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“HAPPY HEAVENLY BIRTHDAY, BEAUTIFUL QUEEN”: #JUSTICEFORBRE AND THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT ON INSTAGRAM

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician (EMT) from Louisville, Kentucky, was killed by police officers during a raid on her apartment. In its immediate aftermath, Taylor's shooting received almost no media attention. Public attention to the case was drawn only after the video of George Floyd's death ignited protest across the United States. As gender studies scholar Brittney Cooper (2020) argued, “black women are rarely the first thought in our outrage over police shootings. But Black women are surely worthy of more than secondary outrage.”

In this study, we analyze the complex intersections between race, gender, and the aesthetic norms dominant on Instagram (see Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020), as they played out in the political expression around the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—specifically around the killing of Breonna Taylor. On a theoretical level, this research offers a model explaining how social media platforms (in this case, Instagram) can enable—as well as constrain—certain forms of political expression, through the interaction between their *affordances*, *norms*, and *contents*.

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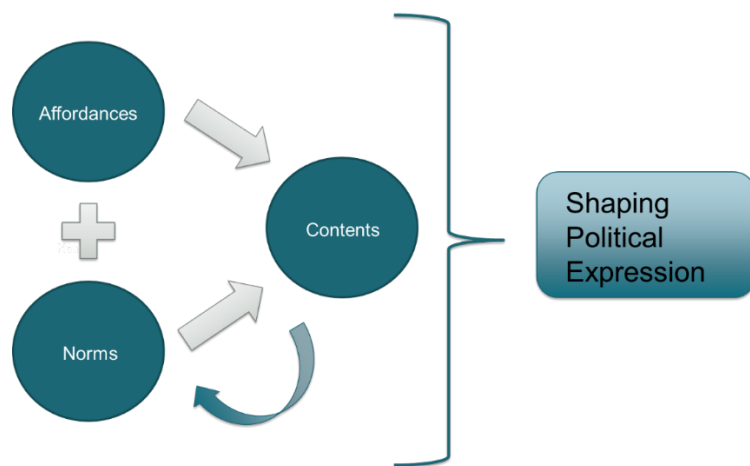


Figure 1. *The affordances/norms/contents framework*
Methods

As our lens, we used the prominent hashtag #justiceforbre. Aided by the software tool 4KStogram, we collected the 5,779 publicly-available Instagram posts that used this hashtag between May 25, 2020 (the day of the killing of George Floyd) and June 7, 2020 (the end of the first big wave of BLM protests in the US). Using systematic random sampling, we created a collection of 578 posts for analysis; these included images, videos, as well as carousel posts (i.e. collections of multiple images and/or videos in a single post). To further understand the exchanges around this content, we also analyzed the 2,173 comments that appeared on these Instagram posts.

Key Findings

Our findings section considers the case study through our proposed affordances/norms/contents framework.

The conversation around #justiceforbre manifested in a collection of posts that was rather uniform, centered on reposting a relatively limited set of posts that were eye-catching and visually appealing. In terms of content, these consisted most centrally of a few selected photographs of Taylor (see Figure 2, top row), as well as a series of artistic renderings of her created by social media users (see Figure 2, bottom row). These digital images highlight Taylor’s femininity, e.g. by the recurrent use of flowers in her hair or background, and were often accompanied by textual references to her as beautiful, or a “beautiful queen.” In addition to images of Taylor, another dominant content genre included reposting of stylized activism guides with titles like “5 ways for non-black people to take action” or “Ways you can help Breonna Taylor.” Often paired with images, these included links to sign online petitions, emails and phone numbers of officials to contact, as well as calls to further share on social media.

A dominant norm in the corpus was connecting political expression around the killing of Breonna Taylor to the user’s own identity, so that the “right” way to speak around the issue varied based on one’s racial group. In that sense, as opposed to the practice of “strategic colorblindness” practiced in many contexts in U.S. society (Apfelbaum, Sommers & Norton, 2008) racial identity was explicitly foregrounded in these posts. For

Black users of Instagram, this took the form of taking ownership of the issue of police violence and speaking in third person plural, such as in this caption text: “Breonna was a Kentucky EMT, a daughter, a girlfriend—but most importantly she is a Black woman. No one speaks up for us. This has to change.” Perhaps more surprisingly, non-Black (and, especially, white) users explicitly identified themselves racially as well, while problematizing their position vis-à-vis the BLM movement. Whether calling others to “use your white privilege and DO something” or sharing personal stories of racial reckoning, such posts stand out versus the common “invisibility”—and thus seeming universality—of whiteness as a racial identity (Dyer, 1997).

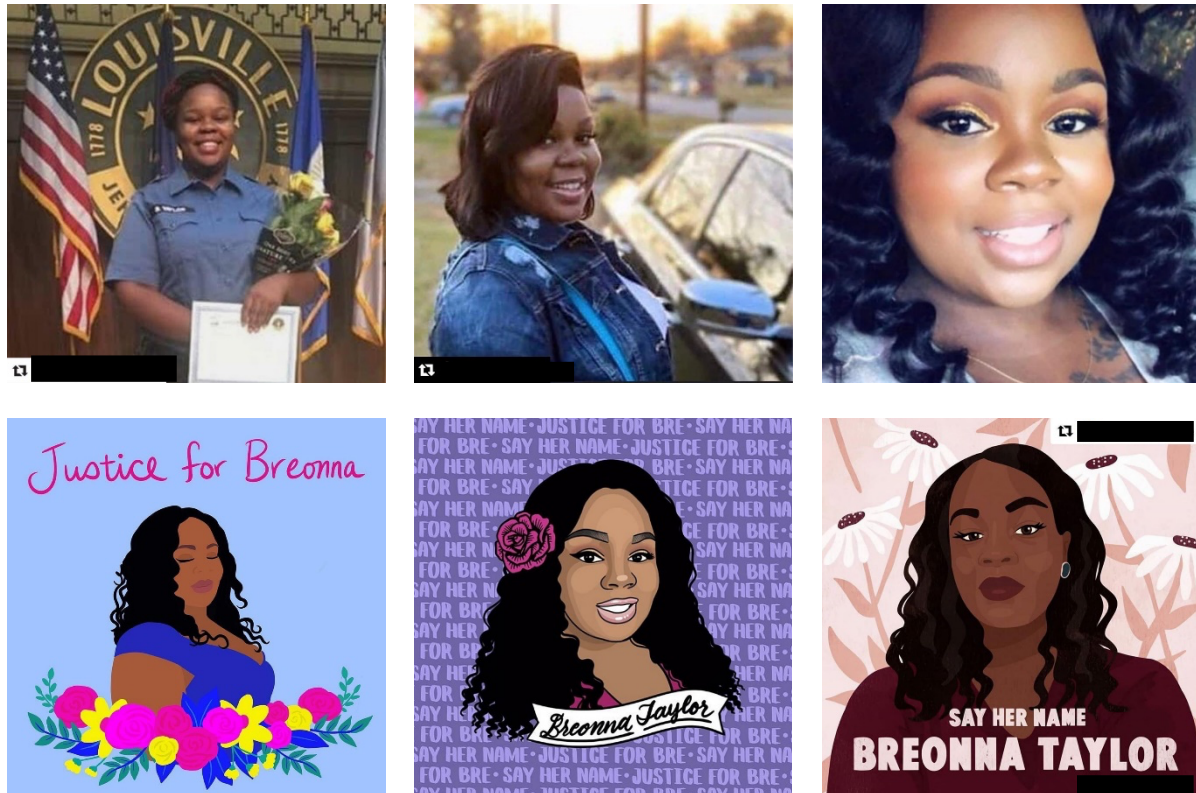


Figure 2. Examples of the dominant photographs (top row) and artistic renderings (bottom row) of Breonna Taylor shared in the corpus.

The reliance on affordances, norms, and contents unique to Instagram played out most clearly in the #birthdayforbreonna campaign, launched on June 3 by culture critic Cate Young. To honor what should have been Breonna’s 27th birthday—June 5, 2020—Young called on her 20k Instagram followers to share a stylized set of slides, including an artistic rendering of Breonna created for the occasion by an artist, as well as a list of 10 “concrete action items people can do to commemorate her life and fight to get her justice.” Action items included sending a birthday card to the Kentucky Attorney General demanding that he lay charges against the officers who killed Breonna, as well as a call to flood social media platforms with remembrances for Breonna Taylor in order to “take over Instagram in her name.”

This initiative invited users to combine the political campaign around Taylor's killing with a well-known social media ritual (Burgess et al., 2018): that of a birthday celebration. This unorthodox pairing broadened the norms of acceptable participation in the campaign, to include a range of practices usually associated with birthdays: users posting on June 5, the date of her birthday, interlaid images of Breonna with "happy birthday" and "happy heavenly birthday" wishes, shared handmade birthday cards, or posted pictures of their homemade birthday cakes. The birthday campaign resonated powerfully, broadening the scope of users posting around Breonna Taylor. In our dataset, 3501 #justiceforbre posts were shared on her birthday, accounting for 61% of the total content that was posted over a 14-day period. By pairing the birthday-associated practices with concrete action steps, the campaign highlighted Breonna Taylor as one of the key figures related to the BLM protests.

Through this analysis, our study points at how the interaction between affordances, norms and contents uniquely shaped the kind of political expression that was enabled on Instagram, as well as illuminating the kinds of expression that are constrained by the same dynamics. While the birthday campaign and other forms of embracing the Instagram aesthetic (e.g. the use of pictures, artistic renderings and stylized activism guides) made a powerful impact for the BLM movement, they also show the limits posed on activist action around the complex topic of race relations, when it is confined to aesthetically pleasing forms of expression that focus on femininity and beauty.

References

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