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**“Hands up, don’t shoot”: College students, social media and the  
#BLACKLIVESMATTER movement**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study focused on how college students are using social media in the #Blacklivesmatter movement. There have been several socially galvanizing events surrounding the #Blacklivesmatter movement that have led to many people to turn to social media to voice their opinions, share information and debate different ideas. This study specifically focused on college student's involvement on social media surrounding these events. The data suggests that Facebook was overwhelmingly the main choice for participants to gather information about this movement. While college students are gathering information about the #Blacklivesmatter movement on social media, the data suggests that participants rarely posted or shared information about the movement on their personal social media platforms. The study addressed how the Uses and Gratifications theory helps explain why people may or may not use social media for the purpose of news/information gathering.*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this project was to depict information circulating around the topic of black Americans. Things such as, where would one go to find information if they were hoping to be involved and/or what platforms are best for minimal bias and equal sharing of information. The goal was to identify participant's specific uses on social media. Along with this, determining what social media platform is the most popular gatekeeper for this movement. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram were the primary platforms analyzed.

Racial integration is the process of ending systematic racial segregation. Given that our culture is foremost an individualistic culture, we tend to focus on what's in front

of us or being the most discussed. This can be harmful when there is harsh stigma attached to socially charged issues or massive miscommunication over the media. The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) attempts to shed light on police brutality and issues related to racial inequality. With cultural changes and a persisting racial crisis, the BLMM says we need to be more equal, which seems simple. However, this type of social change has been a part of our social dialogue for many years. Many scholars have assumed that with more government policies and regulations we can assume a drastic change is right around the corner (Orlando, 1998). Yet this change is slow to occur and often it takes a major event to shake up the American consciousness.

The Ferguson trial was a turning point in history; it made racial inequalities be brought up in daily conversation, but that was only the beginning. After this instance, other events of brutality and inequality against African Americans were brought to light. A spotlight was placed on events such as those related to the Sandra Bland case in Texas, Eric Gardner case in New York, Jamar Clark case in Minneapolis, Freddie Gray case in Baltimore, Cedrick Chatman case in Chicago, and the University of Missouri protest of race relations at that institution. These events and others like them from across the country, are the reason why the BLMM exist. "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (Cullors, 2014, p. 1).

## Literature Review

The origins of #Blacklivesmatter can be traced back to 2013, during the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman incidents. On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch captain, shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old high school student who was visiting his father at the time. George Zimmerman was charged with 2nd degree murder, and manslaughter. After 16 hours of deliberation, the jury decided to find Zimmerman not guilty of all charges. After protest and outrage over the verdict of the case, #Blacklivesmatter was given birth during these protests and all over the various social media platforms.

Although the Trayvon Martin Incident was the original start to the #Blacklivesmatter movement, the movement did not get as much national attention until a year later. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Wilson. Michael Brown and a close friend were seen on camera in a nearby drug store stealing cigarillos and also assaulting the store clerk. After receiving the information from the dispatcher, Officer Wilson encountered Brown and his friend while they were walking down the center of the street. Wilson then backed his police cruiser towards the two young men as if to block them in for further questioning. Shortly after, an altercation ensued with Brown and Wilson fighting through the window of Wilson's squad car. The altercation ended when Wilson's firearm was discharged twice at the window. As Brown attempted to flee, Wilson pursued Brown to apprehend him. According to Wilson, Brown turned and attempted to charge him causing Wilson to fire a total of twelve rounds at Michael Brown, which resulted in Brown's death (Clark, 2014). The police department and the district attorney came under scrutiny because of the way the information about

Brown's murder was released on news and social media. People's perception of the way the police department handled the media was that the police were not only inappropriate but disrespectful of the family (Ortiz, 2014). The grand jury announced Officer Wilson as being free of all charges. The next day 1,000's of police took a stand blocking off a whole street in Ferguson. They did not want to be associated with this crime; they saw it as "murder" and was not what they represented (Ortiz, 2014).

The case pushed racial issues to the forefront of nearly every American's mind and for months all attention began to focus on black Americans. Within minutes of the initial incident, people flocked to various social media platforms to express their feelings about the event and it spread like wildfire. There were 3.5 million tweets total about the Ferguson decision Monday night. "#FergusonDecision" remained the top trending topic in the United States Tuesday morning (Luckerson, 2014). Riots followed the event and their volatility increased the severity of this incident overall. Following this critical event, others like it began to receive attention, as did the BLMM.

Other cases of police brutality also contributed to the rise of the #Blacklivesmatter movement. Events such as the Sandra Bland case in Texas, Eric Gardner case in New York, Jamar Clark case in Minneapolis, Freddie Gray case in Baltimore, Cedrick Chatman case in Chicago, and the University of Missouri protest of race relations at the institution. Each case sparked national attention making the #BLMM more and more popular. Especially the Eric Gardner case, which led to the creation of the "I Can't Breathe" hashtag, the Sandra Bland case, where police tried to hide the death of Sandra Bland due to police brutality, and the Freddie Gray death, which "proved that Black Lives Matter movement would not be contained to a handful of cities — nor would it be

limited to situations in which unarmed black men were killed by white police officers in cities run by whites” (Ehrenfreund, 2014 p.2).

### *Social Media Response*

Social media platforms have taken over American culture. These platforms are not only a place where people can connect with others, but people are increasingly using social media platforms to voice their opinions about certain issues in today’s society. Facebook specifically allows people to elaborate and go more in depth with the different views they may have. Facebook also allows users to create different pages that the user can administer in hope to promote a business, a cause, or anything the user is interested in.

People discussed and debated the facts surrounding the case on these various social media sites and the case was also blasted on national and world news media outlets. Since these cases of #Blacklivesmatter are still fairly new and still ongoing at the civil level, there isn’t a lot of scholarly research that has been published surround this topic and social media. A lot of the articles found are merely people’s opinions, which still serve as valuable resources. In an interview on NPR done on August 16, 2014, Scott Simon (the host) was interviewing Kai Wright who is the Editor-at-Large of the publication called Color Lines (Kai Wright, 2010). They were discussing the Michael Brown case; specifically how social media has impacted the case. The host, Scott Simon, asked Kai Wright, “Are social media platforms adding something to public reaction, or at least reaction time these days too?” Wright responded by saying, “...it’s certainly been the case with Michael Brown. But I think what is also important to point out is that while the medium of social media has been very powerful, what’s really been at the courts is

something very old-school, which was citizens behaving as citizen journalists, who just refuse to be bullied out on the streets..."(NPR, 2014)

After the death of Michael Brown, the hashtag began to gain momentum after a few violent acts by police against Black men. Black Twitter, or according to Apryl Williams and Doris Domoszali "a networked cultural identity", started to draw attention to these events, critiquing police violence against African Americans and media portrayals of African Americans. Social media's response to these events attempted to challenge White perceptions of African Americans. "Critical race scholars teach us that the scripting of the Black body through slavery, black codes, Jim Crow, lynchings, poverty, and shootings coaches White society that Black lives do not matter" (Langford & Speight, 2015 p.79).

The idea of Black Lives Matter has quickly become a very significant movement for the black community. Although America has made progress over the years, racially defined roles still exist among Americans. #BlackLivesMatter aims to challenge these roles. Many see a resemblance between #BlackLivesMatter and protest of Jim Crow laws in the 1960's (Edwards & Harris, 2015 p.4). The same way the black community fought to end Jim Crow laws, #BlackLivesMatter aims to fight against the mistreatment and disregard for black lives. The movement involves different protests, demonstrations, "die-ins", and other acts of resistance. The movement has become so significant that celebrities have taken part in it. Celebrities such as Kanye West, Prince, Jay Z, and Beyoncé have been associated with the movement. Even politicians have discussed the significance of the movement. Congressman Keith Ellison stated that "#BlackLivesMatter holds great promise today, if we heeds its call to action. It holds



within it the possibility of a galvanizing, magnetic force. Such a movement is what this time calls for, and I believe #BlackLivesMatter has the charisma, vision, and organizational capacity to spark another major reordering of American social and economic relationships” (Edwards & Harris, 2015 p.5).

Soon after the #BlackLivesMatter started to gain more attention, many other social media users started to raise the question, “why just black lives? What about all lives?” This helped strengthen the message that #BlackLivesMatter has been trying to portray over the past few years. “All Lives Matter” does not necessarily include black lives because black lives have not been fully recognized as having lives that matter (Yancy & Butler, 2015 p.6). The idea of “Black Lives Matter” does not aim to discount other races nor does it aim to make black lives more important than other races. The movement's goal is to change the idea that black lives are not disposable. “If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, ‘all lives matter,’ then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of all lives” (Yancy & Butler, 2015 p.6).

In recent years, social media has been a common outlet for protesters. Social media has been a very important part of various protests such as Occupy Wall Street, #Blacklivesmatter protest and even protest in Egypt and Syria. In an article written by Nic Newman (2009), he explains how social media changes the range of coverage immensely. More persons are hearing information from multiple mediums, making it easier to elicit a wide group of people to participate in an event. Similar studies have shown that social media has had a huge impact among protesters. In regard to a participant group of 1,600, “About 92% of the respondents used phones in general and 82% used phones for communicating about the protests. About half had a Facebook

profile (52%) and almost everyone who had one used it for communicating about the protests (51%). Twitter was used in general by 16% of the respondents, and for communicating about the protests by 13%” (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012. Egypt Protests tab).

While the study did a good job of analyzing the usage of social media and protest, the participants of the study were mostly attendants of the protest. Since there is such a heavy use of social media in today’s time, there can be a sense of hostility and anger between two different ideas about the issue. An example would be during the Michael Brown situation. After many Facebook pages were created to support Michael Brown, others created pages that support Darren Wilson, the police officer that shot Michael Brown. Because of these different ideas on the situation, many supporters of one side would harass and argue with supporters of the other side, all via social media platforms.

### **Research Question**

The topic of social media use during times of crisis is important to research because it can help get a better understanding of how social media is used and how it affects people's thought process and ultimate actions. Social media can be a positive source of information regarding a crisis event yet information may be difficult for users to synchronize and follow the events at hand (Simon, Goldberg, Aharonson-Daniel, Leykin, & Adini, 2014). It is important to study how the social media platforms are used during events, like the one in Ferguson, MO., in an effort to determine where users are getting their information, how is it being used in the greater discussion of that event, and if users are sharing this information with others. Events that deal with racism and police brutality are extremely polarizing. There are people who will be on opposite sides when

it comes to whom they support. The use of social media has made a vast change in the ability for anyone to get involved and be part of the conversation.

*Research Question:*

*"In what capacity do college students use social media in the Black Lives Matter Movement?"*

### **Methodology**

In an attempt to gain greater understanding of how college students use social media to get involved in the BLMM, a survey was created and disseminated. 2108 students from a faith based private university located in the Midwest were asked to respond to questions regarding this topic. 418 participants responded providing for a 20% response rate. The survey was disseminated via the survey tool of survey monkey and data was collected after two weeks of the survey being available. It is important to note, that the survey was disseminated prior to the Jamar Clark event and protests, which happened November 2015 in St. Paul, MN.

### **Results**

When asked, "Do you use social media platforms to obtain information about the News?" 57% responded yes and 42% stated no. Individuals can go to a variety of sources to gather daily news information, like news broadcast news, local and national papers, and the like. Less than half of our survey participants went to these others sources for general news information, while many still use social media as a source to gather information about the news.

With that being said, when asked about which social media platform is preferred when gaining information about the BLMM, 68% of respondents said Facebook was their

preference (N=260). The other platforms used to gain information about the movement included Twitter (N=66), Tumbler (N=28), Instagram (N=14), and Snapchat (N=9). This data seems to be in line with the social media sites that, in general, are most frequently used by the participants. 80% of the participants stated that they primarily use Facebook. The data suggests that the primary platform for social media use, i.e. Facebook, is also the main source of information about the BLMM.

In addition to Facebook being the main source of information about this social issue, it seems to also be the most influential. 71% of participants indicated that they found Facebook to be the most influential source of information. The remaining platforms were not as significant in their persuasive appeals. Only 19% viewed Twitter as influential, while the other platforms were viewed in the following manner of influence: 5% Tumbler, 3% Instagram, and 2% Snapchat. Facebook became the daily news for many people in our country, but predominantly to millennials, as an easy access way to have knowledge of the outside world. Facebook allows its users to not only voice their opinions with an unlimited amount of characters on their own personal pages, but Facebook also allows you to comment on other user's status, pictures and videos. Because of this, users from all around the world can connect, communicate, debate, and learn about topics that they may have otherwise never been interested in.

Although a majority of participants in the survey are aware of the Black Lives Matter movement (94.6%) and have seen posts about it (85%), the amount of people actively posting and commenting on the topic is significantly lower. When participants were asked, "Have you commented on social media post regarding the Black Lives Matter Movement?" 76% of participants said "no". The same occurred when asked

“Have you posted anything on social media about the Black Lives Matter Movement?” in which only 17% answered “yes”. Another question asked in the survey was, “Which social media platform, that you use, do you feel has the least bias?” 54% of participants indicated they believed all media platforms show some level of bias. This lack of trust in social media could be the reason why the amount of people posting about the Black Lives Matter movement is low.

“Which social media platform would you use to learn more information about the #Blacklivesmatter movement?” This is possibly the most important question asked in our survey. Our results found that 68% of our respondents used Facebook to gather information specifically revolving around the #Blacklivesmatter movement, followed by 17% of our respondents using Twitter to gather information. Twitter, like Facebook, allows its users to comment, share and repost information on their own accounts, as well as other user’s accounts. The difference is that Twitter only allows 120 characters per Tweet. That’s a small number of words and not exactly suitable for engaging in long conversations or debates.

### **Discussion**

There has been extensive research done on the topic of why people do what they do. The Uses and Gratifications Theory is a theory that helps explain why and how people from various demographics seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs. A key question that the Uses and Gratification Theory asks is “what do people do with media?” In a 2015 study, Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye sought to find an answer to this question: Why do people rely on media that they do not deem credible? They found that this question was also being asked given the recent rise of social media not only

being used for social interactions, but also for news gathering and political information.

Their study-compared perceptions for credibility of information found on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to credibility of information found on traditional news outlets like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC (Johnson & Kaye, 2015).

Elihu Katz attempts to explain the uses and functions of the media for individuals, groups, and society in general and he created the Uses and Gratifications theory. In this case the research group had a medium, social media of sorts, which is where people are getting current events and somewhat informative topics regarding news and mass media. This particular event of the #Blacklivesmatter movement is in a very close relation to the definition. In that, social media is where you, a concerned or otherwise citizen, have the chance to evaluate and critique a topic from anywhere you please, however you please.

Uses and Gratification theory seems to have a correlation between both the use of social media and the relationship or reciprocity received from the medium by the user (Masullo, 2010). What can a follower gain from engaging in social media or specific activities on Facebook or twitter? Furthermore, does the medium used satisfy, whichever urge brought them to that location on the web? In our research we found the reciprocity act develops in a similar fashion. After the completion of our survey we found with the use of social media followers would be relieved with seeing the information they wanted to see on the page or site they are dedicated. Media seems to initiate behaviors in people and therefore contribute to their actions. By posting specific media content you can lead your readers in a direction of your control. There are also two levels to this, first being what you see on the top layer, or your original impression. However, the second being

what your unconscious sees and develops leading to future actions or assumptions (Sorin, 2010).

### **Limitations**

Limitations for the analysis of social media and #Blacklivesmatter were mainly based on the participants and the group. While analyzing the results on Survey Monkey, the first thing that popped up was the number of participants that completed the survey. The survey was only sent to college students, which was 2,180 students and only 412 completed the survey. Although, 412 completed surveys is an ideal number to analyze, the other 1696 students didn't attempt the survey, which is 80% of the total invitations. This is critical for this research because we could be missing essential information from the 80% that did not attempt the survey.

The survey is based on social media and Black Lives Matter, which is a huge controversial topic in today's society. Some participants may have strong beliefs on this topic, which will result in feeling sensitive to the survey. This may have contributed to the reason why some students did not participate in the survey.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

If this analysis were to continue, there are several questions that a researcher would ask. This question would only apply to those people who are actively engaged in commented, sharing, debating or posting information on their social media platforms. What type of information are college students sharing? Are they sharing articles surrounding the #Blacklivesmatter movement? Are they sharing pictures or videos of protests? Other questions that would be asked are "What are your motivations behind engaging in discussions surrounding this topic?" Lastly, we would want to ask, "Why are

college students choosing to use social media rather than other outlets to have their voices heard?" The answers to many of these questions are more invasive than most and require a level of trust and comfort in order to get honest responses.

### **Conclusion**

In the summation of our research project we have reached a deeper understanding of communication on social media, specifically the #Blacklivesmatter movement. What medium is best utilized to gather, interpret, and resend to information? After analyzing the surveys of 462 participants that were college students, it was clear Facebook seemed to be the favorite platform. It allows for trending news topics to be posted and users may infer an official perspective. More or less Facebook, and other various platforms of social media, provide a more personal basis of sharing and are less informational. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and other various news sources all have one thing in common: mass media and social communication. It is critical that social media users know where they are getting their news and try utilize multiple news gathering sites. Knowledge and understanding come from the activity of communication and the ability to view a topic from multiple perspectives.



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