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# Media Framing and Respectability Narratives in #BlackLivesMatter: A Twitter Analysis

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Media Framing and Respectability Narratives in #BlackLivesMatter: A Twitter Analysis

by

Sherrice Wright

A Thesis
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The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
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# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine community dialogues on the social media platform, Twitter, in order to better understand how conventional media framing influences conversations on social media. The Black Lives Matter movement, one of the most prominent, current social justice movements, was founded on Twitter. Since then this platform has played a pivotal role in gaining awareness for issues of marginalized citizens. While Black Lives Matter has had a key role in the development of public perception, so has the traditional media. Through the use of media framing, the dominant class has the ability to reinforce or reject opinons about these deaths.

Through a two-stage research process, this study evaluated the role of media framing in the deaths of Philando Castile, George Floyd, Aura Rosser and Breonna Taylor. After gaining a better understanding of the framing, the study moved on to analyzing tweets about these deaths. After conducting a thorough analysis, the research found that often tweets that were coded as negative served as defenses of the victims rather than a negative reflection of the victims. The positive coded tweets were further reinforcement for the positive traits about the victims. Overall, the media framing did influence the perception of some victims, but it was not a strict relationship that a victim with negative media framing was discussed negatively on Twitter.

***Keywords:*** *Black Lives Matter, respectability politics, police brutality,Twitter, Philando Castile, George Floyd, Aura Rosser, Breonna Taylor*

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Background*

The goal of this research is to study community conversations through the social media platform, Twitter, to better understand how media framing from traditional media outlets influences conversations that take place on social media. For many, social media is a constant news source that provides updates on political, social, and economic issues. Though there is a lot of contention surrounding the consumption of news through social media during the era of fake news, it would be dishonest to ignore the influence that social media has as a news source among young Americans especially.

The conception of Black Lives Matter as a social justice movement truly speaks to the duality of media framing in traditional media and social media outlets. Black Lives Matter was founded through Twitter in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). From this initial spark in 2013, Twitter has become a pivotal platform for engaging users in social justice efforts. This became even more important during 2020 when activism efforts, such as organized protests and other community interactions, were limited due to the pandemic. This form of social media activism truly marked a new era in social justice movements.

*Hypothesis*

This research aims to further investigate the relationship between media framing in the traditional media and social media through the implementation of respectability narratives. The primary hypothesis of this research is that certain police brutality related deaths are portrayed more favorably in the media than others due to the utilization of

respectability narratives. This research initially assumed that deaths perceived to align more with the interests of the dominant class would use respectability politics to create a more sympathetic narrative. It was assumed that deaths of male victims underwent more scrutiny, and, as such, gender would play a significant role in the public's opinion.

To put this hypothesis in the direct terms of this study, the initial hypothesis stated that gender would have a great influence on whether the victim is deserving of a respectability narrative. Even though Castile was more closely associated with positive characteristics and received ample sympathy through the news articles referenced, the study hypothesized that his gender will have a greater influence on the public's opinion of him than the sympathy that can be garnered from testimonials. When it comes to Aura Rosser and Breonna Taylor, the study theorized that there would be harsher conversations surrounding Aura Rosser than Breonna Tayor due to her history of mental illness and drug use. Overall, the study pointed to Breonna Taylor was the most sympathetic victim due to her career as an EMT and an essential worker during the pandemic.

*George Floyd*

This study assumed that tweets related to Floyd would primarily be negative in nature, centering around Floyd's drug use and criminal history to follow the negative narrative that was common in the news.

*Aura Rosser*

Before conducting an analysis of these tweets, the study assumed that they would follow in a similar fashion as the positively coded tweets about George Floyd. Due to

Rosser's noted history with mental illness, the research hypothesized that people would be more sympathetic to her death especially because she was a woman.

*Breonna Taylor*

This project assumed that Taylor's role as an essential worker during the coronavirus pandemic was one of the biggest contributing factors to the visibility her death garnered. Taylor's death was seen as one that was truly sympathetic and deserving of justice. This research predicted that the tweets about Taylor would be positive and that the negative tweets would primarily reference Taylor's ex-boyfriend involvement with drugs. This was the pattern that emerged from Taylor's death in the media.

*Philando Castile*

At the outset of this research, it was assumed that there would be an increase in negative conversation surrounding Castile. This presumption was formed when considering the way that other Black men have been portrayed on social media. Though Castile had a relatively clean career, I assumed that his presence as a Black man would automatically classify him as deserving of his death. However, I was surprised by the content on Twitter.

Through the process of this research, further implications of political discourse, respectability politics, and race-based violence have been explored.

# CHAPTER II: Literature Review

This research is heavily inspired by the events of the Summer of 2020, namely the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. As a result of these acts of racial violence, there was a poignant international response. Because these acts were committed amid a global pandemic, most of the responses were communicated through social media channels. Increased awareness and sedition spread through these instances of informal political communication.

### *Bargaining for Visibility through Democratic Sacrifice*

These public forms of political discourse are the true way that marginalized and oppressed people can bring light to such issues of injustice. This is the core of visibility which is discussed at length in articles by Danielle Allen (2005) and Juliet Hooker (2016).

Allen primarily explores two systems of oppression, domination and exclusion, as barriers to creating a more just society in her article. An undercurrent in the discussion of both forms of oppression is the complex metaphor of the invisibility of oppressed. Through the lens of philosopher Hannah Arendt, invisibility "symbolized exclusion and established this as the relevant term for understanding and reversing injustice" while novelist Ralph Ellison's idea of invisibility was at the core of domination (Allen, 2005, 32).

From Allen's (2005) perspective, Arendt's idea of political invisibility is both a cause and consequence of a society based upon exclusion. It places the oppressed outside of the political realm and, if oppressed citizens want to enter the political sphere, they must become educated on the standards of citizenship as created by the same people who

excluded them originally. Arendt claims that this would require two tasks, "first, an effort to make political institutions fully inclusive; and second, an attempt to educate minorities to convert their fraternity within the group into the stuff of a broader citizenship already developed by those within the political realm" (Allen, 2005, 55). However, Ellison's take on invisibility, as posed by Allen, places the invisible, oppressed citizens within the political realm. Ellison believes that "the project of undoing the dominantion of the invisible would require not educating them into the citizenly habits of the dominators, which were themselves malformed, but rather reforming everyone's habits of citizenship" (Allen, 2005, 56). The key distinction here is that the standards of the political sphere are upheld by the visible, dominant citizens and the acquiescence of those invisible citizens. Thus, reformation of the political realm would require a total reshaping of standards and ideals as the former invisible citizens are incorporated as active participants in the polity. Allen concludes her article by suggesting that society is more similar to the domination theory proposed by Ellison, but it is important to keep the structure provided by this dialogue in mind.

The discourse of systems of oppression is especially relevant to the research conducted here, not to prove that we exist in one system over the other, but to comment on the complexity of involving invisible, or oppressed, citizens in the political sphere. Both streams of thought posed in ddd article provide a critical context for invisibility in politics, but this research focuses on visibility. In short, visibility is the antithesis of invisibility. However, this research demands a more structured definition of visibility when speaking of the modern political realm.

Visibility is the means through which injustice gains awareness. In a literal sense, this visibility can take the form of news headlines, social media graphics, or museum exhibits. Consider the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennesse, and its importance to the Civil Rights Movement. This is a historical artifact that aims to educate and inform those in the present about the past. In a more metaphorical sense following the forms of invisibility discussed in the Allen (2005) article, visibility can be defined as a prominent standing in society. The visible citizens are those who hold the most power when it comes to making decisions. They have the ability and power to create the docket, so to speak, for issues that society should care about. Visible citizens as a collective can say what issues are of the most importance. This can be summarized as agenda setting and media framing when speaking of the traditional news media outlets.

### *Respectability Narratives in Race-Based Violence*

However, visibility often comes at a cost. It is imperative to clarify the terms of respectability narratives and respectability politics for the purposes of this research. Respectability narratives are described as the "representations of marginalized individuals meant to depict them as sharing similar traits, values, and morals that align with the dominant group's definition of 'respectability'" (Chen & Dorsey, 2021). Respectability politics, however, is "a school of thought that utilizes respectability narratives as the basis for enacting social, political, and legal change," (Chen & Dorsey, 2021). In terms of this research, respectability narratives can be employed through media framing to create a victim who is deserving of justice and thus deemed worthy of attention by the dominant culture. Respectability politics can be summarized as the way that marginalized groups bargain with the dominant, visible collective to achieve a more

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equal citizenry. Both Arendt and Ellison in Allen's (2005) article provide a glimpse into the utilization of respectability politics in their reflections. In Arendt's perspective, respectability politics is employed by those outside of the realm of visibility following the standards of citizenship created by those within the realm of visibility. From Ellison's perspective, respectability politics can be used with the peaceful acquiescence of the invisible citizens.

Respectability politics are discussed at length as one of Hooker's (2016) main contentions with Allen's discussion. Whereas Allen (2005) suggests an Ellisonian philosophy of peaceful acquiescence to democratic loss as a solution to incorporating marginalized citizens, Hooker is in favor of black activism and embracing the various outlets through which it may exist including riots. The acceptance of the role of democratic losers can also be referred to as democratic sacrifice. Hooker (2016) posits the Ellisionian notion of democratic sacrifice as problematic and even disrespectful to courageous acts of civil disobedience. Specifically, Hooker claims that democratic sacrifice discounts the intentionality of certain acts during the Civil Rights movement that were pivotal to increasing the visibility of injustice. Instead, she focuses on deliberate acts of Black defiance and activism to observe the importance of visibility in social justice movements. Regardless of the social structure, be it domination, exclusion, or something in between, visibility remains one of the most crucial tactics in bargaining for social equality.

Placing Allen and Hooker's conversation in a more modern context, Patrisse Khan-Cullors gives a firsthand account of her experience leveraging these moments of visibility with the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement in her memoir. In this

book, Khan-Cullors humanizes the countless victims of police brutality and other acts of race-based violence, making the reader just as sympathetic as those who initially saw the hashtag that launched a social justice movement. She recounts watching both her father and her brother become a part of the incarceration cycle. Between the covers of this memoir, the reader is placed in the mind of a Black woman struggling to escape a maze that she has been placed in due to the color of her skin. Khan-Cullors highlights the intentionality of this attack on the Black community by starting the first chapter with a quote from President Nixon's National Domestic Policy Chief about the administration's stance on Black people in which he says, "We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be... black, but by getting the public to associate the... blacks with heroin... and then criminalizing [them] heavily, we could disrupt [their] communities... Did we know we were lying? Of course we did," (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, 9).

With statements such as this sprinkled throughout the book, Khan-Cullors presents the reader with a case for intentional acts of hatred that targeted a community. She breathes life into names that have been broadcast on the nightly news. She puts flesh and blood to hashtags that trend on Twitter. Most importantly, she brings visibility to two different cases that could have a negative perception. Both her father and brother were addicted to drugs and fell into the vicious cycle of going back and forth in jail. Khan-Cullors heavily relies on pathos to engage the reader with these two tragic instances. By portraying her father and brother as products of an environment without proper resources for necessities, including mental health services, Khan-Cullors crafts two well-nuanced respectability narratives that allow those in the dominant class to further empathize with these men.

This creates a sense of humanity that has been stripped from victims of race-based violence. This source in particular is important for the role it plays in contextualizing the development of the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter began as a hashtag on Twitter following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who murdered unarmed Trayvon Martin. Martin's death is recognized as one of the first instances that gained outspoken support against police brutality on social media. Visibility is a core part of social justice movements as exemplified through the Black Lives Matter movement. Police brutality has plagued Black Americans for decades, stemming from a history of racial tension including the War on Drugs previously referenced. However, this movement gave more visibility to the issue through community conversations on social media.

Though one phase of this research focuses on the role of these conversations through Twitter, another phase focuses on the role of the traditional news media which is equally important. As discussed in the Fabregat and Beck article, these deaths often fall subject to media framing, agenda-setting, and gatekeeping. Through these three primary tactics, media outlets can control the narrative that will be spread throughout the dominant culture. This article outlines the symbiotic relationship between the media outlets and the prevailing culture noting that "the perceptions of the dominant race are the dominant perceptions" (Fabregat & Beck, 2018, 767). Referencing the examples given by Arendt and Ellison again, those who are within the realm of visibility set the tone for the political and social realms. In terms of the traditional news, the agenda of the dominant can easily be dispersed through the media so long as the dominant culture also dominates

the media. This is a given based upon the current structure of society which allows for some difference in opinion, but the dominant culture continues to prevail.

As the dominant race in the United States, white Americans have the resources to further agendas that fulfill their best interests more than other races. With her memoir, Khan-Cullors aims to create a foil to the overarching noise from the media. Whereas Fabregat and Beck's article highlights the harmful messages that can be pushed by the popular media outlets to further the agendas of the prevailing voices, Khan-Cullors personalizes the injustices Black people face by taking them on an in-depth journey with two men who have fallen victim to the system. Khan-Cullors challenges the reader to empathize with these victims even if they don't fit the ideal make-up of a sympathetic death.

However, there has not been a prevalent narrative that makes up a 'good' sympathetic death in these racially motivated deaths. Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager walking home, was not enough to be deemed a sympathetic death in the eyes of the media. Patrick Warren, a man who was experiencing a mental health crisis when police were called, was not sympathetic enough. Yvette Smith, a woman attempting to settle a disagreement between her friend and his son, who complied immediately with police orders, was not sympathetic enough. These three victims and many others have been charged with fault for their deaths. Kristin Nicole Dukes and Sarah E. Gaither's (2017) research further discusses this phenomenon.

The Dukes and Gaither's study "aims to understand what influence characterizations have on attitudes toward victims, their killers and criminal proceedings" (Dukes & Gaither, 2017, 790). In this research, Dukes and Gaither gave their participants

scenarios in which they would read about a victim, who was given either negative, stereotypic Black characteristics or positive, counterstereotypic characteristics, and a shooter. The race of the victim and the shooter, either Black or white, was randomly chosen for the survey instrument to test implications and implicit biases with Black stereotypes. Through their instrument, they were able to conclude that the media played an incredibly important role in the placement of blame and feelings of sympathy.

This study is vital to this research for several reasons. First, this study provides one of the most modern research instruments to test public perception and media implications. The participants were significantly more sympathetic to victims with positive Black stereotypes than those with negative stereotypes. An analysis of the results also proved that the participants were more sympathetic to white shooters after reading about a victim with negative Black stereotypes. This test of public perception directly correlates to the ideas of visibility and respectability politics as posed above. The manipulation of a media's content and messaging could heavily sway the results of criminal proceedings as trials, unfortunately, could occur years after an incident occurred. This allows for a narrative to be spun completely out of control according to an agenda that is set by the dominant political climate at the time.

Another reason that the Dukes and Gaither study is paramount to this research is the stereotype descriptions. The Dukes and Gaither study has provided the framework for several thematic concepts that were utilized in the construction of the qualitative study instrument. These imaginary scenarios are almost perfect foils that act as both negative and positive stereotypical framework for the study. Through these positive and negative stereotypes, this study can draw several implications about the public's perception of

Black Americans and how the use of respectability politics influences the public's

sympathy or lack thereof with a victim of racially motivated incidents.

### *Media Framing and Public Perception*

A more direct study of public perception of media outlets takes place in research

conducted by Brian Chama (2019). This article is very informative in its thorough

exploration of both the media's portrayal of the Black Lives Matter movement and Black

Americans' response to the media content. Chama's study looks at Black Americans'

perception of reporting by two tabloid newspapers, the *New York Post* and the *New York*

*Daily News*. This article focuses on the perception of Black citizens in Chicago following

the murder of Jacquan McDonald, a 17-year-old who was shot by officer Jason Van

Dyke. With a heightened awareness due to the murder of McDonald, Chicago proved a

perfect place to study. Chama led in-depth interviews with open-ended questions that

focused on the reportage of the two tabloids, the tabloids' portrayal of crime and police

brutality in Black Americans, and the "perception of police public policing by African

Americans on curbing in local communities" (Chama, 2019, 202).

From the responses gathered, Chama concluded that the stories published in these

tabloids were very emotionally evocative. He notes that this industry typically "thrive[s]

on sensationalism, brief stories and attention-grabbing headlines" (Chama, 2019, 214).

Chama's respondents found this to be especially true, claiming that the *New York Post*

tended to criticize the Black Lives Matter movement and draw negative associations

between African Americans and crime. The *New York Daily News*, however, was seen to

be more objective in its reportage of both. This article is yet another important

contribution to the culture of this research because it acts as a mirror for Black Americans to analyze the way that they are portrayed in popular media outlets.

Where the Charma article contributes to the current literature by providing responses to the formal media outlets, this research provides the public's responses to specific incidents through a social media platform, Twitter. Twitter emphasizes the need for community conversation as posed through the social media platform; these community interactions are critical to framing the way that these deaths are perceived. It places special care upon the grassroots component of the social justice movement and puts the conversation back into the hands of the people. This environment is not one that is conducive to generating well-nuanced articles that explain the complexity of issues such as these.

As an active observer and participant in the Black Lives Matter movement, I have noticed that certain victims receive more respect and sympathy than others. As a victim's name is circulated through social media, it undergoes a period of deep scrutiny in which the public breaks apart the victim's life to decide if their death was justifiable or not. Through these discussions, the dominant culture can either adopt the issue as a concern or reject it. The court of public opinion and popular media outlets have a mutual relationship in which the victims' lives are dissected in order to determine their place in the overarching culture. These conversations can greatly impact any trials or court proceedings that might occur as a result of such deaths. As such, it becomes even more important to ensure that bias and negative stereotypes are identified. This study fulfills a crucial piece of the current dialogue by engaging in social media activism and the court of public opinion.

This research aims to fill the gap in the current literature surrounding police brutality-related deaths by contributing to the discussion about the way that respectability narratives are employed to portray victims in a more positive light. By portraying the victims in a more positive perspective, oppressed citizens can gain visibility for their concerns. Typically, by falling within the criteria of respectability politics, marginalized citizens are submitting to the culture of the dominant to raise awareness for a societal issue that plagues the invisible. This research stands out among other literature in the field because it highlights the connection between social media and more traditional media outlets. This connection is a two-way communication channel, in which the traditional news can distribute the first findings on any given topic, citizens then engage with this topic as a part of social media discourse, and, often, the news will revisit the topic after being informed on the public's perception.

This constant cycle of communication is important to the culture of the United States. In political science, the media is often referred to as the governmental 'watchdog', but it also has the ability to raise political awareness for preferred political topics and shape public opinion. In recent years, Black Lives Matter has been scrutinized at length for many reasons, including its support of police brutality victims regardless of their background before they died. The discussion in the media tends to center around positing the movement as either employing respectability politics to bring awareness to the issue that is police brutality, typically seen as more positive, or acting in Black defiance, seen as negative. Neither of the two is an all-encompassing description of Black Lives Matter as a social justice movement. This research, however, navigates the influence of traditional media outlets' framing on social media conversations about these victims.

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# CHAPTER III: Methodology

*Research Design*

This research utilized a two-stage analysis methodology. This structure was chosen to analyze the use of respectability politics as a tactic to gain awareness about the injustices that occur with racially motivated murders. The first stage of the study occurred by observing the media framing in terms of positive and negative stereotypes of victims. To begin this process, I first researched popular news outlets including *PolitiFact*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Fox News* to investigate some of the most prominent cases of racially motivated deaths addressed by Black Lives Matter. When beginning this research, it was important that I attempted to find as diverse a range of cases to study as possible. I compiled a thorough list of prominent deaths covered by the Black Lives Matter movement. This initial stage of research revealed a total of four cases, two males and two females, that were among the most prominent deaths publicized by Black Lives Matter. Though the research aimed to study deaths that occurred in both the public and private sphere, there was a lack of female deaths that occurred in public. Thus, both male deaths occurred in public while both of the female deaths happened at a private residence. From these articles, several names arose, but Philando Castile, George Floyd, Aura Rosser, and Breonna Taylor emerged as prominent cases. After identifying four primary cases to study, I referenced the positive and negative themes produced in the Dukes and Gaither study (2017). By first creating a list of positive and negative codes, the media framing was more informed than blindly picking deaths addressed within the movement.

The Dukes and Gaither (2017) study provided context and proper criteria for classifying negative and positive stereotypes. This article focused on a racially motivated

incident similar to that of Michael Brown. The study's participants were given a scenario in which an unarmed victim was murdered by a shooter in the name of self-defense. The victim was either assigned negative stereotypic traits of a Black male or positive, counter-stereotypes traits of a Black male. The incident was constructed to have either a Black victim and a white shooter or vice versa.

With this information, the participants were then given the task of assessing fault, sympathy, and judiciary recommendations for the shooter. Though the implications of this study have inspired this research in several ways, the primary criteria for assessing what counts as respectability politics was drawn from the victim information. In order to portray victims in a more positive light, media framing tends to lend itself to respectability politics. This can be seen as making victims sound more palatable to the dominant culture. The scenario with positive, counter stereotypic examples from the Dukes and Gaither study is included below.

> According to several news sources, [victim name], 20-year-old [victim race's] male, grew up in a middle- class suburb. His father is an investment banker and his mother teaches English at a liberal arts college. The family has a long tradition in the community of sup-porting the arts, such as the theater and opera. An honors student in high school, [victim name], was accepted to a number of universities. He decided to attend a very prestigious university and continued to excel in college as a biology major. He planned to go on to medical school and had been invited to do an internship at a local hospital this summer. [victim name]'s friends described him as gen- erally good guy noting his calm and kind nature. He was involved in a number of extracurricular activities in addition to keeping up with his classes, including serving as the president of the biology club and a regular contributor to the campus newspaper. The evening of his death, [victim name] was on his way to a reception following the performance of a visiting string quartet from London

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and was planning to write an article for his campus newspaper about the event. (Dukes and Gaither, 2017, 805).

The above paragraph was condensed into five themes: stable familial structure, middle socioeconomic status, high education level, kindness, and ambition. The code of stable familial structure was given to represent the middle-class family with a present father and mother. Middle socioeconomic status was then chosen code to represent the family's interest in fine culture, like opera. High education level was chosen to represent the victim's scholastic achievements, including his record as an honors student. The code of kindness was chosen to represent the friend's testimonies that the victim was a good person. Finally, ambition was chosen as a code to represent the victim's drive which was exemplified through his extracurriculars, plans for medical school, and summer internship.

Participants in the Dukes and Gaither (2017) study with negative victim information read the following paragraph:

According to several news sources, [vic-tim], a 20-year-old [victim's race] male, was raised by his grandmother in a housing project. He did not know his father and his mother was in and out of jail for dealing drugs. The family was on and off of welfare throughout his childhood. A high- school dropout, [victim] had been in trouble with the law several times including violations drug and weapons possession. He was recently arrested for robbery. For this latest offense, [victim] spent 3 months in the state prison. Since his release, he was supposed to meet with his probation officer every Tuesday at 9 am, but often did not show up. In a court session, [victim] told a judge that his job caused him to miss the meetings. The judge later learned that he was fired from his job because of a

fight with another employee. Friends described him as a generally good guy but noted his

tendency to be very moody and his quick temper. When things went wrong, as they

frequently did, he often became aggressive and even violent. The evening of his death,

[victim] was on his way from playing basketball at a neighborhood court. (Dukes and

Gaither, 2017, 804-805).

The themes that were coded from the above paragraph acted as almost perfect

foils to the positive themes that emerged. The themes of broken family, low

socioeconomic, drug use, prior criminal history, low education level, and aggression were

coded as negative for this study. Broken family was chosen as a code to represent the

victim's home life. The scenario notes that his parents were absent, and he was mainly

raised by his grandmother. In a similar vein, the term low socioeconomic status was

coded as a negative trait. This referenced the housing project and lack of employment

that was addressed in the scenario. Next, the codes of drug use and prior criminal history

were chosen in reference to both the victim and his mother's drug use and related

criminal violations. Because the victim was a high school dropout, the code of low

education level was incorporated into the negative themes. Finally, aggression was added

as a negative code for the research due to his friends' description of his quick temper. It's

important to note that these traits are treated as negative solely for the purposes of this

research. None of the above terms inherently mean that someone is a criminal or deserves

to die at the hands of a police officer. These terms were specified to assist in informing

positive or negative coverage in media framing.

After creating a list of positive and negative codes, the focus of the research

returned to media framing in news coverage of the four victims. In this first stage, the

primary focus is to understand the context in which these deaths could be classified. As discussed in the Fabregat and Beck article (2018), media framing is one of three important components that shape the dominant perceptions in culture. Paired with gatekeeping and agenda-setting, the media can create a narrative that not only reflects but also reinforces the ideals of the controlling class. In America, one of the largest and most visible class divisions stems from race. There are other factors that are influential in divisions such as education level and socioeconomic status, but, for the purposes of this study, race is the primary difference we will be studying.

The negative and positive coding categories are representative of the public's perception of qualities that make a death important to the dominant culture. The public's perception is greatly influenced by media framing. Therefore, some stories of victims are seen as deserving more justice than others; the utilization of respectability narratives is a bargaining tactic to engage the dominant class in the concerns of the marginalized communities. This is the core of visibility.

A critical element of media framing with reference to victims of racially motivated violence is the assessment of fault. This idea was discussed at length in the findings of the Duke and Gaither (2017) resource, but, essentially, the placement of fault or blame in these deaths is dependent on the way it is framed in discussions. These discussions can occur both in the media and through social media. The prevailing narrative can significantly change the public's perception which is why the positive and negative coding terms are vital to this research. Positive and negative stereotypes play an almost cyclical role in both the development of these stories in the media and the perpetuation of these stereotypes.

When initially creating the parameters for this research, I predicted that both representations of male victims would be considered negative stereotypes while the female victims would be considered positive stereotypes. As a Black woman and someone who has observed the Black Lives Matter movement from the beginning, I've noticed that the coverage of Black men tends to be harsher in the media. When discussing the deaths of these men, it seems as though prior criminal history and references to being a thug were used to justify the officers' actions. With women, it seems as though the most consistent narrative is much more passive. Their deaths and hashtags simply do not have the same presence within the Black Lives Matter movement as men do even though the movement was established by women.

To begin the research, each victim was studied to determine if they aligned more with the positive or negative codes that emerged from the Dukes and Gaither study. Philando Castile was the first person studied.

In 2016, Philando Castile was driving with his fiancée Diamond Reynolds and her four-year-old daughter when he was pulled over as a part of a traffic stop. Officer Jeronimo Yanez approached Castile's car and asked him to show proof of his license and registration. After showing his proof of insurance, Castile told Yanez that he did have a firearm in the car for which he had a license. While Castile reached for his wallet, Yanez fired several shots at close range, killing Castile shortly after.

Though Castile died in quite a tragic way, the positive impact of his life served as a monument to the justice his death deserved. As summarized in an article published by Vox (Lopez, G. 2017), when asked what initiated the traffic stop, officer Yanez said that Castile and his girlfriend "just look like people that were involved in

a robbery" (Lopez, G. 2017). This is the opposite of the character Castile was made out to be by some of the ones who knew him best. Castile was only 32 years old at the time of his death and worked at a school cafeteria for around 15 years. He was remembered for his kind personality and uplifting spirit among the students at his school. Castile's death aligns with the positive counterstereotypes due to his career, kindness, and ambition thus validating his place in this research.

Next, the death of George Floyd was studied. Police officer Derek Chauvin killed Floyd after responding to a call about Floyd possibly using a counterfeit $20 bill to buy cigarettes. In the immediate weeks following Floyd's death, there were several news articles questioning if Floyd's death was due to hypertension or fentanyl use as opposed to Chauvin's use of excessive force. Many articles referenced Floyd's previous criminal history, drug usage, and selling drugs in his death which further contributed to the idea that his death was justified. According to an article published by Fox News (Best, P., 2021) that was written at the time of the trial for Floyd's death, Floyd "grew up in poverty and had multiple run-ins with law enforcement, but he is also remembered as a mentor who looked out for his loved ones and became a church outreach volunteer in Houston after a stint in prison". An article published by the *Chicago Tribune* (Richmond, T., 2020) notes Floyd's previous criminal history by stating that he "was charged in 2007 with armed robbery in a home invasion in Houston and in 2009 was sentenced to five years in prison as a part of plea deal". This same article, however, has quotes from personal friends who refer to Floyd as a "gentle giant" and a "quiet personality but a beautiful spirit" (Richmond, T., 2020). Floyd found himself in a series of unfortunate circumstances, including being unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These

accounts directly reflect several of the themes that were coded for negative stereotypes and validate Floyd's position in this project.

The next incident studied was the murder of Aura Rosser. Rosser was a 40-year-old African American woman who was murdered in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ann Arbor police responded to a call at Rosser's home because "she had been engaged in a protracted argument with her boyfriend" (ACLU Michigan, nd.). When the Ann Arbor police officers arrived at the scene, "Ms. Rosser approached them with a knife. One of the officers fired a taser, but the other officer confronting the same threat fired his gun, killing Ms. Rosser" (ACLU Michigan, nd.). A Huffington Post article referred to Rosser as a citizen who was known to struggle with her mental health and was not on her medication at the time of the incident (Abbey-Lambertz, 2015). In the same article, a memo from the prosecutor reveals that they believed Rosser's death to be a "justifiable homicide" due to her aggression (Abbey-Lambertz, 2015). A toxicology report also revealed that there were "high levels of alcohol and cocaine in Rosser's system, and officials said witness statements made it clear she had smoked crack that night" (Abbey-Lambertz, 2015). These statements directly reflect several of the themes that represented the negative stereotypes for this research.

The final death that was studied was that of Breonna Taylor. Taylor was a young Black woman who worked as an EMT in Louisville, Kentucky. She was an essential worker during the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. On a website created to bring justice to Taylor's death, she was described by those around her as a "loving daughter, caring sister, and a kind and giving friend throughout her short life, she had a servant's heart and dedicated her entire life to helping people," (Standwithbre, nd.).

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Louisville police officers went into Taylor's apartment looking for her ex-boyfriend, Jamarcus Glover, in connection to a drug investigation. A PolitiFact article said that police were "surveilling addresses that Glover frequently visited, including Taylor's apartment" (Kim, N. Y. & Valverde, M., 2020). However, Glover was not in Taylor's home the night of the incident and had not been for an extended period of time. They entered Taylor's apartment late at night with a no-knocksearch warrant. Taylor's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker III, thought someone was breaking into the apartment, firing a warning shot. The police then responded by firing back with shots that would ultimately result in Taylor's death.

Though there has been significant controversy surrounding Taylor's involvement in the narcotics investigation, this has been largely disproven. The relationship between Taylor and Glover was limited to him using her address for packages and his home address (Kim, N. Y. & Valverde, M., 2020). Taylor's death was seen as one that deserved justice due to her ambition, education, career, and kindness. Breonna Taylor was recalled as a kind soul, one that was truly invested in the development and betterment of her community.

In short, Castile and Taylor align with the positive characteristics while Floyd and Rosser align more with the negative characteristics. From the news articles referenced above, Castile and Taylor's deaths were given respectability narratives with their coverage, making them more sympathetic victims. The second phase of the research aims to see if the conversations on Twitter mirror the respectability narratives in the traditional news media.

With the negative and positive characterizations in place, there is a clear distinction in the prevailing narratives about the victims who aligned with the positive, counter stereotypical traits and those who aligned with the negative, stereotypical traits. Referencing the Dukes and Gaither (2017) research study, the participants were asked to assess fault and give recommendations for criminal proceedings with the given scenario. Regardless of the victim's race, when given the negative, Black stereotypic scenario, participants thought that the victim was more at fault for their death; there was also a correlation between the shooter being less at fault for the shooting (Dukes & Gaither, 2017, 801-802). This has significant implications for the way that victims are portrayed in the media. The way that victims are discussed, especially when it comes to negative stereotypes, has a great influence on the public's perception of assessing fault. For the Dukes and Gaither (2017) article, this led to the direct conclusion that the media's role in constructing either a positive or negative narrative of the victim in question has significant implications on the public reception of the incident.

With these implications in mind, the second stage of the research set out to investigate if the narratives from media framing is reproduced in the Twitter conversations or not. Twitter is the preferred platform due to its emphasis on text, community conversations, and optimized search options. Though other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, prioritize multimedia content and storytelling, Twitter places importance on public dialogue and ease of interaction. For analyzing large community conversations, Twitter is one of the best platforms for studying community interactions and discourse such as the topic of this paper (Ince, J. Rojas, F. & Davis, C. A., 2017). The goal of this design is to analyze the role of respectability politics in public

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discourse and serve as an artifact of conversations that played a critical role in the discussion of victims of racially motivated murders.

The research design is as follows: each victim was studied through Twitter's advanced search engine with both positive and negative characteristics. The use of positive and negative characteristics allows for a more holistic understanding of each victim. For reference, deaths that were portrayed negatively in the media may have more positive coverage from conversations that take place on Twitter. As a reminder, the five positive traits were stable familial structure, middle-class socioeconomic status, high education level, kindness, and ambition. The negative traits were broken family, prior criminal history, drug use, low socioeconomic status, low education level, and aggression. Positive and negative coding terms were converted into simple terms that were 1) searchable through Twitter's advanced search option and 2) would yield substantive results. Due to the nature of the platform, it's extremely rare that a tweet would explicitly contain a phrase such as middle-class socioeconomic status. Instead, this term was replaced with the word wealth. The positive traits were then translated into stable family, wealthy, education, kindness and ambition. The negative traits were translated into broken family, drug, poverty, education, and criminal history.

Twitter's advanced search engine includes multiple valuable resources to curate a specific inquiry. It functions like a Boolean search. You can add details for the categories including words, accounts, dates, and engagement. In this research, the positive and negative terms were searched through the 'any of these words' box. This search would yield results for any of the terms included in the box; it acts most similarly to the 'or' function in a Boolean search. For example, when searching the negative terms, I input the

words broken family, drug, poverty, education, and criminal. The engine would register this search as broken OR family OR drug OR poverty OR education OR criminal. Any tweets containing these words would pop up as a result of the search.

To individualize the searches to each victim, the victim's name would be searched as a hashtag, for example #PhilandoCastile, along with the Black Lives Matter hashtag, #blacklivesmatter. The time period for Tweets was also individualized. The time period would begin with the date that the murder occurred and conclude 6 months later. The period of six months was chosen to have a wide enough expanse of tweets that would encompass immediate reactions as well as retroactive actions, like protests, that may have taken place.

To protect the anonymity of the Twitter users, personalized, identifiable information was discarded. Each user will be identified by number in reference to the tweet they are connected to. It is important to emphasize that the main focus of this study is the engagement of community conversations.

This initial search served as a vetting process to filter tweets that were primarily text-based for the purposes of this research study. Though other tweets with multimedia storytelling characteristics are invaluable as a holistic artifact of the Black Lives Matter movement, they do not serve the purposes of this research.

Before embarking on the Twitter searches for each victim, it was an assumption of the research that there would be extremely negative discussions surrounding the two male figures, George Floyd and Philando Castile. This follows the initial hypothesis stating that male victims would receive harsher scrutiny and public opinion than the female victims.

After a database of tweets was created, the research proceeded by comparing the number of positive to negative tweets to gain further perspective as to which viewpoint is associated with each victim. After comparing the quantity of positive and negative tweets, a rhetorical content analysis will be conducted to provide a more in-depth analysis. From this analysis, the research will conclu as to the effects of media framing and agenda-setting on social media-based conversations.

***Results***

In Figure 1, the tweets gathered have been broken down into two distinct categories. The first category consists of tweets that were coded as positive while the second consists of tweets that were coded as negative. It is important to note that these are the categories for raw coding. Tweets that may have negative coded but were positive in content will remain in the negative coding category.

| Victim Name | Positive Coded Tweets | Negative Coded Tweets | Total # of tweets |
|---|---|---|---|
| Philando Castile | 48 | 27 | 75 |
| Breonna Taylor | 105 | 78 | 183 |
| George Floyd | 59 | 83 | 142 |
| Aura Rosser | 5 | 25 | 30 |

Figure 1

*George Floyd*

From the traditional media coverage, George Floyd had the most varied range of media framing and the harshest negative perception of the four victims. His drug addiction and prior criminal history were often used as reasons to justify his death. Several of the articles referred to him, in so many words, as a lifelong criminal and someone whose death was justified. They portrayed him as someone with violent, even

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reckless, tendencies who would inevitably have a fatal run-in with the law. The following

tweets represent the results from the negative search for George Floyd.

(1) Every #BlackLivesMatter hero is a felon with a violent criminal history or associated with the same [@user1]

(2) Tweeting the public criminal record of a career criminal is "character assassination" to the #BlackLivesMatter crew [@user1]

(3) Four Minneapolis police officers are being railroaded with murder charges to appease the #BLMTerrorists. #GeorgeFloyd had FATAL LEVELS of fentanyl in his system according to the medical examiner. He died of a drug overdose. #LawEnforcement #KAG [@user2]

The above tweets highlight the negative sentiments that were quite often dispelled

through Twitter. Many users were especially interested in Floyd's prior criminal history

as a justification for his death. They also referred to his drug use and issues like

hypertension as primary contributing factors to Floyd's death as opposed to the officer

kneeling on his neck. What is most interesting from these conversations, however, is the

association of Black Lives Matter itself as a violent, terrorist organization. Clearly, the

association between Floyd and Black Lives Matter could not be broken, so it seems as if

some Twitter users attempted to portray the organization as an anti-governmental entity

determined to bring down the traditional structure of America.

Though public records have proven that Floyd had previous arrests, they blatantly

ignore Floyd's attempts to become a mentor and turn his life around. As previously

mentioned, Floyd moved to Minneapolis to restart his life several years ago. Until the

COVID-19 pandemic, Floyd was employed, working several jobs at once and becoming

involved in his local church ministry. However, the negative tweets thus far follow the

popular media narrative that claimed Floyd was nothing more than a criminal.

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These tweets were more complex than reinforcing negative stereotypes about

Floyd's death. Often, these tweets included words that were coded as negative

stereotypes but discussed them as faults within society that needed to be improved. When

it comes to positive coded tweets, they tended to act as a defense for Floyd's death.

Rather than depicting Floyd as an explicitly positive character, they tend to follow a

similar vein as the respectability narratives that Khan-Cullors (2018) used in her memoir.

Just as Khan-Cullors portrayed her father and brother as consequences of their

environment, the authors of these tweets showed Floyd as a product of inherently racist

systems.

> (4) A judge rejected dismissing charges of aiding and abetting murder for
> 3 officers for the killing of #GeorgeFloyd. They face up to 40 years in
> prison. Thomas Lane, J. Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao ignored pleas as
> Derek Chauvin kneeled on his neck for almost 9 minutes. [@user 3]

> (5) "They're trying to detract from the real issue which is the murder of
> #GeorgeFloyd and the racism and white supremacy in these systems."
> "The spark that lit the fire was the murder of George Floyd"— Volunteer
> with Minnesota Uprising Arrestee Support [@user 4]

> (6) Also, how can you respond to what happened with #BreonnaTaylor
> and #GeorgeFloyd and not acknowledge the way the drug war has fueled
> police violence and devasted Black and Brown communities? [@user5]

These tweets highlight the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement that

occurred due to Floyd's murder. This is a prime example of visibility at work. His death

represented something greater than the loss of a singular life. It represented the need for

equality that had fallen to the backburner due to the pandemic. Through discussions

taking place on social media, the Black Lives Matter movement was able to mobilize on

behalf of Floyd's death and raise awareness in a way that the dominant class could relate

to.

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*Aura Rosser*

Though Rosser's death had a decent amount of coverage when it came to the traditional news media outlets, this was not the case on Twitter. Out of the four deaths covered in this research, Aura Rosser had the smallest quantity of Tweets that directly referenced her death. In fact, there were so many deaths that were being picked up by the movement that her name became just one of many that were circulated at the time. This was incredibly surprising to me as her death was one of the first female deaths to gain some notoriety through Black Lives Matter.

Besides Sandra Bland, Aura Rosser was one of the first notable female deaths to be publicized by the Black Lives Matter movement. Though coverage of Sandra Bland's death to be critical at times, it was never anywhere near the negative coverage that would follow the men who died at the hands of a police officer. In the traditional media, Rosser's death was deemed a justifiable one. Officers claimed that Rosser was aggressive, charging them with a knife once they appeared on the scene. Articles also noted her history with drug use; some even referenced her use of cocaine and alcohol the night of her death. While a few sources did note Rosser's struggle with mental illness, the overall narrative surrounding Rosser in the media was negative.

On Twitter, most of the tweets that discussed Rosser's death focused on overarching issues such as inaccessible resources for mental health issues and drug addictions in the Black community. There was little differentiation between the tweets that were coded as negative and those that were coded as positive. This could be due to the number of deaths that were being considered at the time. This created a significant

area of overlap within the dataset. The following tweets were coded as negative for

Rosser.

> (7) #AuraRosser deserved help/treatment for drug use and mental illness, not bullets. [hyperlink] #BlackLivesMatter [@user6]

> (8) "[Ann Arbor] is a very safe city" unless you're poor and black, then you gotta watch out for the cops [hyperlink] #AuraRosser [@user7]

> (9) Justice for #AuraRosser who got killed by police in Michigan. #BlackLivesMatter [hyperlink] Don't forget her & other lives. [@user8]

> (10) Woke up today with three new hashtags... #AntonioMartin #BrandonTateBrown #AuraRosser I hurt on this Christmas Eve. [@user9]

> (11) #ThaddeusMcCarroll was not mentally stable, but black people don't get to be mentally unstable. That's a white thing. #BlackLivesMatter [@user10]

> (12) Meanwhile, we also need to turn up at the death of #AuraRosser in Ann Arbor, MI who was killed in her home by police. [@user11]

> (13) @user11 OMG. I was JUST being sarcastic w/myself thinking "Maybe black people shld[sic] just always stay home." But then the cops bust in. [@user12]

Unfortunately, individual commentary about Rosser's death wasn't spread in the

same way that the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, or Philando Castile. This

could be attributed to a multitude of things. Rosser's death occurred earlier than the other

three deaths researched in this paper. This was while the Black Lives Matter movement

was still in its early phases of creating a name for itself. It could also be attributed to the

many deaths that were being discussed in relation to the movement. In six months

following Rosser's death, there were several other deaths that received high-profile

coverage around the same time.

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Regardless, the information provided in these tweets creates a necessary discussion around some stigmas in the Black community without assessing fault on the part of the dead. Tweet seven highlights two primary issues that were coded as negative traits for this study. The context of this tweet mirrors that of others in their discussion of resources that need to be allocated. Rather than focusing conversations on what went wrong, the conversations that surrounded Rosser's death truly focused on the racial disparities that existed in the form of improper access to mental healthcare and drug rehabilitation. In terms of respectability narratives, there was not the same level of defense seen in tweets about George Floyd's death. Floyd was made to be a much more complex and sympathetic person from the topics discussed on social media. Rosser was not given that same grace. Though these tweets did create a dialogue about unequal living standards for Black citizens, the authors of these tweets spoke much more passively about Rosser's death. Instead, they discussed matters with social inequality. This case is unique because the visibility is given more directly to issues within society as opposed to the individual death that occurred.

*Breonna Taylor*

Of the four victims discussed here, Breonna Taylor had the most positive overall reaction in the traditional media. The publicity of her death followed an almost perfect respectability narrative.. Below are the tweets that resulted from the negative coded search terms for Breonna Taylor.

> (11) Arrest the police who shot and killed #BreonnaTaylor. She didn't deserve to die because of a botched drug raid. No drugs found. #PoliceTerrorismKill [@user13]

(12) Roses are red Trump is a failure Arrest the cops Who killed Breonna Taylor.. Tomorrow marks 6 months since Breonna Taylor was murdered by police. We've had more luck getting a syrup brand to change their name than getting justice for Breonna. #BlackLivesMatter [@user14]

(13) #BlackLivesMatter 's own website says they want to "disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family" and calls members "comrades." This is a Marxist organization that is a destructive force in society. Dr. [@user15] explains in [their] [@user16] interview: [hyperlink] [@user17]

(14) Don't forget that @JoeBiden pushed to militarize the police and increase penalties for drug offenses with the 1994 Crime Bill that he authored, and those policies led directly to police murdering #BreonnaTaylor. [@user18]

Though the above tweets are coded as negative, they serve as criticisms of the criminal justice system rather than Taylor's supposed role in her death which is becoming quite the theme in this research. Tweet 11, for instance, was coded negatively for the mention of drugs, but the tweet speaks to the drug investigation that resulted in Taylor's death. Tweet 14 also speaks to the War on Drugs in America that so heavily affected Black communities across the nation. Tweet 13, however, is negatively coded and serves as a negative opinion on the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole. This criticism compares Black Lives Matter to a socialist organization that aims to tear down society rather than raise issues of inequality.

The tweets coded as positive followed in quite a similar vein as the ones that were coded as negative. They tended to criticize the police rather than place blame on the victim which was quite a surprise based on opinions I read in articles.

(15) Arrest #BreonnaTaylor's killers. They are all cops. The police barged into Breonna's home without announcing themselves and killed her. Breonna was an emergency medical technician. She was a Black woman who was loved. She had a bright future ahead of her. [@user19]

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(16) #BreonnaTalor[sic] was shot 8 times at 1 am. She & her boyfriend essential workers without records. When my people say we are tired. THIS IS WHAT WE MEAN. #TheView #BreonnaTaylor [@user20]

(17) The kind of behavior we are seeing across America from police during the #BreonnaTaylor #GeorgeFloyd #AhmaudArbery protests is the kind of #everyday behavior that most black people, regardless of class and education, experience from police everyday. Now suddenly people believe us [@user21]

(18) When we demand #BlackLivesMatter we're not just talking about policing. We're demanding justice in health care, housing, education, and so much more. [@user22]

When it came to the tweets that were coded as positive for Breonna Taylor, there is more rhetoric that employs the use of respectability politics. Tweet 15 references the good qualities in Breonna. It spoke of her being deserving of love, her bright future, and her kindness within her career in the medical field. Tweet 16 follows this trend by referencing both her and her boyfriend's careers as essential workers and their clean records. These references to being essential workers were crucial to gaining support for bringing justice to Breonna Taylor's death, especially with the role essential workers play during the early stages of the pandemic. This paired with the lack of prior criminal history made Taylor's death even more sympathetic. By framing Taylor's death as a loss of an essential worker, the dominant class became more invested in getting justice. Because of all the positive codes above, Taylor's death was one that easily aligned with respectability narratives. Compared to George Floyd and Aura Rosser, this is the first time that tweets really supported the individual and in a positive way. Rather than being positive by disputing the negatives in society, these tweets were positive in their explicit support of Breonna.

She was a good woman who played an active role in keeping the world going amid a global pandemic. Her character aligns with the interests of the dominant class which gave more visibility to issues like the logic behind no-knock warrants.

*Philando Castile*

Philando Castile's media coverage was quite positive, but it wasn't quite on the same level as Breonna Taylor. Castile's death was seen as a tragic event for several reasons: the young child in the backseat, the hole he left within his community, and the circumstances under which this incident occurred. There was virtually nothing on Castile's record thus setting his death up to be one that was given a respectability narrative. The overriding framing from the media about Castile's death described him as a good man who shouldn't have lost his life.

As seen below, even the tweets that were coded as negative primarily served as critiques of the criminal justice system rather than Philando Castile himself.

(19) CEOs that funded #BlackLivesMatter need to face criminal and civil penalties. #BLMKidnapping [@user23]

(20) Please explain why the girlfriend of #PhilandoCastile was handcuffed and placed in back of a police car next to her 4 year old daughter? [@user24]

(21) "Mind you, all of this was over a broken taillight."-[@user22] on cop charged in #PhilandoCastile killing. [hyperlink] [@user25]

(22) Criminal justice reform/racial profiling #blacklivesmatter #blm #blmtv #politics #news [hyperlink] [@user26]

The tweets that were coded as positive for Castile were among the most positive of all four victims studied.

(23) [Student's name] describes #PhilandoCastile as "a Mr. Rogers with dread locks," selfless, kind, generous. [@user27]

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(24) Now that officer Yanez has been criminally charged for murdering #PhilandoCastile, will the MSM demonize Yanez the same way they did Castile [@user28]

(25) Coworker on #PhilandoCastile: "Kids loved him. He was smart, over-qualified. He was quiet respectful, and kind." [hyperlink][@user29]

(26) They say: 'Get a job.' 'Don't commit a crime.' 'Comply with officers, and you'll be fine.' But: #CharlesKinsey and #PhilandoCastile and... [@user30]

Tweets 23 and 25 explicitly speak to the character of Castile. Many of the words found in these tweets, such as kind, quiet, and selfless were used frequently in reference to Philando Castile. Whereas other positive tweets would speak to the overall circumstances of the death in a positive light, these tweets often spoke to Castile's character and devotion from the firsthand experience of others. This was truly unique among the victims studied in this research.

# CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

Media framing and agenda-setting play a critical role in the perception of violence done to Black bodies. Beginning with the conception of the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter in 2013, this social media platform has allowed for community members to have conversations parallel to those in the traditional media. The social media platform has allowed for these discussions to act as a real-world mirror to issues such as police brutality and improper allocation of community resources. These complexities were found in the several samples of tweets that were gathered in this study. Rather than issues blatantly placing blame on the victims for their deaths, the conversations tended to focus on the issues of police brutality holistically.

This research aimed to better understand the role of respectability narratives and respectability politics in media framing. When the media covers social justice movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the media can significantly influence the public's perception of these deaths and thus the justice these deaths deserve. This framing can shape the way that the dominant class perceives issues of importance. As a means of bargaining with the dominant class, marginalized citizens try to bring visibility to their concerns often through collective organization. In order to achieve such visibility, these movements may reinforce respectability narratives. Respectability narratives can align key players with the values of the dominant class to achieve a more equal citizenry.

Through a two-staged research process, this research investigated the influence of traditional media framing on social media perception. The first stage of this research involved studying several media articles to gauge the media's framing of prominent cases in Black Lives Matter. With criteria from the Dukes and Gaither (2017) study in mind,

articles were gathered to find examples of media framing in relation to Black Lives Matter victims. Two positive and two negative cases emerged. Tweets were collected and analyzed to discover if the media framing continued on social media.

The tweets gathered for George Floyd offered the greatest range of any collected in this study. The tweets that emerged from the negative coded search portrayed Floyd as a career criminal and drug addict. The positive coded tweets provided quite the opposite view. They addressed systematic inequalities that played a role in Floyd's death. First, the tweets addressed the lack of accountability from the other three officers who watched as Derek Chauvin kneeled on Floyd's neck. The following tweet directly names racism and white supremacy as contributors to the violence that occurred while the last tweet in this series made a meaningful connection between the War on Drugs and over-policing in Black communities. The positive and negative coded tweets here are in a dialogue unlike any other in this study which could be attributed to how high-profile Floyd's death was during the summer of 2020.

The tweets compiled for Floyd are in a dialogue that grapples with the media framing of Floyd as a thug and the firsthand experience of marginalized citizens. This firsthand experience from Twitter users directly combats the media's overarching negative narrative of Floyd. Here, it is important to keep in mind that these tweets and articles were written before the trial of Chauvin concluded, thus allowing us to reflect on many initial reactions to the death. Therefore, these articles and tweets serve as an artifact of conversations that were active around the time of Floyd's death.

Timing is an imperative piece of this research. When analyzing the coverage of Rosser's death on Twitter, she did not receive the individual attention as other victims

studied here. This could be attributed to the period of time in which tweets were collected. For each victim, this research collected tweets that spanned six months from the date of the victim's death. In this time, unfortunately, several other high-profile police brutality related deaths happened. A few of these deaths include that of Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott. These deaths were heavily discussed during this time, making Rosser's death one among many.

When conducting both positive and negative coded searches, often the same tweets would appear. Rosser's death overall was added to an ongoing discussion and was not as influential in mobilization on a national scale. However, the hashtag #AuraRosser was used to garner attention about other deaths that occurred. Where other victims' deaths received more individual attention, Rosser's death acted as a vessel that would adopt the names of other victims as it gained traction. Conversations surrounding Rosser's death focused on improper allocation of resources for mental health and drug addiction in Black communities. They even called for the use of alternative services instead of policing for concerns related to domestic violence or mental illness.

This is incredibly insightful when reflecting on the roots of the Black Lives Matter movement. Aura Rosser's death occurred quite early in the movement's history, but it translates the importance of community organization. The dialogues surrounding Rosser's death helped to increase awareness of issues that unfairly impact the Black community. This is truly one of the best examples of visibility despite Rosser's death not fitting a favorable respectability narrative.

In stark contrast to a death that did not fit a respectability narrative, Breonna Taylor's death fit a favorable respectability narrative perfectly. The negative coded

tweets served as criticisms of the criminal justice system rather than placing blame on Taylor. These tweets would include the negative terms, but they called for Taylor's justice. This followed the media's framing of Taylor's death as a sympathetic one. The positive tweets were quite remarkable in their portrayal of Taylor as a golden citizen. They continually referenced her role as an essential worker and her clean record. This was incredibly important at the time because we were in the beginning of a global pandemic. What is even more interesting about Taylor's death is the way that it presented a palatable way to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

When Taylor's death was discussed in the media, it seemed as if her name was one of three. Her death was continually referenced along with the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd as if they were a related incident. As discussed above, the media portrayed Floyd's death as quite the controversial one, but, when it came to Breonna Taylor, no direct fault could be found. For many, Taylor's death was their 'in' to supporting and mobilizing alongside the Black Lives Matter movement. Floyd had too much speculation of drug abuse and Arbery wasn't as high profile as Floyd or Taylor. However, Taylor's death seemed like one that was entirely unjustifiable. People felt as if a clear line had been crossed and Taylor deserved justice. On social media, nearly every discussion seemed to function as a preemptive defense. This case in particular highlights the influence of the dominant class when a proper respectability narrative is employed.

Of all the cases studied in this research, the response to Philando Castile was truly the most surprising. Castile had a positive response to the traditional media framing; he was described as an honest man with a good heart. I initially expected Castile to receive negative coverage on Twitter; however, I found that the negative coded tweets followed

in a similar fashion to those found with Taylor. The negative coded tweets tended to reveal inconsistencies within the criminal justice system and policing. The positive coded tweets spoke very highly of Castile's character. These tweets had testimonials from community members who knew Castile which were very emotional. I would argue that these personal comments on Castile's character surpassed the kind words spoken about Taylor's character. The community response to his death was great which turned into a national mobilization effort.

While Castile's death did follow a favorable format for a respectability narrative, the social media conversations added an emotional aspect that was missing from the media coverage. Though these news articles did use quotes from children who had known Castile, the threads that would go on to speak about Castile's kindness were unlike anything else uncovered in this research. This adds a layer of depth that was not initially considered in the research. The emotional presence was pivotal in Castile's death gaining attention along the road to justice.

This raises a valid point in the conclusion of the analysis. Though statements on social media and in the news are fueled by the words of people, there is no replacing that person-to-person interaction. Often, those in the dominant class could gain a better understanding of the issues that marginalized citizens face with more personal interactions. This is not to say that empathy would fix great issues like racism or unequal housing; that would simply be inaccurate. However, it is through community conversations that we can work to improve the standards of living for all.

# CHAPTER V: Limitations

Though this study was conducted as in-depth as possible, there were still a few limitations to the research. The terms for coding, both negative and positive, could have gone through more intense analysis to ensure that they translated well on the social media platform. Though the terms used for the advanced search on Twitter were accurate in their translation from the Dukes and Gaither (2017) study to searchable terms on Twitter, I am not sure that they were the most optimized terms for the search purposes.

Though she seemed like a prime person to study at the time of embarking on the study, I believe the research could have been improved with a subject who had more media coverage than Aura Rosser. Her struggle with mental illness helped in finding a female with negative traits to study for the purposes of this research, but there was a significant lack in content about Rosser compared to the other three victims.

This research could have benefited significantly from the use of an online coding program such as Python to organize and filter through a larger sample size. This coding was conducted manually by a singular person, but, with proper resources, a larger sample could have been pulled and analyzed to make a more all-encompassing statement about the relationship of respectability politics utilized through social media.

# CHAPTER VI: Conclusion

At the core of this study is a need to bring light to issues of racial injustice. This idea can best be described as visibility. This idea of visibility was discussed primarily through Danielle Allen's "Invisible Citizens: Political Exclusion and Domination in Arendt and Ellison". Allen follows two lines of thought in this discussion: the first being Hannah Arendt, who explained the invisibility as a consequence of citizens who were excluded from society, and the second being Ralph Ellison, who saw invisibility as oppressed citizens who exist within the same political realm as dominant citizens. Once again, this research did not serve as an investigation to prove that Arendt's theory was correct instead of Ellison's or vice versa. Rather, these political theories inform the way that we look at marginalized citizens in society and their involvement in the political realm.

Today, one of the easiest ways to process visibility is through media coverage. Often, in political science, the traditional media has been described as the fourth, unofficial branch of government due to its influence on legislation (Jones, P., 2000, 316). The media acts as a two-way communication channel in which citizens can have a more personal investment in governmental processes. In combining this idea of visibility with the influence of the media, this research sought to better understand the role of media framing and agenda-setting with victims of racially motivated deaths. This was observed by studying the way that respectability politics increased visibility and empathy in deaths covered to facilitate social change.

The Black Lives Matter movement sprung forth from the necessity to bring visibility to deaths related to police brutality. When looking at the murders of George

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Floyd, Aura Rosser, Breonna Taylor, and Philando Castile, each instance represents a unique part of the Black Lives Matter movement. An initial assumption of this research was that respectability politics would play a significant role in the defense of these deaths. However, respectability politics did not play as large of a role as initially thought. In actuality, the discussion surrounding these deaths on Twitter was quite purposeful in addressing the improper utilization of police forces, the need for reallocation of mental health services, and other vital necessary changes to create a more equal society for marginalized citizens.

The conversations that flowed from these tragic deaths provided community support for issues that faced these oppressed communities, namely the Black community. Rather than serving as a justification for those who were seen as positive victims, these conversations created visibility for issues that have long plagued marginalized communities. Struggles with mental health, drug addiction, and toxic relationships are nothing new, but by highlighting these societal flaws as a part of the conversations surrounding racial violence, a wider range of the citizenry became invested in these issues. Though it is horrible that these deaths are the channel through which we have come to have these conversations, it keeps their legacy alive.

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