Research Article

Visual Representation of the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests: Comparing US Mainstream Media Images to Citizens' Social Media Postings

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study set out to examine how the US broadcast media visually presented the 2020 Black Lives Matter. We compared news content collected from mainstream websites to those generated by citizen journalists and posted on Twitter. The purpose was to examine whether the two shared common narratives in their visual representation of the protestors. Through visual rhetoric frames, our findings suggest that citizen journalists' picture narratives were humanistic and presented women and children as major players in the protests. On the other hand, visual rhetoric in the US media sites were characterized by narratives of violence, male-focused, and lacking racial diversity.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, photograph, framing, visual rhetoric, mainstream media, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

The question of how the US broadcast media sites portray different races, age groups and gender profiles remain a heated debate among media scholars. The irony resides in the argument that as scholarship increases, so are the gaps in literature on how the media ought to present news during the times of conflict. In the digital age, visual rhetoric permeates all platforms, including broadcast and electronic media. As most scholars have argued, social media has expanded the broadcast and electronic media cultural forum models by allowing citizens to speak current affairs that shape the news content (Bernabo, 2019). Berger (2017) and Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) attribute the problem to the tenets of framing theories who continue to analyze texts while ignoring images or photographs. As Parrott et al. (2019) had earlier stated, this imbalance needs to be corrected considering that images in the news contain properties that either enhance or mitigate their consequences.

This argument is manifest in the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that characterized and interrogated the role of the media in reporting racially heated events. Essentially the poignancy and power of the 2020 BLM racial protests images that circulated across the globe, attest to the long-held argument that photography surpasses the effects of written communication (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Photography encapsulates various forms of cultures into a language that requires only eyesight for interpretation. In other words, little or no professional skills are needed to understand the image on the part of the consumers. As a result, the media has used photographs in time and history to communicate a message to various cultures. In the same way, the citizens (whom we interchangeably refer to as citizen journalists in this case), through digital technologies adopted unique skills of collecting and creating newsworthy content in various

multimedia platforms. As a result, journalism as a profession has been put to the test. The challenge is exacerbated in events such as the 2020 BLM protests that put to test the role of the mainstream media in reporting authentic newsworthy content against 'accidental witnesses' or citizen journalists. We loosely use the term 'citizen journalists' to include all ordinary individuals without special journalistic training who reported about the 2020 BLM protests through photographs.

Against this backdrop, this study examined how images from broadcast news sites (cnn.com, foxnews.com, msnbc.com, etc.), when compared to images from individualized twitter accounts (citizen content) presented the narratives of the 2020 BLM protest. We acknowledge the debates surrounding our three media choices, and whether their programs function outside the traditional news structure. However, we selected these media sites because of their viewership and levels of influence to society. The purpose was to examine whether the two were divergent in their visual rhetoric. We looked at what was emphasized in the image and who was missing in the images (hypothetically, were Hispanics, Asians, and other minority groups in the US present in the images?).

Using Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) model of visual framing, we attempt to answer the broader questions by treating visuals as denotative, connotative, stylistic-semiotic systems, and ideological representations. The four levels of analysis examine humanistic nature of the images, the focus on direct evidence as in the case of medium shots, the focus on the physical appearance of the subjects in the image, and the ideological weight that the pictorial convention is carrying.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing Visual Rhetoric

Fred R. Barnard's 1921 statement, 'A picture is worth a thousand words', remains a relevant approach to understanding the value and influence of photographs in our society. According to Barnard, a single image had the power to effectively convey complex and sometimes multiple ideas. This implied that graphics had the power to shape individual tests and preferences than mere verbal description (Mieder, 1990). The media throughout history have used photographs in their news reporting. Griffin (2004) stated that visual images are the shorthand written reports of specific stories, where the picture adds more impact and symbolism.

Generally, visual images are influenced by the context of presentation, where values, beliefs, ideology makes it unique (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). This statement is consistent with many visual communication scholars who assert that photographs go beyond to communicate different cultural meanings (Batziou, 2011; Parry, 2010). In her analysis of the Israeli-Lebanon conflict, Parry (2010) observes that the distance of the image (extreme close-up, close-up, etc.), photo subject, headline and caption portrayed the visual framing along with different perspective of the conflict. This means that the photographer, or the photo editor can use such techniques to shape the narrative and create what Lippmann (1922) referred to as 'pictures in our heads' (p. 18). Evidently, the media continue to use visual communication techniques to influence propaganda. Heider (1997) "observe that news decisions support dominant views, reality is defined by the existing social order, and the exclusionary decisions are routinely ignored" (p. 173). Batizou (2011) called this phenomenon a 'loud' frame. He claimed that because mainstream media consider themselves as credible, serious, and influential, so this 'loud' frame make a strong effect on the viewers. The researcher tried to find out how immigrants' pictures have been framed by the media where he emphasized on images as text loaded with cultural meaning (Batizou, 2011).

Perception shapes our news choices (how we understand them) and interpretations (how we explain and present them) technique (Fahmy, 2004). Entman (1993) asserted that in the context of visual framing, photographs help readers to understand the in-depth meaning of the news event. Photographs are socially structured products and final news photograph is only a slice of reality. For Fahmy (2004), photographs are only a part of what is out there. When specific visual frames dictate the storyline, most of the target audience would be more receptive to understand the event. However, this does not limit the power of photographs to story lines since images by themselves are worth a thousand words (Kwok, 2020). The argument is very compelling especially in images about protests, where two major conflicting narratives are framed to explain the phenomena.

Framing Protests in Photojournalism

Media select, package, and disseminate news or visuals by following their organizational ideologies (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2015). This understanding extends to specific frames that relate to all forms of protests. Researchers noted that diversified communities such as African Americans, Latinos, Asians do not get significant coverage by the news media (Poindexter et al., 2010). Whenever they got attention, they were framed as a social threat or perpetrators in the news, while Whites portrayed as victims and heroes (Henderson et al., 2021). Beyond this, most researchers have found that framing of protests tend to "marginalize protesters by focusing on their tactics, emphasizing violence and deviant behavior, and not giving space to protesters' ideas and social critiques" (Mourão et al., 2021, p. 3). Accordingly, these frames are informed by norms and routines that accompany the production processes of news, which tends to focus on angles involving conflict while relying on official narratives for their sources (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Research also suggests that the media uses three presentational strategies of frames when reporting racial protests: delegitimizing riots; confrontation, and legitimizing protests (Mourão et al., 2021). Delegitimizing riot frame highlights the dispute between protesters and society, with a focus on violence, confrontational news frames tend to highlight clashes between the police and the protesters while putting the police as the legitimate law enforcers, and legitimization protest frames treat protesters as legitimate groups seeking justice (Mourão et. al., 2021). However, it is important to note that the media can sometimes dissect groups into those that are legitimate versus illegitimate protesters. For example, the 2020 protests in Portland Oregon were characterized by the "Proud Boys"–a far right "Western chauvinist" group associated with white nationalistic rhetoric vs the Black Lives Movement.

Despite the amount of research conducted on this topic, there are still gaps in journalism studies that seek to analyze frames within visual rhetoric and photography. Most studies tend to use traditional measures of framing with foci on story type, story placement, story enhancement, and story sources. For example, Schwalbe (2006) analyzed visual framing of the Iraq war in the US news websites (cnn.com, foxnews.com, msnbc.com, etc.) where unit of analysis was individual news image such as a photograph, map, graphic, etc. The researcher coded picture as dominant or secondary. We want to argue that this process of analyzing framing is important when looking at the overall story but understanding the in-depth meaning of the picture needs more criteria than only dominant or secondary frame. As per researchers, framing goes further to assess the actual effects of the content within that issue (Entman, 1993). Therefore, as effective as it might seem, we argue that measuring framing of photographs through story type, placement, enhancement, and source is not complete until photo subjects and the graphic nature of the photo are included.

In this view, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) proposed four levels of visual analysis that they believe have a higher capacity of depicting and identifying frames in visual images. Accordingly, these models work with any unit of analysis including media and citizen frames. The four levels identified are visuals as denotative, stylistic-semiotic systems, connotative, and ideological representations. When visuals are employed denotatively, the frames are intended to captivate the "visual sensations or stimuli that activate the nerve cells in the eye" (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 52). This implies that the image is designed to provoke some emotions on the consumer. For example, an image of a woman or a child crying during the protest would elicit some emotions. In the same way, angry young men looting and breaking public property, including police cars could be another example of visuals as a denotative system.

Stylistic-semiotic systems refer to "the conventional and technical transformations involved in representation" (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 54). In photography, "a close-up shot signifies intimacy, a medium shot signifies personal relationship, a full shot signifies social relationship, and a long shot signifies context, scope, and public distance (Berger, 2017). Such kind of shots signify what the photographer is perceiving as their focal point and the rhetoric they intend for their audience/consumers. In one of his earlier studies, for example, Goffman (1976) distinguished several photo poses and how each of them demonstrated the rituals of subordination or infantile. Such poses can only be identified by observing the kind of shot the photographer used.

Connotative system present individuals in the photo beyond their denotative nature. For example, a police officer hugging a black male during the protest will have a different connotation to a police officer hugging a white male. This is because of the embedded meanings that have been created over time.

The ideological representation, which seeks to answer the 'WHY' question as they relate to access and ideology. According to Pieterse (1992) this 'WHY' question goes beyond, find relations with cultural, psychological, and emotional spheres of the viewers. For example, do the images present and confirm a perpetuated stereotype of the protestors?

These four levels of visual analysis already used by many scholars. For example, Parry (2010) used these levels to measure photo subjects, graphic nature, and framing analysis in terms of photographic framing and linguistic framing. Batziou (2011) measured graphic nature, expression of emotions, spatial proximity, and social interaction by using these levels. However, it is important to acknowledge that these elements are essential for measuring frames in the media to understand how photojournalism frames the news of racial protests beyond the common measures of framing. These are the elements that Santana and Hopp (2016) consider as important in understanding the link between citizen journalism and traditional journalism practices. Most important is understanding the variations in the way the mainstream media uses their presentational framing skills as opposed to how the citizens choose to frame their photographs. Based on these arguments, we ask the following questions:

1. **RQ1:** How did the US mainstream broadcasting websites visualize the 2020 BLM protests in photographs?
2. **RQ2:** How did the US citizens visualize the 2020 BLM protests in photographs?
3. **RQ3:** To what degree and how did the US mainstream media websites differ from citizen journalists in their visualization of the 2020 BLM racial protests?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study was based on the comparison of the visual interpretation of the 2020 BLM protests between the US mainstream media sites and citizens journalists' visual accounts which posted on their twitter accounts. We employed qualitative content analysis on 200 top images from cnn.com, msnbc.com, foxnews.com, and citizen's twitter accounts. The purpose was to explore the cultural meaning of the visual data. We acknowledge the debates surrounding our three media choices, and whether their programs function outside the traditional news structure. However, we selected these media sites on the basis of viewership and influence on society. According to Statista, in the time of BLM 2020 the three most watched cable news network in the United States were CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC (Watson, 2021).

Essentially, our interest in the electronic media stems from the competing debates on television that characterized the schism in thought between the two main political parties (progressive and conservative) in the US. On the other hand, twitter has been selected because of its popularity and availability. Data shows, 21% US adults use Twitter, and they are mostly accessing the platform on a mobile device (Omnicore, 2021). Thus, Twitter provided a unique opportunity to identify how citizens visually presented BLM Protest in the social media platform which is uniquely different from media professionals.

We extracted our data using an open access tool called Mecodify (https://mecodify.org). Essentially, this tool can extract, analyze, and present online and big data with relative ease. We assigned web-search pages to identify the IDs that match a particular search query for the assigned time. In this case, we assigned the tool to extract data ranging from January 2020 to December 2020. However, only photographs that appeared between May 27, 2020, and Dec 31, 2020 (The starting and peaking period of BLM protests in the US because of George Floyd's death) were collected. Our search queries included the following keywords #BLM, #racial protests, #George Floyd, and #Police brutality. Essentially, several scholars have used hashtags to trace participant roles in a framed event (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017), thus forming what Davis (2013) referred to as "hashtag politics" of a network of individuals with a heightened interest in a particular issue.

A total of 200 images, were extracted (50 from each of the three mainstream broadcast websites, equals 150 and 50 from Twitter). Each of the 50 twitter images were manually screened to ensure that the post belonged to an individual that did not define themselves as journalists. This was done through a deep dive into the profiles of our sample size after conducting a pretest with two trained coders who produced an intercoder reliability accuracy of 0.93%. With such accuracy, the two coders and researchers worked separately in extracting images from four sites. To be included in the study, extracted images were supposed

Figure 1. Depictions of the 2020 #BLM by CNN (Source: cnn.com)

Figure 2. Example depictions of the 2020 #BLM protests by Fox News (Source: foxnews.com)

to be original (not retweeted for twitter), they should be determined by the number of viewership, should have been posted during the stipulated timeframe. This produced an intercoder reliability accuracy of 87.3.

Consistent with Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) four-tier model, we analyzed each collected image for denotative, stylistic semiotics, connotative, and ideological representation. While analyzing the photos we asked the following questions: who was in the picture and what were they depicted doing–we focused on race, gender, age, and what they were exactly doing in the picture?, how subjects were depicted through camera angles?, whether there are concepts attached to the actors in the photos?, and how were images employed as instruments of power in shaping public consciousness and historical imagination? To find out the stated questions' answers, we looked at the graphic nature of the images (nature of the main subjects: male, female and/or children, and how they were depicted in the photographs: as whether they were heroes or villains?), expression of emotions (whether the subject's face shows anger, violence, or sympathy?), spatial proximity (close-up, medium, or long shot), and social interaction (which racial groups were captured most, Black, Latino, Asian , or White). Each of the responses was documented in a spreadsheet.

FINDINGS

This study compared visual rhetoric portraying the 2020 BLM Protests in the US. Overall findings reveal variations across the media, and especially between the (CNN and MSNBC) and (Fox News) media websites. Our analyses indicate that while the progressive media was pro-BLM protests, i.e., images emphasizing the #BLM signs and symbols, the conservative media platform seemed to be anti-protests, i.e., images depicting BLM protestors as violent and looters. Particularly, more than 90% of the images analyzed from the progressive media websites had a sign or symbol of the BLM movement and most images showed a racially diverse group in support of the protests (**Figure 1**).

On the other hand, most recurring images from Fox News website were characterized by their news anchors, especially Tucker Carlson, and his criticism of the protests (**Figure 2**). Other images were long shots and mostly not focused on individuals and depicting protestors as violent. A few that were close-up shots were accompanied by anti-protest captioned like "Protesters carrying BLM signs vandalize CA police station".

Figure 3. Example depictions of protests by Twitter (Source: Twitter/citizen accounts)

Table 1. Percentage of graphic nature in the different media

Graphic Nature 2	Fox News	%	CNN	%	MSNBC	%	Citizen/Twitter	%
Subject as Hero	3	6.2	42	84.0	46	92.0	50	100.0
Subject as Villain	47	93.8	8	16.0	4	8.0	0	0.0
Total	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0

Note. Each variable was measured on the total number of each media sample=50

Data from the citizens/Twitter present a more compounded narrative accompanied by women and children (most considered minorities) as major players in the 2020 BLM protests (**Figure 3**). In almost every photo of the protests from the citizens, women were presented as spearheading the march, therefore highlighting black women leadership, and thus creating a strong narrative around women as the center of the protests. Further, data from the citizens seemed not to focus on the racial divide as most narratives suggest, but on the mistreatment of the police. This argument is supported by the number of images that show all races marching together in harmony against police brutality. Moreover, most images indicating police brutality gathered from the citizens were conspicuously absent from the mainstream media coverage. This would imply that their presence on Twitter, and among the citizens offered an authoritative counter-narrative beyond the corporate and organizational world.

Graphic Nature

The content analysis of the graphic nature of images indicated that 37 (74%) from cnn.com, 48 (96%) from foxnews.com, and 31 (62%) from msnbc.com were focused on male subjects. These findings are significant as opposed to the citizens posting, 43 (86%) of the photographs had either a female and/or child in them presented as protestors. Further, of the 200 photographs analyzed, 97 (48.5%) depicted violence, and the remainder 103 (51.5%) were characterized by either peaceful demonstrations or sympathy. Of those depicting protests as violent came from the conservative media. When it comes to specific data of each medium, 47 (93.8%) of the data from Fox News presented the protestors as villains, as opposed to the eight (16%) of the data from CNN that presented the subjects as villains and 42 (84%) as heroes. This is culminated in the data from the citizens/Twitter that recorded a 50 (100%) heroic nature of the subjects. **Table 1** presents the summary of these findings.

Emotional Expressions

Our analysis found a range of emotions within the 200 photographs. While the conservative media seemed to focus on violent emotions in their visual rhetoric (86%), the progressive media seemed to focus on anger (81%). Anger in this case was presented as a positive thing in the sense that the protestors were angry against injustices, and thus were demanding for change. On the other hand, visual rhetoric from the citizens/Twitter seemed to focus on sympathy and heroic acts (96%), especially of women and children (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Percentage of emotional expressions in the photographs

Emotional expression	Fox News	%	CNN	%	MSNBC	%	Citizen/Twitter	%
Violence	43	86.0	7	13.0	11	22.0	1	1.0
Anger	6	11.0	41	81.0	37	73.0	1	3.0
Peaceful/sympathy	1	3.0	2	6.0	2	5.0	48	96.0
Total	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0

Note. Each variable was measured on the total number of each media sample=50

Spatial Proximity

Data from the mainstream media sites (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) was mostly presented with images which suggested physical alteration in close-up shots. The overall findings suggest that photographs from the conservative media sites (foxnews.com) were significantly informed by narratives of violence and looting by showing close-up shots (94%). However, other kinds of shots were also accounted for, but mostly in instances where the protestors were presented as jubilating after destroying things, and/or when attacking the police. We could not account for any long shots from the conservative media. On the other hand, data from the citizens/Twitter, accounted for several close-up shots (92%), with most of them showing women and children protesting with placards like "#My father is not a threat...#I am Tamir Rice...#When do I go from cute to dangerous".

Social Interaction

Overarchingly, 45 (89%) of photographs from the citizens/Twitter depicted Black people protesting together with other races. The rest of the three mainstream media sites' findings were totally opposite. The mainstream media websites mostly showed Black people (cnn.com 73%, foxnews.com 99%, and msnbc.com 93%), which imply that it is only protest of the Black community.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was two-fold: to examine how the US citizens visualize the 2020 BLM protests in photographs as opposed to the traditional media, and to assess the differences. The results of the study give us interesting aspects for discussion. We cannot reject that the BLM protests manifest the injustice and mistreatment of people of color in the US and beyond. The movement reflects the consequences of longstanding discrimination towards people of color. The data depicted the fact that citizens/Twitter platform's visual representation is more humane, more diversified and more women centric than mainstream media coverage. It can be argued that in the name of objectivity and following organizational policies, the mainstream media websites focused on choices of fact in their visual representation (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). But we want to argue that since images are important factors to understand visible or invisible socio-political contestation, the selection of photographs particularly of movements like BLM protests is vital to create the perception.

Overtly, the above findings describe a phenomenon of decision-making process where graphic materials inform the individual political preferences and are linked to the specific situations in which the human suffering occurs (Parry, 2010). The results can infer to a lot of things including the political and corporate affiliations of the mainstream media. The fact that photographs from the citizens/Twitter had a lot of women and children as their subjects could be used as a justification to suggest the independence of choice and believe among Twitter users. Findings from mainstream broadcast media websites' portrayal of BLM protests are also supported by Batizou (2011) and Parry (2010) research. Both of their studies depicted the selection and filtration of photographs in the mainstream media as driven by dominant ideology of the respective organizations. Sometimes presenting an issue in an unfavorable manner seems normal.

Our findings suggest that the pictures posted or shared by the citizens/Twitter, humanized the protestors as opposed to the photographs used in the websites by the mainstream media. It could be argued that social media (Twitter) is operated by individuals, who control their beliefs by their own perception, and post what they think are right for them (Bernabo, 2019). On the other hand, the findings seem to suggest that the mainstream media cannot operate emotionally and, in most cases, fail to humanize issues like BLM protests due to news values and organizational policies. These finding are consistent and mirror Poindexter et al.,

(2010) and Westin (2001)'s arguments that the media framed the minority races as social threats or groups of commotion. While interviewing 120 television staff in the US, Westin (2001) discovered that race and ethnic diversity impacts decision-making about the news content, despite their belief and whether the media is progressive or conservative. The domination of white audience perception is so strong that the coverage of black or ethnic community is almost absent in the news, while coverage of white group of people is impeccable. Based on this, we can argue that due to white dominance, mainstream media did not humanize the issue that much, which we observed from citizens/Twitter.

Further findings suggest that women and children played a central role in the protests, therefore challenging the common male dominated narrative. This new type of narrative was mostly found in data from the citizens/Twitter, whereas the mainstream media focused on police action and male protesters' aggressiveness. It can be concluded that while the mainstream media might be perpetuating the common narratives of male dominance, the citizens see women and children playing a vital role in the process of change. A recent study by Kwok (2020), analyzed Hong Kong's protest movement 2019 and claimed that featuring women protesters in the social media "reveal specific perceptions of gender norms and female empowerment" (p. 165). Analyzing data from the BLM protests show that the presence of the significant number of women in the front line reflect that those women are active participants in the whole process. We hold that it is important to acknowledge women's active participation and the significance they designate to the BLM protests. Unlike the past, where women were perceived as passive agents in the mainstream media, we think it's time to shift the perspective.

The data revealed another important aspect that the citizens/Twitter platform presented a racially diverse population of protestors as opposed to what we found in the websites of the three mainstream broadcast media. These findings explain the aspect that citizens/Twitter portrayed the issue as everybody's, and not only of the Black community. By including people of other races in the pictures, the citizens/Twitter tried to show the rationales of the movement. On the other hand, mainstream media, whether progressive or conservative, fulfilled their organizational agenda and tried to show the movement as only Black people's matter, where they overlooked the movement as a social justice issue.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the challenges and prospects of journalism practice amidst the coalescing of citizens journalism. The findings bolster the notion that traditional reportorial norms continue to govern the practices of journalism in the digital age despite proliferated access to information. Given that social media news/citizens' reporting is now institutionalized and has become an indispensable part of the day-to-day journalistic routine, and with the ability to operate independently (create and disseminate information), the question of credibility in the construction of reality has become more eminent.

Practical implications of this study that would benefit professional journalistic practices include the awareness of how reporters are choosing the content they incorporate into their media. Initially, the mainstream media used to control news contents (text and image), but the rise of social media and citizens' participation in the production and dissemination of content leaves less room to journalists to alter their content for satisfying the demands of their corporations and/or political partisanship. Again, echoing Shoemaker and Reese (2013), citizen participation in the creation and dissemination of content is no longer an option for routine journalistic practices for it contributes to the production of the so-called standardized patterns of news content.

To this end, journalists should move away from seeing citizen/accidental witnesses as simply appendments, but as colleagues that can help create and disseminate content. That is why Santana and Hopp (2016) believed that it was important that social media practices be imperative to journalistic practice. This action, by itself, will allow journalists minimize hitting a nadir in navigating through the journalistic values.

As a final note, the study was posed with several limitations ranging from the type of data and the sampling process. The result cannot be generalized due to the sample size. The use of traditional and qualitative content analysis posed challenges in the interpretation and presentation of data. While we were able to go deep into the interpretation, some data received more attention that the other. Therefore, we recommend

that future research critically analyzes each image. This is particularly possible through quantitative analyses. Further, we suggest that future research explore role of Latinos and other ethnic groups in the BLM protests.

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