the media might reframe a story to change the connotation of a situation.

In another mememe, the front driver side bumper of a huge semi-truck is covered with blood and text reading, “just drove through Minneapolis and didn't see any protesters” [sic]. In hindsight, this mememe is illustrating people are just going about their day--acting as if they don't see what is going on across the country due to the death of Floyd. This mememe sparks conversation on protesters questioning the morality of politicians and police

personnel who ignore their pleas for social justice. The memes imply that listening to individuals is the right thing to do.

Other American citizens in the memes in this category are standing and watching social injustices and the slaying of African Americans; however, some people turn a blind eye. By posting this meme, the audience is encouraged to do the “right” thing and prompt more backlash from violent protests. Individuals are also encouraged to open their eyes and see what is happening around them. They indicate it is immoral for certain groups not to care about the protests and causing violence toward protesters.

Memes with a morality frame also help shine light on how the media might reframe a story to belittle an issue. Such memes can be used to inform the public of how news outlets attempt to hide the truth from the public. The meme can be considered a timely example of how social media outlets help viewers question the news we are seeing. It helps the public determine what is real and what has been altered to fit what the story the news wants to show.



Figure 3. Morality-themed memes

Memes in this category also judged the morality of protesting at sporting events. Several memes in our sample featured images of Kaepernick or other individuals taking a knee in a sports arena--presumably in support of the BLM movement (Figure 4). For instance, one meme in this category, features an African American soccer player kneeling on the field before an unidentified game. We coded this meme as a morality-themed meme because the individual is kneeling in protest and presumably in support of the BLM movement. (We see the man on one knee with his head down showing his support.) The

creator of this meme shines light on the pervasiveness of Kaepernick's platform dating back to 2016, when Kaepernick helped spread the word about police brutality by taking a knee during the National Anthem before numerous games.

Memes noted that Kaepernick also urged other athletes to participate in the protest in support of the BLM movement. As such, this photo illustrated this athlete's participation in the fight against police brutality. This meme plays right into the Kaepernick-themed meme category, as it illustrates how the community of athletes banded together to show support for an important social movement. By doing so, it aims to spread awareness and encourage thoughtful conversations on unarmed black people police officers have killed. This meme highlights the movement Kaepernick started and promotes the importance of the movement.



Figure 4. Morality-themed memes

Morality-themed memes not only highlight the importance of Kaepernick's individual fight for racial equality, but they also pay homage to Floyd and emphasize his impact on the fight against police brutality.

Memes containing the morality frame also featured visual illustrations from people mimicking the position former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin assumed when he pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes (Figure 5). In one such meme, two white males were featured reenacting the slaying of Floyd. The first male has his knee on the second one's neck while the second male lay down on his chest with his hands crossed behind his back. The bottom of the photo features the caption "George Floyd challenge." We coded this illustration as a copycat theme-meme with a negative tone.

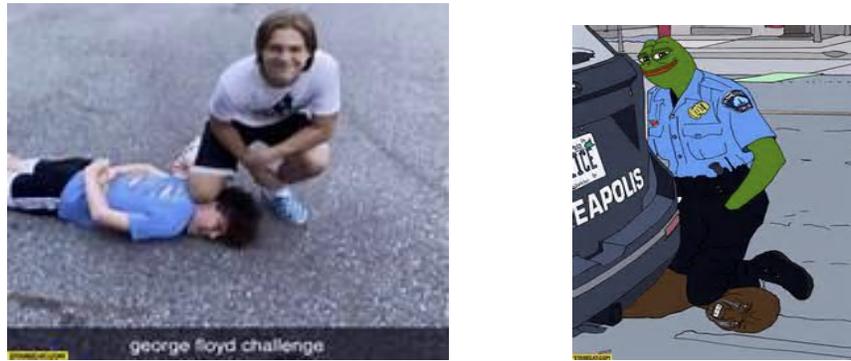


Figure 5. Morality-themed memes

The challenge perpetuated by the memes in this category is they had the potential to create or feed into a trend that might support or encourage the mocking of George Floyd's death. The memes in this category also have the potential to create a negative connotation around the BLM movement and influence others to participate in similar activities in an effort to make light of an otherwise serious situation. With social media challenges, individuals tend to get involved by filming the suggested activity and posting photos on social media platforms to elicit reactions from viewers. Once the challenge catches on, more people participate in the suggested activity and cause a trend to take root. Since the death of Floyd was a major topic of conversation across all media platforms, the memes in this category had the potential to steal attention away from the BLM movement and sway the conversation elsewhere.

Responsibility Frame: These memes containing the responsibility frame emphasized the idea that the American dream has not been realized and the dream will remain unrealized as long as Black people are discriminated against. However, one key difference in memes in this category is the emphasis on the idea of freedom. For instance, freedom-themed memes might include ideas related to enslaved people and America's history of enslaving black people. The use of shackles, images of bondage and other images of enslavement were key to this category.

Responsibility-themed framed memes also focused on Trump's role in systemic racism. Trump-related memes in our sample tended to highlight the 45th president of the United States in various situations (Figure 6). One such meme illustrates the idea that Trump is killing democracy in the United States. Floyd, an unarmed African American

man represents democracy, while Trump is portrayed as the police officer who killed Floyd after taking an oath to protect and serve the community. In other Trump-themed memes, we see racial symbols posted around Trump. For instance, one meme includes a swastika symbol on the car. Another meme portrays Trump's allegations of being unfair and biased against the people he swore to serve and protect. This meme may be used to spark a conversation about Trump's work to improve our country and how he has failed in the area of racial reconciliation.

Another meme in this category highlights one of Trump's quotes, which is compared to a newsreel that talks about the Floyd investigation. Trump states, "My heart goes out to George's family and friends. Justice will be served!" At the bottom of the meme, a quote states, "Trump makes racist comments about George Floyd." The quote does not use any racist slurs. The meme illustrates the idea that no matter what Trump does, he will be depicted as a racist. This meme indicates Trump will always have that negative connotation about him when it comes down to his role in the U.S. justice system. Memes indicate Trump is known for his race-related views, and this depiction will always follow his name. This meme aims to shed light on how the media portrays Trump. It may be used to shift the light from politics to a conversation about Trump's role in institutional racism.

Another meme includes a painting of former President George Washington wearing a "Make America" hat, representing the "Make America Great Again" campaign touted by Trump and his supporters (Figure 6). The meme may be viewed as sarcastic, as it refers to Trump's presidential campaign and its significance. The meme questions the intention of Trump's campaign and what it truly means to make America great (and if it ever was great). The meme is associated with the history of racist presidents of the United States. Washington is noted for being an owner of enslaved people and is one of America's forefathers who promoted the building of the country using the labor of enslaved Africans. This meme highlights Washington's role in building the United States and an era during which its Black citizens did not have equal rights or opportunities. Hence, this meme conveys the idea that Trump is referring to an era that was "great" for White people, but less-than desirable for Black people who they treated as second-class citizens.



Figure 6. Memes containing a conflict frame.

Cultural and Counter Narratives

The third research question asked how did memes in the wake of Floyd's death build on previous cultural narratives to frame the protests and what impact do memes play in organizing and mobilization counter narratives? As mentioned in the literature review, individuals share memes to inspire change and to encourage support for a cause. The memes in our sample frequently built on cultural narratives related to racism—often highlighted Floyd's death as an indication systemic racism is still strong in the United States. Narratives also framed the event as related to historical representations of race and oppression of marginalized groups.

As a counternarrative to representations of people of color as violent and animalistic, memes also focused on peaceful forms of protests and historical parallels to Floyd's death throughout history (Sci & Dare, 2014; Hristova, 2014; Harlow, 2013). One of the primary frames that fell in this category was memes that emphasized looting and destruction. While frequent photo images and video replays of TV news accounts emphasized destruction and created the perception that the bulk of Minneapolis was destroyed in the aftermath of protests and riots after George Floyd's death (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. Floyd-themed memes with a counter narrative



Figure 8. Protest-themed memes

Meme makers contributed to that perception by posting memes suggesting Black people are thieves and not so smart looters. For example, one widely circulated meme featured some masked young Black people with shopping carts leaving a store with a caption that read “WHEN LOOTING, ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU NEVER GRAB THE CART THAT HAS THAT ONE WHEEL WITH A MIND OF IT’S OWN.”

Another series of memes labeled “BLACK FRIDAY” showed Black people (including some in hoodies) with merchandise leaving stores and frames them as “THUGS,” “ROWDY,” “ANIMALS,” “DESTROYING THEIR COMMUNITY” whereas photos of whites are labeled as “MISCHIEF” and “BOOZE FILLED REVELERS.” Another meme featuring people of more than one race read “STOP CALLING THEM LOOTERS THEY ARE UNDOCUMENTED SHOPPERS.” These images feed into negative stereotypes about Black people and although the majority of the protests were peaceful, these memes contribute to the framing of individuals involved as criminals and lawbreakers. It’s also important to note one poked at Sylvester Stallone who starred in the Rocky movies, and

that meme showed a bloody Rocky with a big screen TV box photoshopped in with this caption “YO ADRIAN. I GOT US A TV.” The impact of the long-term damage in Minneapolis and other major cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Portland and New York was still being calculated as this study was being completed. Minnesota officials have estimated there is at least \$500 million in damage with much of the worst damage along Lake Street in South Minneapolis (Read, 2020).

Conclusion

History indicates interest in police brutality incidents tend to peak and fizzle out within months (i.e., such as the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner). Floyd’s death; however, served as the impetus for a sustained keen interest in systemic racism. Just days before the one-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd in May, *USA Today* introduce the year-long project “Never Been Told: The Lost History of People of Color,” which seeks to “elevate, through deeply reported investigative and explanatory journalism, the people, places and ideas that are often excluded from history books.” Racism and history enterprise editor Nichelle Smith, who oversees the project, explained that traditionally, the nation’s history was taught through a White perspective. “Changing that lens, elevating stories that haven’t been elevated, reaching back and getting these stories that have been obscured by time, forgotten in time, erased—intentionally or unintentionally—that is very much our goal,” she said. Projects such as these indicate the question of if Floyd’s death served as a turning point in race-relations for the United States.

The three dominant meme themes that emerged from our study were conflict, human interest and responsibility. Topics included stereotyping of Black people, systemic racism; and forms of demonstration. Study implications highlight the importance of CRT and how memes are used to tackle and address the deep wounds of systemic racism that exist in America. While there were contrary opinions, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reports show that most of the protests were peaceful. Unfortunately, these memes could have contributed to the perception that the protests and the aftermath were largely violent. This is represented in the conflict-themed images in our sample.

Events in 2020 have brought to the forefront the deep wounds of systemic racism that exist in America. Online meme templates are popular and meme creators use them repeatedly to get various messages across. However, while popular memes generally include particular pop culture icons, we found that the Floyd-themed memes in our sample were less likely to include images that have been used previously to make a political statement. In fact, popular characters, such as Black Guy on Cell Phone, Lady with Cat, Barbecue Becky, and Bad Luck Brian, were not used at all in the memes collected in our sample. Popular TV shows, celebrities, books and cartoon characters were also less likely to be used in this particular case.

Although most of the demonstrations were peaceful, many of the memes contained violent imagery. Play-by-play imagery of Derek Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck contributed to a negative characterization of his unlikely death. Floyd-themed memes also served as another insensitive way to lessen the importance of Black men and women. The knee-on-the-neck image turned into an internet challenge. This negative portrayal of Floyd downplayed the importance of Black people—and highlighted the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement. Memes that framed the event in a more objective manner fell in what we labeled the “just-the-facts” category. Most of these emphasized news coverages of the event. Memes in this category also included images that were often triggering because they featured images of Floyd's slow death at the hands of a police officer.

The omission of pop culture icons is noteworthy, as standard staples in the meme culture are expected and appreciated by people who enjoy memes. We speculate meme creators didn't use traditional templates to create memes to spotlight Floyd's death because its seriousness. Instead, memes they were more likely to use the actual image of Floyd and Chauvin and superimpose text over it in order to make a statement.

Images that were superimposed over the original photo included the Statue of Liberty, Donald Trump and the Simpsons. In the end, most people took the Floyd incident seriously, and used the memes to impart a serious message—where it is was “for” or “against” police brutality and/or ending systemic racism. There was one exception, the Pepe the Frog meme, which became popular in 2005—and has since been usurped by many individuals and used to create various types of memes. One explanation for why

Pepe the Frog was used in reference to Floyd is it often has a race-related premise. Individuals have appropriated the character and placed him in a variety of circumstances—including racist and anti-Semitic situations to make a statement (ADL, 2020).

Study limitations include a lack of long-range data on Floyd-themed memes. The memes in our sample focused only on the month after the Minneapolis protests. However, it is important to look at the immediate response to police brutality—as it offers insight into the catalyst for a wave of protests. In addition, it was particularly important to document the early days following George Floyd’s death, as there were several other video-documented police-involved killings of Black people in 2020—such as Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and others. Another study limitation is that we did not examine user-creator interactions.

Even with these limitations this study is important, as it helps document an important era in American history. We provide a detailed look at the content shared regarding the George Floyd incident. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans dealt with another crisis—racism—one that has been going on for centuries and that one can only hope will one day be resolved. Floyd’s death was not novel; however, the socio-political climate surrounding it was different. Individuals were staying home and paying attention to their surroundings. The handling of his death and how individuals responded differed from previous police brutality incidents. Numerous other instances of racism against African Americans in the country have led to demonstrations against police brutality and systemic, institutional racism that many people believe have gone unchecked for decades.

Future studies that build on this research might focus on how audiences respond online to messages they receive. For instance, in-depth interviews with individuals who make up the collective and meme creating community might be a worthwhile undertaking. Future studies might also highlight more recent cases of police brutality and the use of memes to highlight the BLM movement. The characterization of the BLM continues to shift. A recent Pew research study indicated there has been a decrease in support for the BLM movement in 2020. The Pew study found stronger support in the Black community (86% in June 2020) compared to 87% in September 2020. In addition, the study indicated

BLM support was 65% among whites in June 2020 and had dropped to 45% in September 2020 (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020). The gap in BLM support among White and Hispanic people also grew and there was less support when compared to Black people.

Social media are powerful, and we saw that memes can make a difference in race relations and how people perceive the death of individuals killed by police officers. Social media users shared memes and other content regarding the incident, which is key in facilitating change. We witnessed an important time in history, during which institutions and individuals finally acknowledged and began to weed out racist symbols in American culture. There was more progress in a few months than America has seen in decades. Memes and other user-generated content offered a means for all communities to disseminate messages.

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