

Black Lives Matter and Its Influence on Culture

Grace Cody

University of Rhode Island

Thesis:

The Black Lives Matter movement was one of the most influential organizations in the post civil rights era. The movement began to gain national recognition in 2014 after Micheal Brown was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Black Lives Matter decided that they needed to go to Missouri and show their support for the activists who were advocating for the conviction of the police officer. This was a changing point for the movement not only because they began to get more recognition on social media and in news coverage, but also because their organization grew nationally. People left Missouri to start their own chapter of Black Lives Matter in 18 different cities, growing the movement rapidly. In this essay the cultural influences of Black Lives Matter through social media, the way the news covered the movement and how this led to an opposition group, and how the movement affected police officers will be discussed.

## Methodology:

First, the cultural influence of Black Lives Matter will be analyzed through their utilization of social media. The way that the organization created a hashtag and grew because of this was a first of their kind. This paper will explain how without the use of the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, the organization may not have grown to the size that it did and have as big of an influence on our culture.

The opposition that grew against Black Lives Matter began to call themselves “All Lives Matter”. This growth was formed out of the belief that there was an exclusion of other races in what Black Lives Matter was doing. This paper will take a deeper look at what Black Lives Matter wanted to accomplish and compare it to the grievances that All Lives Matter had.

Finally, I conducted an interview with my father who is an FBI Agent about the influence that Black Lives Matter had on his job. Much of the work that Black Lives Matter accomplished was focused on police brutality and the systemic racism in policing, so this can sometimes shed a very negative and broad light on law enforcement.

The Black Lives Matter movement has changed the way that racial activists make changes in our society. As explained on the Black Lives Matter website, the movement was started in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who killed Trayvon Martin. The founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi were frustrated by the acquittal and founded Black Lives Matter in 2013. The movement gained national recognition after Micheal Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri and the police officer that shot him was aquitted. This paper will look at the cultural influences that the organization had on our society.

Black Lives Matter is a decentralized group, meaning that anyone can take their message that they stand for and make it their own. This explains why social media was so powerful for this specific movement. During 2014, the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” was circulating around Twitter and drew much attention to the group. Twitter encourages users to create their own content and share their ideas. This concept and the decentralization of Black Lives Matter led to people to share their own ideas about this movement. The article, “The social media response to Black Lives Matter: how Twitter users interact with Black Lives Matter through hashtag use” is a study done by Fabio Rojas and Clayton A. Davis where the usage of the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” is conducted and how this changes the framing of the movement is looked at. The study found that when people used the hashtag, the overwhelming majority supported the movement and was pledging solidarity with them. The hashtag’s use was to encourage the people with Black Lives Matter to continue their activism and to share their own experiences with racism.

The use of social media also plays a role in the development of other organizations that have fought for racial justice that were influenced by Black Lives Matter. In the article “How

Black Lives Matter Changed the Way that Americans Fight for Freedom”, the author Frank Leon Roberts writes that students and activists across the country have been inspired by Black Lives Matter and have started their own organizations. The organizations include the Black Youth Project 100, the Dream Defenders, Assata’s Daughters, the St. Louis Action council, Millennial Activists United, and the Organization for Black Struggle (Roberts). Roberts explains that all of these organizations can be considered part of the Black Lives Matter Movement because Black Lives Matter’s original intent was not to change a specific law, but to influence our society as a whole. Black Lives Matter has changed the way that our culture has viewed activism. Black activism is not only Martin Luther King and the Freedom Riders, but now includes a whole other section of people who fight for activism online.

Due to our divided culture of political ideologies, it is not surprising that the Black Lives Matter movement was covered differently in varying news sources. The way that the movement was covered, led to an opposition group and hashtag called, All Lives Matter. Ashley Atkins discusses the group in her article “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice”. Atkins explains that people were interpreting the movement as “Only Black Lives Matter” and not “Black Lives Matter, too”, the second being the intent of the name. The exclusion of other races in the name was not done intentionally by the organization, but black lives were focused on because they were the ones they felt needed more attention in that moment. The movement argues that there is a clear distinction between when white lives matter, and when black lives do not, leading to the name of the group.

In 2014, I was a sophomore in high school when I first learned about the Black Lives Matter Movement. My family and I watched the news together where the riots in Ferguson were

shown and I was involved in class discussions where this was discussed. In these class discussions was the first time that I heard people express their hatred for police officers. My father is an FBI agent and I had always been proud to tell people this. However, this was the first time I had felt judged for being related to someone in law enforcement. The Black Lives Matter Movement and what was happening in Ferguson, opened a new conversation for my white family and my law enforcement father, which was about race.

Years later, I discussed with my father again how Black Lives Matter affected his career as a member of law enforcement. “This conversation about race, especially in a job with so much power is something that needs to be had,” my father explains. My father is an FBI Agent now for 19 years and has done incredible work to keep people safe. While understanding the need for the organization and the reasoning behind it, my father also felt that it sometimes gives people a platform to form hatred about police officers, which is different than needing a change in policing. When discussing his understanding of the movement my dad says that “There are good and bad people in every job. There are bad accountants and bad teachers. The difference with law enforcement is that we have a certain power that other jobs do not, and that gets to people’s heads without proper training and education.” The need for change is there, but a need for hatred is never there on either side of the argument.

The Black Lives Matter movement was started to create a systematic change and I think the movement created change beyond even what their intention was. The way that policing is looked at changed, the way that social media can become a movement changed, and most importantly conversations that needed to happen, happened. Black Lives Matter opened doors for racial justice and led the way for future movements to use social media as well.



## Bibliography

Atkins, A. (2018, July 25). Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice\*. Retrieved March 23, 2020, from  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02691728.2018.1483879>

Herstory. (n.d.). Retrieved March 23, 2020, from <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

Roberts, F. L. (2019, August 22). How Black Lives Matter Changed the Way Americans Fight for Freedom. Retrieved March 23, 2020, from  
<https://www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/race-and-criminal-justice/how-black-lives-matter-changed-way-americans-fight>

Rojas, F., Davis, C. A., & Ince, J. (2017, July 6). The social media response to Black Lives Matter: how Twitter users interact with Black Lives Matter through hashtag use. Retrieved March 23, 2020, from  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334931?scroll=top&needAccess=true>