Intersecting matters: 
#GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19 
by Jenny L. Davis and Tony P. Love

Abstract
In the late spring of 2020 amid a global pandemic, George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, triggering mass protests under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement. We take this moment of coinciding crises as our point of analysis observed through the lens of concurrent hashtags on Twitter. Social media content both reflect and construct the social meanings of topics and events. We thus draw from social media to understand how George Floyd and COVID-19 inform and inflect each other, building a dataset from ~20,000 tweets that unite prevalent hashtags associated with each. Analyses reveal a repeating set of symbolic hooks — death, breath, masks, and voice — encompassing dense and competing narratives about justice and injustice, systemic inequality, degrading trust in institutions, and the changing identity of a nation. These narratives are anchored in the events under study and indexed through co-occurring social media registers. In addition to substantive findings, the study introduces and applies hashtag convergence, a novel methodological approach based on user-generated indexical pairings.

Contents
Introduction
Methods
Findings
Conclusions

Introduction
Since the onset of its global spread COVID-19 has had an omnipresent character, overtaking news cycles and touching all elements of personal and public life. In this same period race relations loomed, animated in the United States by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement against state violence and systemic racial injustice — an ongoing project that predates the pandemic and continued to bubble as COVID-19 took hold. These dual contextual backdrops of a pandemic and a racial reckoning came sharply together in a single week of late spring, 2020. Just days after the United States surpassed 100,000 COVID-19 deaths, footage spread of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck, killing the unarmed Black man who asphyxiated and expired. In the thick of pandemic shutdowns, BLM protestors took to the streets.
Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19

Although BLM and COVID-19 have indelibly shaped and informed each other (Benjamin, 2020; Bonilla-Silva; 2020; Schachter, 2020), there has yet to be a systematic study of the social and cultural meanings produced and deployed through their entanglement. In the present work, we probe this entanglement through an empirical study of concurrent hashtags on Twitter in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd’s death, as both racial justice mobilization and the COVID-19 pandemic swelled. Our study is driven by the following question: how have Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 symbolically converged, and what meanings are deployed through their pairing? We address this question with a targeted study of George Floyd and COVID-19 on Twitter, using a novel methodological approach — hashtag convergence — to build a dataset from tweets that indexically unite the two topics.

We collected ~20,000 tweets that join #GeorgeFloyd with #COVID-19 as dual hashtags, showing contested discourses of race, virality, mobilization, and national identity, all hung on four symbolic hooks: death, breath, masks, and voice. These data serve as a lens on meaning and action as they emerged in real time, forged at the crossroads of two historically transformative events. We use these data as an access point to BLM and COVID-19, uncovering their sociological confluence via a communication medium that has been integral to each.

Intersecting matters: BLM, George Floyd, and COVID-19

One of sociology’s earliest and most enduring insights is that social life is interconnected. Across micro, macro, interpersonal, and institutional domains, social facts converge to co-produce material circumstances and symbolic meanings [1]. Such is the case with George Floyd’s death and the COVID-19 pandemic, two intersecting matters that took shape through their relation. There is no intrinsic or obvious tie between a prolonged global pandemic that kills millions and a single police encounter that kills one. Yet, the connection between COVID-19 and George Floyd is inextricable. This relationship is based on several factors, not least of which is a temporal overlap between the two happenings, coupled with a link between Floyd’s death and a larger ongoing movement for racial justice in the United States — Black Lives Matter — that infused the cultural moment while COVID-19 surfaced and spread.

The Black Lives Matter movement dates back to 2013, when social activist Alicia Garza wrote a Facebook post responding to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a vigilante who shot and killed Trayvon Martin while the unarmed Black teenager walked home from a convenience store. Garza ended the post with the hashtagged statement #BlackLivesMatter. The slogan and its hashtagged moniker picked up steam the following year during protests over Michael Brown, a 14-year-old who was killed by police outside Ferguson, Missouri. With the Michael Brown protests, Black Lives Matter rose to prominence as a cultural icon, an organization (co-founded by Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi), and a movement that now defines contemporary race politics in the United States (Bunting and Stamatel, 2019; Freelon, et al., 2016; Garza, 2016).

Although BLM has sustained an ongoing presence, it surges and recedes as high-profile incidents of racial violence emerge, flow through media cycles, and fizzle out or resolve. In the winter of 2020, mobilization was relatively subdued due to collective attention on COVID-19 and the practical matter of people staying out of public and in their homes. However, tensions began to rebuild in February when white vigilantes killed Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black man jogging in Georgia. These tensions increased in March, when Louisville, Kentucky police shot and killed Breonna Taylor while executing a wrongfully issued no-knock warrant based on faulty information. On 25 May, when video footage of George Floyd’s death spread through media channels, the movement reignedited with protests in Minnesota, then across the country, and across the world, marking what some would call a “turning point” in U.S. race relations (Guardian, 2020).

The Floyd protests were spurred by police violence but largely defined by their activation during pandemic shutdowns. To avoid viral spread, many cities and states kept people out of school and work, closed bars and restaurants, and enacted a range of measures to enforce physical distancing. These measures were politically divisive, with compliance and resistance falling along progressive and conservative lines,
Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19 respectively (Gollwitzer, et al., 2020; Gadarian, et al., 2021). It was thus the case that many who advocated for and adhered to physical distancing practices also supported and/or participated in racial justice protests which had people pressed together in the streets (Cobbina, et al., 2021), while many who contested shutdown measures now cast the protests as public health hazards and the protesters as hypocritical actors (Nguyen, 2020). As we will show, these circumstances of protest-amid-pandemic became at once a signal of the protests’ power and also, a means for conservative critics to undermine both the protests themselves and the progressive position on public health mandates.

Just as the Floyd protests were defined vis-à-vis pandemic life, the pandemic too was inflected by BLM. Even before Floyd, the BLM movement had sensitized Americans to the breadth of systemic racism and this likely factored into public discussions and research priorities that focused on racial disparities in virus-related health and economic outcomes (Craven, 2020; Devakumar, et al., 2020; Marshburn, et al., 2021). With this foundation already set, Floyd’s highly public and violent death channeled and concentrated anti-racist energy, cracking through color-blind pandemic narratives (Bonilla-Silva, 2020) and breaking open a space to address and account for the diffuse effects of institutional racial oppression (Thelwall and Thelwall, 2021).

Social media have been integral to both matters under study and to their intersection, figuring into the “new normal” of remote contact amid pandemic shutdowns (Ferrara, 2020; Fischer, 2020; Pei and Mehta, 2020; Singh, et al., 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020) and, from its onset, central to the Black Lives Matter movement (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Bunting and Stamatel, 2019; Freelon, et al., 2016; Ince, et al., 2017; Kuo, 2018; Ray, et al., 2017; Recuber, 2021). More generally, social media are sites of both communication and production, through which communicative acts create a living record of empirical events, what they mean, and how they matter (Couldry and Hepp, 2018; Davis and Love, 2019, 2018; Halford and Savage, 2017; Hepp, et al., 2018; Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2016). We thus draw on social media data to understand the convergence between BLM and COVID-19 and the symbolic meanings developed through their coupling.

### Methods

**Hashtag convergence: Developing a dataset**

To study the symbolic confluence of BLM, George Floyd, and COVID-19 we devised hashtag convergence as a data collection method. This approach builds a dataset from user-generated indexical pairings, probing these pairings for the meanings that emerge. Hashtag convergence represents a subtle but significant pivot from traditional hashtag studies, which have become a lynchpin of social media research (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Brock, 2012; Bruns, et al., 2016; Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Zappavigna, 2018).

Most hashtag analyses take three forms: single topic analyses, competing frame analyses, and multi-topic analyses via combined datasets. Single topic hashtag analyses focus on a singular tag and/or related set of registers, such as studies of #BlackLivesMatter, (e.g., Freelon, et al., 2016) or studies of #COVID19 (e.g., Ferrera, 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020). Researchers also examine competing hashtags about the same topic, recording contrasting frames such as those represented by #BlackLivesMatter vs. #BlueLivesMatter in statements about race and police violence (e.g., Gallagher, et al., 2018; Ince, et al., 2017) or #COVID19 vs. #ChineseVirus in framing the pandemic (e.g., Hswen, et al., 2021). Finally, when researchers do analytically combine distinct topics, it has thus far been through manufactured datasets in which hashtag pairings are exogenously constructed by the researcher, such as Thelwall and Thelwall’s (2021) repository of BLM and COVID-related tweets.

In contrast to extant methods, hashtag convergence collects social media posts that join topically distinct hashtags within a single utterance (e.g., #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19). This approach treats dual topics as
the unit of analysis, derived from user-generated pairings. Such an approach, which we take in the present work, is ideally suited to the study of co-constitutive phenomena, attending to the ways discursive publics merge these phenomena into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

On a technical level, we enacted hashtag convergence by scraping publicly available tweets that combine both George Floyd and COVID-19 in a single post, indexed by concurrent hashtags, and shared in the immediate aftermath of Floyd’s death. Tweets in our dataset thus meet the following criteria: they were tweeted between 25 May 2020 and 26 June 2020, and they contain the hashtag #GeorgeFloyd plus at least one variant of #COVID19 or #Coronavirus (not case sensitive), such that all tweets in our dataset make indexical reference to both topics of interest. These dates represent the month following Floyd’s death, during which time social media activity around Floyd and BLM peaked (Rothschild, 2020). Our selected hashtags are the most prevalent for Floyd and COVID-19 on Twitter as calculated by hashtagify.me, a Web site that documents hashtag popularity and usage.

To make the data both tractable and precise, we did not scrape all BLM content. Instead, #GeorgeFloyd served as a conduit for the BLM movement during the pandemic. Just over one-third of the tweets within the sample thus contain #BlackLivesMatter and its variants, but all included tweets are indexed by the hashtag #GeorgeFloyd plus at least one version of the #COVID19 hashtag. The dataset includes tweets that contain the designated hashtags directly, as well as tweets that have been quote-retweeted using the hashtags [2]. We scraped the data from Twitter’s advanced search page using webscraper io, an add-on to Google’s Chrome browser, generating a total of 20,017 tweets and retweets.

Analysis

Our analysis was guided by the “small data” tradition in social media research, prioritizing depth and richness through qualitative interpretivist methods (Brock, 2018; Latzko-Toth, et al., 2016; Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2016), while maintaining a broad lens on the holistic dataset. We struck this balance with an abductive approach, employing a top-down, bottom-up process in which existing theoretical and empirical insights are brought to bear on new data, while the data work back to advance and elucidate established understandings using grounded theory techniques (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). We thus read the data to let themes emerge and triangulated those themes with theoretical insights from the fields of symbolic interaction, social media, social movements, and critical race studies, with insights form each woven throughout the findings.

The authors read the data independently and then together, establishing initial impressions and orienting patterns. This process revealed a notable trend: a refrain of symbolic markers that were present across tweets, serving as vehicles for claims and contestations about the specific events under study and about broader social issues, anchored and amplified by those events. We distilled these down to four symbolic hooks — death, breath, masks, and voice — which guided subsequent analyses led by the first author and spot-checked by the second. This process included keyword searches for thematic terms, hand coding of all relevant tweets, parsing each theme into relevant subthemes, and identifying exemplar tweets for each theme and subtheme. Thematic coding was based on a holistic reading of text, links, and attached images for each tweet. For the exemplar tweets presented in the Findings section we include the original text and links, describing relevant imagery in accompanying brackets.

Table 1 represents the presence of each symbolic hook within the dataset. This includes a reference-level and tweet-level accounting. The reference column shows the total number of times the symbolic hook was mentioned in the dataset, allowing for multiple references within a single tweet. At the tweet level, we show the number of whole tweets that draw on the theme, including the percentage of each theme in relation to the full data corpus, allowing tweets to be counted in multiple categories. Although some of the thematic percentages are relatively small, each theme was referenced over 1,000 times and featured in more than 600 tweets, figuring into a patterned story about life and death at the intersection of COVID-19 and racial (in)justice. We organize the findings around these four symbolic hooks, evinced with exemplar tweets from the dataset.
Findings

COVID-19 and the George Floyd protests came together as part of a socially transformative moment, marked by ideological shifts and deep social divisions. Within this context, our data reveal complex narratives about justice and injustice, systemic inequality, degrading trust in institutions, and the changing identity of a nation. These abstract issues take diverse and often divergent form, articulated through a repeating set of symbolic hooks: death, breath, masks, and voice. The boundaries between each hook remain porous, with discourses from each seeping into, shaping, and informing the others. We separate them here for analytic clarity while allowing their overlaps to remain evident.

Table 1: Thematic Hooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total References</th>
<th>Total Tweets and % of Corpus*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>8,059</td>
<td>5,980 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breath</td>
<td>2,705</td>
<td>1,292 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masks</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td>691 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>16,421</td>
<td>9,261 (46%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages equal less than 100 because the dataset contains tweets that do not adhere to any discernable pattern (e.g., idiosyncratic communications between individual twitter users) and/or were not codable in the context of this study (e.g., shared links with no textual additions from the tweeter, advertisements appended with the hashtags).

Death

The story of COVID-19 and the story of George Floyd are each steeped in death. The former threatens to kill those afflicted and has done as much to over five million worldwide at the time of this writing. The latter, a single death in late spring 2020, represents centuries of continuing state violence against Black people in America and the fatal devaluation of Black lives. The intersection of these events is thus marked with a distinctly morbid character, as represented in our dataset with over 8,000 death-related references across 5,980 tweets. These tweets frame COVID-19 and racism as dual, deadly pandemics, read COVID-19 mortality rates through a racial prism, and tie these realities to the conditions of systemic racial inequality.
**Dual pandemics**

The BLM movement is premised on the social fact that Blackness can be fatal. Arising after high-profile extrajudicial killings of Black Americans by vigilantes and police, BLM works to highlight and dismantle the systemic conditions that render Blackness deadly. Within the dataset, racism in general, and Black mortality in particular, were situated alongside COVID-19 as dual pandemics, with COVID-19 operating as both a metaphor and a scale for expressions of racial violence.

We mobilized the planet to combat the #COVID19 virus. What are we doing to combat the disease of rampant racism? We must combat and eliminate this far more insidious disease. #GeorgeFloyd #RacismMustEnd [Image of Floyd pinned to the ground]

While our attention has been on #coronavirus, and rightfully so ... there is another type of contagion that still keeps some of White America paralyzed: Fear of black men in public spaces. https://t.co/h5OTD7b8NU #GeorgeFloyd #AhmaudArbery #FranklinTempleton #tooman[y]tohashtag

Although Floyd is a central figure, his name was often catalogued alongside a string of names and incidents, joining Floyd’s death with others who have suffered similar fates and highlighting the systemic rather than isolated nature of Floyd’s murder. This linking of Floyd with other victims, along with reference to pervasive racial bias (e.g., “fear of black men in public spaces”), position racism *vis-à-vis* the pandemic as insidious, persistent, and in need of fundamental redress.

**Racial health disparities**

The death and infection rates of COVID-19 are disproportionately higher among Black and Latinx Americans as compared with other groups (Hooper, *et al.*, 2020). These health outcomes follow existing trends in racial health disparities that show significantly reduced life expectancies for people of color in the United States (National Center for Health Statistics, 2016). Over the course of the movement, BLM has trained national attention on the expanse of racial inequalities, including those of health and wellness. Thus, even before Floyd’s death, racial disparities in COVID-19 outcomes were already part of the national conversation. Although it is impossible to know how salient these racial disparities would have been without the BLM movement, it is near certain that BLM’s racial justice messaging increased social sensitivity to race related variables in analyses of COVID-19 and its effects (Craven, 2020; Devakumar, *et al.*, 2020).

With the death of Floyd and re-centralization of BLM concerns, COVID-19 racial health disparities surged into the spotlight (Thelwall and Thelwall, 2021). Within our data, this became part of a bigger story about death, Blackness, and the consequences of systemic, institutionalized White supremacy.

It is hard to hear “we are all in this together” when POC [people of color] are dying at higher rates due to #COVID19 + being murdered by white men #GeorgeFloyd #AhmaudArbery — Can we be in this together + challenge systemic racism? That’s my “together” #BlackLivesMatter https://t.co/Y1Gc0JUrEr

Folks are now asking which is worse for Black people: #COVID19 or racism. This false dichotomy misses the larger, structural reality. Covid harms Black people disproportionately BECAUSE OF racism. This is all connected, folks. The tragic
This focus on disparate COVID-19 outcomes and the connection between racialized health disparities and state violence against people of color remains tied to the broader framing of dual pandemics (COVID-19 and racism) which together, make the prospect of Black death apparent and acute.

**Breath**

Physical breath is a focal element of both COVID-19 and of Floyd’s death, featuring 2,705 times in our data across 1,292 tweets. COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that causes inflammation in the lungs and low blood oxygen. Critical cases can require intubation onto ventilators and a great many who die from the virus do so because they can no longer breathe. Like COVID-19 victims, Floyd too was deprived of breath, which he indicated to officers as they applied lethal force to his body [3]. At the same time that literal breath factors into COVID-19 and systemic racial oppression, these dual crises have also had socially suffocating effects, overwhelming daily life and upending a taken-for-granted sense of normalcy. In both physiology and metaphor, breath thus presented in the data as a defining thread.

**Physical breath**

George Floyd’s refrain — “I can’t breathe” — communicated the literal loss of breath from his body at the hands (and knees) of police. This proclamation of breathlessness resonates with the experience of COVID-19 patients, whose most notable symptom is respiratory distress. On Twitter, people highlight this connection.

> George Floyd’s heartbreaking final words “I can’t breathe” are a wake-up call for the world and perhaps the definitive epitaph of the year 2020 #GeorgeFloyd #JusticeForFloyd #Coronavirus #COVID #Riots2020 #ProtestFromHome
> https://t.co/522Rmz0v7q [Image of Floyd, an animated COVID-19 infected lung, and animated face masks]

> The last time I heard the words “I can’t breathe” was when I took care of a nurse who had #covid19. She was in tears. These were the words that #GeorgeFloyd said before he was killed by a police officer who suffocated him. Haunting. #icantbreathe

> This protestor’s mask captures the pain of 401 years of systemic, silent (silenced) racism in the USA: 1619-2020 And conjures pain of last breaths taken by the majority of #COVID19 fatalities: Hispanic, Asian, African American & the poor & uninsured #icantbreathe #GeorgeFloyd [Image of a woman of color wearing a surgical mask that reads ‘Please, I can’t breathe’]

Interwoven in these statements of breathlessness are acknowledgments of raced and classed COVID-19 mortality rates, as discussed in the previous section (*Death*), along with allusions to encompassing forms of subjugation, to which we now turn.

**Breath as metaphor**

Both COVID-19 and state-based violence against people of color have physical, embodied consequences. These phenomena also have flow-on effects that pervade the lived experiences of those affected in ways big, small, obvious, and concealed. These flow-on effects present as layers of pain that wreak havoc on the body, on society, and on the self, culminating at the intersection of COVID-19 and George Floyd’s death.
Along with accounts of exhaustion in the face of persistent struggle, tweeters in our dataset attached their laments to Floyd’s three simple words.

The last words #GeorgeFloyd is remembered by is “I can’t breathe” amid the #COVID19 pandemic that’s literally taking people’s breath away. Floyd’s case is a symbolic image of the US wretched by police brutality and the respiratory disease

#Breathing: the ultimate #rhythm that defines whether or not we are alive & how we live. Between #covid19 respiratory issues & the tragic death of #GeorgeFloyd, it seems like deep breath is what humanity is missing now. It will remain for me the marking #metaphor to evoke #2020

In these tweets, we observe how the pandemic and state violence have both come to represent suffocating circumstances, with compounding, racialized effects.

**Masks**

Masks have been a fraught issue in the United States since the early days of COVID-19. Plagued by inconsistent advice from health experts and political leaders and complicated by supply shortages for frontline workers, the question of whether or not to wear a mask was unclear for a period of time. Today, we know that masks effectively curb the spread of the virus. However, mask wearing remains contentious, and was even more so in the period under study. Exacerbated by then U.S. president Donald Trump’s protracted resistance to face coverings, masks took on political significance. Masks also became a critical technology in protest participation. The physical co-presence of BLM activists posed a risk of infectious spread, including among communities of color that were (and remain) disproportionately affected. Masks thus featured in the data as a point of political division and as a tool of political mobilization (see also Lupton, et al., 2021). The dataset includes 1,060 references to masks through 691 total tweets.

**Masks as political signifiers**

Science shows that masks are a simple and effective way to contain respiratory droplets, thereby reducing the spread of COVID-19 (Chu, et al., 2020; Eikenberry, et al., 2020). However, conservative politicians, pundits, and activists have resisted mask mandates and a range of social distancing regulations on the grounds that these measures ostensibly suppress individual liberties, overstate the seriousness of COVID-19, and directly and indirectly hurt the economy. This resistance has played out in dramatic fashion with armed protestors converging on public buildings mask-less and in close physical proximity to assert their demands. These anti-regulation protests and in particular, resistance to masks, have come to signify a conservative political position at-odds with the racially conscious, collectively oriented message of the BLM movement, and the alignment of this movement with progressive positions on public health mandates. Masks thus serve as both a symbol of progressivism and, as we show here, an artifact through which critiques of White conservatism materialize.

Just remember. The same people who will say #AllLivesMatter in response to #GeorgeFloyd are the same ones who don’t want to wear a mask; says the #coronavirus is just the flu and believe the deaths of 100k Americans to #COVID19 shouldn’t interfere with their ‘freedoms’

The same white men who refuse to wear a mask around other people also deny that white privilege exists. #GeorgeFloyd #BlackLivesMatter #minneapolisriots #whiteprivilege #mask #coronavirus
Mask refusal is positioned here in alignment with White privilege, colorblind racism (e.g., “#AllLivesMatter), and related indifference to the loss of life caused by viral spread, drawing on and mobilizing the political meaning of these small material implements and the ideological currents they have come to represent.

**Masks as technologies of resistance**

Over the past decade, social movements have been marked by their use of social media to organize, broadcast, and galvanize action (Boulianne, 2019; Christensen, 2011; Earl and Kimport, 2011; Schradie, 2019; Tufekci, 2017). In contrast, the most striking feature of the BLM protests following Floyd’s death was activists’ physical co-presence. These protests took place while the virus surged, and while whole cities were shut down to minimize person-person contact and mitigate viral spread. Cognizant of this tension, protesters were vocal about safety measures and placed a particular emphasis on masks. Masks thus became a technology of risk control that made protest participation possible, with activists issuing regular reminders about the norm and the need, to mask-up.

**WEAR YOU MASKS! Protest to picnics. Wherever you are**
**WEAR YOUR MASK! We still in a pandemic. #protests**
**#pandemic #COVID19 #love #BlackLivesMatter #BeWell**
**#BeSafe #GeorgeFloydProtests #GeorgeFloyd**

It’s a really scary time to be black. It’s a really scary time to be a POC [person of color]. It’s a really scary time to be.. well, anyone in these protests who are standing up for #GeorgeFloyd and #BlackLivesMatter Stay safe. Wear your mask. We need everyone strong. #coronavirus #LAProtests

With masks operating as symbolic signifiers of life under the pandemic and political signifiers of partisan ideology, they were also a vital material tool for protest participation, enabling protestors to coalesce while staving off the dangers of close physical proximity [4].

**Voice**

We situate voice as an umbrella category that captures the contested meanings of street protests following Floyd’s death. Because mobilization was so central to the Floyd incident, it is unsurprising that it blankets the dataset, with 16,421 thematic references over 9,261 tweets. With these data, we find competing narratives about the protests themselves, whose voices are heard, and whose are stifled. More specifically, we analyze claims about the (ir)responsibility of physically protesting during a pandemic, and narratives about how BLM protests and anti-lockdown protests have been variously supported and condemned by institutional authorities.

**Social (ir)responsibility**

As discussed in the previous section about masking as a practicality of protest participation, the physical co-presence of BLM activists during COVID-19 created a potential health risk. Protestors cited this risk as not only acceptable, but necessary in the context of systemic racial violence, while detractors pointed to the irresponsibility of these actions and the hypocrisy these actions imply. We can thus observe competing claims about the riskiness of bodies in shared physical space and the relationship between this risk and broader social imperatives.

BLM activists and allies cited the risk of physical co-presence as evidence of protestors’ commitment to the cause and positioned the risk as less troublesome than the systemic violence enacted against communities of color. Tufekci (2017) points out that protests can be measured by the power they signal, indicated by how effectively they rise up despite external forces that should stifle mobilization. Physically gathering during a
Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19

White supremacy and anti-Blackness are public health threats, b/c of police violence and failed pandemic response. We *have* to protest because BLM. Cities should spend $$ on testing and community health & support, not policing. https://t.co/Sg24VIOj1Z

They showed up during #COVID19 This speaks volumes! All of these ppl are risking a lot to fight for black people and #GeorgeFloyd who lost his life. This shyt is beautiful! https://t.co/lTx0Da1r0M [Four images of BLM protestors]

People have decided that potentially exposing themselves to #COVID19 is less important than seeking justice for #GeorgeFloyd and so many others. If you are not in awe, you are ignoring their agony.

In contrast, detractors accused protestors of being hypocrites for their vocal support of physical distancing and subsequent assembly in public squares and city streets. These claims tied-in with doubts about the true contagion of COVID-19 and antagonism towards public health measures. They also worked to discredit the voices of protestors and undercut the validity of the BLM cause.

If you were wondering what would trigger the 2nd wave of #covid19, now you know. #GeorgeFloyd https://t.co/mPOLFrloGd [Image of crowded street protests]

If you disapprove of people protesting the #Michigan lockdown than surly you must disapprove of #BlackLivesMatter protesting the #GeorgeFloyd case. Either protests spread #Coronavirus or they don’t, stop being hypocrites.

We observe in these tweets COVID-19 serving competing rhetorical ends *vis-à-vis* street protests. For BLM supporters, the dangers of physical co-presence signal urgency and collective power. For detractors, physical protests during the pandemic undercut protestors’ credibility and undermine the mainstream public health messaging that has become an ideological fracture point.

*Institutional suppression*

Many of the Floyd protests were met with militarized force, including tear gas, rubber bullets, and deadly gunfire. Activists and allies in the dataset juxtaposed this treatment to the (non)response of law enforcement during anti-lockdown protests occurring just before and continuing concurrently with, BLM mobilizations. At the same time, critics juxtaposed the sympathetic response by the media and some public officials to the BLM movement as compared with harsh admonishments against those who flout physical distancing measures.

> BLM activists and allies on Twitter contrasted their suppression with the noninterventionist treatment of anti-lockdown protestors. Tweets making this comparison often highlighted the racial demographics of each respective group, thus generating a meta-statement on systemic racism and its manifestation through authoritarian violence.

We no longer need to engage in hypothetical “what ifs.” White
protestors, armed with rifles, aggressively confront the police to defend their right to a speedy haircut. Nothing. Unarmed Black protestors congregating at the site of a police murder. Tear gas and riot police

Protesters of Black causes and anti-police brutality, met with military gear & assault. #GeorgeFloyd #RIPGeorgeFloyd #GeorgeFloydWasMurdered. Below are angry White thugs protesting the rights to infect their fellow citizens with #coronavirus https://t.co/TJfUsVUIWd [Side-by-side image of anti-lockdown protests and Floyd protests]

In turn, anti-lockdown activists and BLM detractors critiqued the media, law enforcement, and key political figures, alluding to a larger narrative about liberal elitism and the alleged progressive biases of mainstream news.

@Julio_Rosas11 Hey, @GavinNewsom and @MayorOfLA you gonna go on TV and scold these people about social distancing? If you can’t sit on a beach peacefully should you be able to riot, burn, loot and assault? #COVID19 #minneapolisriots #GeorgeFloyd

For past month, media attacked peaceful anti-lockdown protesters nationwide for “endangering” public. Silicon Valley de-platformed them. Many jailed. Now, Minnesota rioters are burning buildings, robbing stores & hurling incendiary devices at firemen & cops. How many arrests???
https://t.co/IaBxgrc8pX [Video of BLM protests with buildings on fire in the background]

Both BLM activists and anti-lockdown advocates made claims that their voices were stifled by powerful institutions. For BLM, this came from federal authorities and police. To those opposing shutdowns, it came from mainstream media outlets and select political figures. For each, the injustice of their own suppression was positioned against concessions for the other.

Conclusions

The Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19 pandemic are two distinct phenomena that converged acutely with the death of George Floyd at the end of May 2020, just as the United States was surpassing 100,000 virus related deaths. Taking this juncture as our point of analysis, we used Twitter data to understand how a movement and a virus came to mutually shape each other.

Social media both reflect and affect social realities. Examining Twitter data with simultaneous hashtags pertaining to George Floyd and COVID-19 provides a lens on a significant historical moment through the prism of two highly salient events. More broadly, the data illuminate the interlocking nature of personal troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959), and of public issues with each other, forged through the connection between the death of a man and death rates of millions; in the multifaceted ways race informs corporeal vulnerability; in the imbuing of medical masks with both political significance and instrumentality; and in the dialogue between indirectly related protest movements and their competing claims about institutional responses to individual and collective action.
Findings show these complex issues navigated through a repeating set of symbolic hooks: death, breath, masks, and voice. Moored by these symbolic hooks, the tweets in our dataset reveal a cultural moment poised for transformation, hastened and intensified by the events under study. Saturated with morbidity and sharp with political divides, these data capture meaning-in-process as everyday people and public figures collectively and combatively construct the defining narratives of this time. Though brief and ephemeral, each digitally mediated micro-statement became part of a living record, making up the material — however partial — from which history will be sculpted. In the preceding text, we documented that material and parsed its sociological significance in terms of race, mobilization, institutions, and ideology.

In addition to substantive findings, our study demonstrates a novel methodological approach to social media data — hashtag convergence — using co-occurring hashtags to understand their sociological confluence. This approach is valuable for the study of social life via social media, as empirical events never occur in a void, but always in conjunction with many other happenings. History is full of intersecting matters — e.g., the Vietnam war and racial integration, women’s suffrage movements and Prohibition, eugenics and the birth control pill. Historians have carefully demonstrated the co-constitution of these phenomena, weaving together disparate documents, stories, and physical artifacts. Today, social media offers a new kind of analyzable artifact, recording the words and claims of mass publics in real time, organized and framed through hashtag registers. Hashtag convergence, which captures users’ organic pairings of otherwise discrete tags, works to identify and parse sociohistorical couplings, creating a repository from which researchers can draw grounded, sociological insights.

As with all studies, ours has qualifying factors that should be considered when inferring from the findings. First, our use of Twitter data is not generalizable to the overall population, nor even generalizable to the entirety of Twitter users. The ~20,000 tweets we analyzed represent a fractional snapshot of publicly available, English language content, shared on one particular platform. This does not undermine the value of the data as a lens on a specific historical moment, but it does act as a reminder that our analysis is a lens, rather than the full holistic picture. A second qualifying factor is our use of only two co-occurring hashtags, rather than multiple. In the course of scraping data, we picked up on several other issues (e.g., global economic downturns, a failed space launch, an upcoming U.S. presidential election, democracy protests in Hong Kong), all of which contributed to the broader historical context. Although we decided on a two-topic analysis for purposes of scope, including more than two hashtags would have generated differently nuanced findings.

Qualifying factors necessarily create bounds around the applicability of the work, while providing opportunities for future research. Empirically, researchers might take our initial findings and build a fuller dataset that incorporates multiple social media platforms, investigating how the affordances and dynamics of different services and communities compare, contrast, and intertwine to capture and create this particular cultural story [5]. Future research may also add additional hashtags to the ones we selected, exploring a complex ecology of events. Finally, our study represents the first instance of the hashtag convergence method. This approach can be further developed in conversation with other methodological advances in big data, small data, and social media studies and applied to myriad cases in which distinct phenomena intersect.

**About the authors**

**Jenny L. Davis** (@Jenny_L_Davis) is a sociologist at the Australian National University, 2019–2022 DECRA Fellow, and a Chief Investigator on ANU’s Humanising Machine Intelligence Project. E-mail: Jennifer [dot] davis [at] anu [dot] edu [dot] au

**Tony P. Love** (@tonyplove) is a sociologist at the University of Kentucky with an honorary appointment in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University. He specializes in social psychology, criminology, and research methods.
Jenny and Tony co-lead the Role-Taking Project, an international collaboration that aims to learn about and improve the ways people understand others’ experiences, worldviews, emotions, and behaviors (https://www.role-taking.com/).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Claire Benn, Professor Toni Erskine, and Dr. Sarah Logan for their feedback and support in developing this paper.

Notes

1. That society is interconnected and co-constitutive is such an integral assumption of sociology that it would be strange to attribute the idea to any specific scholars or pieces of writing. However, some exemplary and canonical statements of this assumption include: Durkheim (1952), Mills (1959), Berger and Luckmann (1966), and Collins (2002).

2. This means that some of our example tweets do not display the hashtags. Tweets that do not display the hashtags have been retweeted with both #GeorgeFloyd and a variant of #COVID19, thus meeting inclusion criteria.

3. The phrase “I can’t breathe” was already central to the BLM movement prior to Floyd’s death, arising with the case of Eric Garner who was killed by police in 2014 for allegedly selling loose cigarettes. He died in a chokehold while telling officers he could not breathe.

4. Masks have long played a multifaceted role in protest movements, protecting activists from both tear gas and surveillance. This is highlighted most recently by the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in the months just before COVID-19 hit, during which government forces enacted mask bans.

5. See Davis (2020) for the political significance of technological affordances.

References


Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19


Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19

Problems, volume 65, number 2, pp. 251–265.


Editorial history

Received 27 February 2022; accepted 8 March 2022.

This paper is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Intersecting matters: #GeorgeFloyd and #COVID19
by Jenny L. Davis and Tony P. Love.
First Monday, volume 27, number 4 (April 2022).
doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i4.12581