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Tess Matzakos

A Reflection on BLM in the Era of the Coronavirus and the Role of Social Media

Introduction

Throughout the course of 2020, the United States has struggled to deal with onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of May 25th, COVID-19 was recorded to have over 1.7 million cases and 93.4 thousand deaths (Johns Hopkins University). May 25, 2020 was also significant as this was the day that George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was killed by a member of the Minneapolis Police Department. Following the death of Floyd, people from across the country united together in protest to demand police reform and greater social equity. Given the CDC's guidelines of social distancing and avoiding large gatherings (CDC), many public health officials were understandably concerned about the mass public protests for BLM and a possible uptake in COVID-19 cases (Lewis). Despite this, many public health experts still articulated the value of the BLM protests in spite of the risks (Simon).

This paper aims to research the validity of claims that BLM protests caused drastic spikes in COVID-19 cases. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the role of social media platforms in 2020 in proliferating information about the movement and the pandemic, specifically in regard to safety. Given the nature of social media and its ability to create social networks, organize social movements, and proliferate information, I argue that social media was an influential component during the intersection of BLM and the pandemic; By promoting the spread of safety information and precautions concerning COVID-19, along with precautionary information about BLM protests, a dramatic rise in cases was actually mitigated.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have researched the intersection of social media and social/protest movements. Social media enables activists to easily disseminate discourses, mobilize action/resistance, as well as play onto collective identities (Cammaerts). The increased connectivity afforded through social media also allows for greater a) participation opportunities in the public sphere, b) protest turnout c) dissemination of information and mobilization and d) platforms for safe spaces for protestors (Mundt). The intense use of social media has transformed the organization and communication of protests, resulting in distributed mass user activity that enables leaders, collective identities, and activists (Poell).

Additionally, social media platforms are influential in shaping political participation, especially in protest behavior. Social media's ability to facilitate an exchange of information is vital to the coordination of protest activities, greatly influencing social networks and bonds (Jost). The importance of these networks is that those with a more developed networks are more likely to participate. Social capital mediates between social media use and social movement participation, with social media serving as the mobilizer of collective action within a participatory media environment (Hwang).

Addressing BLM specifically, many scholars note the evolving importance of social media to this movement and the proliferation of its discourse. Social media is an important informational resource in BLM, helping to acquire information, create content, and easily share information (Cox). BLM sees social media as a mobilization tool to build a) an internal connection/support network, b) generate external resources, c) promote coalition building, and D) aid in narrative amplification for collective movement identity (Mundt). This activist movement around racial discrimination, police violence, and criminal justice has utilized social

media to enable collective agency, provide a communal coping mechanism, communicate perceptions on race, and encourage future protest participation (De Choudhury).

Twitter has been seen as an emerging sphere in BLM, where a new type of activism has been employed and traditionally silent groups have been heard. Hashtags, designated to represent dominant ideologies and aid in organization, have given young people a platform to shape the national discourse on race/racism in the face of high-profile tragedies (Carney). Hashtag activism in networked spaces gives movements a narrative form and sense of agency in their social context (Yang). Social media users who then interact with BLM through hashtag use, modify the movement's framing/rhetoric. The broad audience alters and manipulates a movement's construction of meaning (distributive framing), further impacting cooperation and coordination (Davis). I would like to build on the aforementioned scholars by bringing in the discussion of how social media sources are utilized in BLM (or social movements more generally) to proliferate protest safety information, specifically in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Methodology

My qualitative data consisted of posts from Instagram, which played an important role during the course of the movement, as well as during the pandemic. Additionally, I utilized qualitative information from news/magazine articles about COVID-19, BLM and social media, analyzing interviews and examples of social media posts that promoted safety concerning the pandemic and the protests. I surveyed this information filtering through relevant hashtags (#BLM, #covid, #wearamask, #protestsafety), while also filtering for time specific results correlating to the height of the protests. Looking at a collection of info guides and graphics, I aimed to analyze how young populations were able to utilize their platforms to effectively spread information about the movement, protest safety, and COVID-19 safety/precautions. Especially

given the limitations of the pandemic, the extensive use of these platforms not only encouraged participation in the movement and in protest but provided these collective communities (formed through their identities/social media networks) a way to show their solidarity, while also practicing safety. Lastly, I looked at quantitative data of statistics/articles on actual findings on COVID-19 cases following the protests to analyze how the occurrence of protests impacted case numbers, and if this lined up with assumptions.

Results

Instagram was one of the most active platforms proliferating safety information, serving a community of connected users who were communicative about protest realities/relevant precautions. Where pictures and graphics are the highlight of this platform, and stories are a popular form of a communication, posts such as the one pictured in Figure 1, utilize visual graphics to communicate how to protest safely – including what to bring and what to wear. Other posts under hashtags like #protestsafety utilize visual graphics to communicate similar themes, getting even more specific with information such as engaging with the police, taking ethical photos, and studying surroundings. An important feature is the inclusion of COVID-19 safety information, noting the importance of a mask and hand sanitizer in essential supplies, accompanied by a CDC warning. Often posted first by influential social media users, these posts were then circulated by other users on their stories or feeds, even being shared by online news sources such as NY Magazine (Anello), showing the broad capabilities of spreading information on the platform.

Other Instagram posts were more direct in addressing COVID-19 safety precautions & BLM protest. The post entitled “Safe Protesting During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Figure 3) utilizes the multiple photo feature to share safety information including what to do before (stay

home if you don't feel well, wear a face mask, bring hand sanitizer), during (social distance, avoid touching your face or touching others, bring your own supplies), and after (wash your hands, monitor for symptoms, isolate yourself after, and self-care), based on CDC guidelines. Other posts such as the one in Figure 4 entitled "Protest Safety During COVID-19" contain similar information about the pandemic, combined with normal protest information about knowing one's rights.

A more in-depth intersection of COVID-19 safety precautions with BLM protest information can be found in the post entitled "Practical Guide to Protest and Pandemic Prevention" (Figure 5). This post takes a more holistic approach and has the goal of implementing pandemic preparedness while protesting, regarding community safety and public health. It provides education on police brutality/violence/racism, things one can do to avoid risks at protests (be mindful of immediate contacts, stay home if you've been exposed/make contributions virtually, wear a mask, maintain social distance), how to prep accordingly, what to do during, dealing with tear gas, what to do after (change clothes, disinfect belongings, quarantine, self-isolate, get tested). The disclaimer in this post addresses the importance of protesting and value of contributing to meaningful change despite the health risks. It notes the importance of balancing dissent and Covid-preparedness, acknowledging the privilege in abiding to social distancing health guidelines. This post acknowledges the intersection of the pandemic with systemic racism and its impact on health outcomes, namely the burden on black and brown communities.

Many of the previous posts also advocate for participation in virtual advocacy, such as by donating, making calls to representatives, signing petitions, attending virtual protest, and even registering to vote, especially if one is unable to come (Anello). This could apply to people who

are immunocompromised or showing symptoms. The ability of these platforms to educate through mediums such as info guides, google docs, graphics, and videos, could have further contributed to safety precautions. Furthermore, one may wonder why populations that were previously strict about the pandemic participated in protest. Intersectional posts like these demonstrate the social significance of attending these protests, despite health risks. That is why education and advocacy for pandemic prevention and safety are particularly relevant.

Regarding the quantitative results of this study, various health sources argue that BLM protests did not contribute to virus surges, despite early concerns from health officials. Reasons for the lack of transmission likely are linked to the fact protests occurred in large spaces outdoors, in the wind/sun, with mainly young populations/small portion of the overall population, with many protestors making attempts at masking, distancing, and hand sanitizing, and encouraging others to stay at home, helping to prevent transmission (Lopez). A working scientific paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research, looking at data from the protests between May-June, found “no evidence that urban protests reignited COVID-19 case growth during the more than three weeks following protest onset.” They concluded that predictions of broad negative public health consequences of BLM protests were narrowly conceived, and their results were supported by testing data in many other large cities with protests. Interestingly enough, protests seemed to lead to a net increase in social distancing based on cell-phone data (Dave).

Some health professionals have expressed concern for risks, especially given the interactions between police and protestors, the use of chemicals like tear gas, and the corralling of arrested protestors into crowded facilities (Lewis). Still, there is not much evidence that spikes were linked to protests, especially given they occurred against the background of states

reopening (Berger, Lewis). Many argue that spikes were likely due to the reopening of indoor facilities. Other health officials note the distinction between the BLM protests and anti-lockdown protests, where BLM protests seemed to contain explicit messaging around social distancing and masks, utilizing public health measures rather than going against them (Lewis). This links back to the idea that “silence is violence”, and that although many protestors were aware of the health risks, they still felt a duty to fight for justice. Infectious disease epidemiologist Saskia Popescu draws on the protests, calling them a great example of how following public health guidance and harm reduction efforts can help break the chain of transmission (Lopez).

Conclusion

Although not a comprehensive analysis, this research paper highlights the importance of social media platforms in proliferating safety information regarding the intersection of BLM protests and the risk of COVID-19 in 2020. Through this intersection, users were educated on safety precautions and risks, and were encouraged to follow these safety precautions as part of the movement culture. Virtual activism and protest were also encouraged for those who might be immunocompromised or showing symptoms, avoiding further infection. Although the movements may seem contradictory, many users noted the necessity of fighting for justice, despite the risks. When compared to quantitative findings, there seems to be overwhelming support for the argument that the BLM protests did not cause a surge in cases. Along with the fact these protests had favorable features such as having a young population, being outdoors, etc. I argue that the proliferation of safety information by social media users largely helped to mitigate COVID-19 cases, while also encouraging support for the movement.

Appendix



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

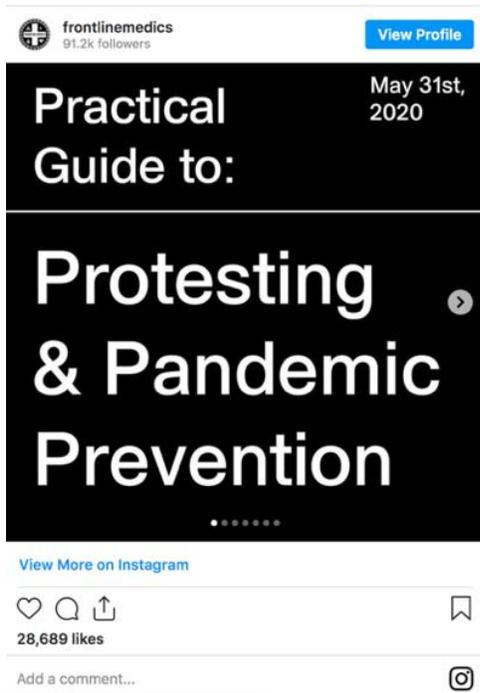


Figure 5

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