

Image, Race, and Rhetoric: The Contention for Visual Space on Twitter

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This study examines photographs associated with the Twitter hashtag “ifiweregunneddown” through the lens of visual rhetoric, concluding that social media users engaged in a protest against mainstream media by using images of themselves to reassert their identity. The study examines and discusses identity within the context of photographic media portrayals of African-Americans, including the historical Emmett Till murder, in which image played a key role in the national discussion over race. Data from this study was examined through the theory of the public sphere, suggesting that societal members use information available to them

to debate and determine meaning. Results found eight patterns in the photos associated with the hashtag: five were considered negative or undesirable, and three were considered positive or socially acceptable. This study also borrows theory from geography and the concept of contested space.

Keywords: social media, Twitter, racism, public sphere, public spaces, identity, contention of space, cultural geography, geography, African American, civil rights, digital activism, social research, stereotypes

Fewer than 24 hours after the shooting death of African-American teenager Michael Brown in 2014 by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a visual, rhetorical battle for the representation of young black men in the United States took place on Twitter with the hashtags “ifiweregunneddown” and “iftheygunnedmedown.” This was unlike the debates that were to come on social media in the form of verifying interpretations of what happened during the encounter between Brown and Officer Darren Wilson. This protest, the first in what would become many as an extension of a consuming debate on race relations and law enforcement, took aim at an historical theme: What do young African Americans look like, angry and potentially violent or high-achieving and positive?

The hashtags collected tweets from users who posted two photos of themselves side by side. Both represented stereotypes, one showing the user in anti-social, such as criminal, overtly sexual or aggressive postures, and one showing the user at the other extreme of socially acceptable, such as graduation from high school or college, performing acts of kindness, and similar poses. The hashtags were meant as a protest against use by traditional media of a photograph of Brown appearing menacing as opposed to a photograph of him in his high school graduation gown. Implied in the social media protest, which included thousands of photographs tweeted over more than a week, was that the media chose the more menacing photograph because that is the more popular image of how young black men are viewed by the American establishment, as dangerous and potentially criminal.

This study examines the photographs associated with the hashtags “ifiweregunneddown” and “iftheygunnedmedown” through the lens of visual rhetoric, a field of inquiry that argues images, specifically photographs and other physical artifacts apart from the written word, are powerful symbols for developing and negotiating meaning in societies. Data was examined through Jürgen Habermas’ (1962/1989) theory of the public sphere, which suggests that societal members use information available to them to debate and determine meaning. This study also borrows theory from geography and the concept of space as cultural landscape. In the context of this study, space is integral to the fight in the public sphere for identity, in which marginalized groups seek to change, reinforce, or otherwise influence perceptions of wider groups (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012). Race and geography can be examined through the idea of the contention of space (Fry, 1998): space on a bus, space in a classroom, space at a lunch counter or space on Twitter. The digital space on Twitter, as well as the metaphorical space on media and social media sites, can be analyzed, deconstructed and examined (Chaudhry, 2015; Neely & Samura, 2011). This is a significant stream of research that seeks to draw together concepts related to social media technology, how it is used by marginalized groups seeking change, and traditional media.

This study extends the growing and important field of inquiry that addresses hashtag activism, which seeks to examine social media as overlapping networks of people using technology and messaging to spur cultural and political change (Jackson &

Banaszczyk, 2016; Stache, 2015). As the digital world consumes evermore time, attention, and energy of the public (Cohen, 2017), scholarship that examines how this dynamic works in culture and society becomes vital for better understanding power structures, influence in the public sphere, communication effects, and other matters.

The authors examined the Twitter feed as it unfolded on the social media stream, with the purpose of identifying patterns and themes in the posts. The authors collected screen shot examples of various types of posts, and then collaborated on closely examining the images. The authors, too, sought to put the images within the context of the greater debate and the environment in which they were presented. The Twitter protest was not unlike the later, in-person protests that engulfed Ferguson as social justice advocates and others sought to occupy the public streets. In each case, in-person and digitally, protesters sought to displace and replace meaning. In the case of the specific hashtags, “#ifiweregunneddown” and “iftheygunnedmedown” the protest was directed at the mainstream media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, occurred on the afternoon of August 9, 2014. Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson stopped Michael Brown after receiving a call of a robbery at a local tobacco store (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2014). After a confrontation that began at Wilson’s patrol car and continued into the street, the 18-year-old Brown was shot to death. The Twitter protest began less than a day later, as the national media began to pick up the narrative that Brown was a teenager, was unarmed, and the fatal shots were fired well away from the patrol car where the initial confrontation occurred. Media portrayals of Brown quickly became part of the dialogue. In one instance, an erroneous portrait of a young black male with a roll of money in his mouth was used. The person in photo was actually a murder suspect in Kansas, not Brown (Held, 2014).

The shooting happened within the context of another heated national debate over image and race, the Trayvon Martin death in Florida (*The New York Times*, 2012). Martin, 17, was shot to death on February 19, 2012, in an encounter with George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood security watchman. In that case, one of the initial images of Martin was of a smiling young teen. This was challenged by several media outlets and conservative commentators who argued the photo was an inaccurate

portrayal of Martin at the time of shooting. Another image began to replace the initial photo, one where Martin clearly was much older. Image, though part of the discussion since the shooting, became a core part of the debate when President Obama told a national news conference that if he had a son, he would “look a lot like Trayvon.” Students at Howard University, in actions similar to what was seen on Twitter in the wake of Michael Brown’s death, launched a video campaign called “Do I Look Suspicious,” which focused on the image of African-American males (Rhodan, 2012).

These incidents are within the historical context of the Emmett Till murder, in which image played a key role in the national discussion over race (Whitaker, 2005). Till was an African-American 14-year-old from Chicago visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1955 when he was abducted and killed after being accused of flirting with Carolyn Bryant, a white female shopkeeper. Bryant’s husband Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were both acquitted of his murder. Till’s mother Mamie Till-Mobley insisted her son’s body, found days after his killing, be available for public viewing. Harold and DeLuca (2005) argue this decision and the resulting news coverage and photos helped change the national race debate from lynching being a Southern problem as an expression of white power to one where the black community embraced the ugliness of racial violence and used Till’s image as a symbol for national reform. Till’s murder is argued to be the beginning and motivating incident of the modern American Civil Rights Movement (Mace, 2014).

Theory

Theories of the public sphere and geography as a contention for space underpin this study. Jürgen Habermas, in critiquing the political situation in post-World War II Germany, built on the concept of citizen involvement in public affairs with his articulation of the public sphere. He concluded that to exist, a true public sphere must have several elements present: a public space in which citizens may engage; topics of discussion that must be of general interest to all (or nearly all) citizens; an opportunity for feedback, and – above all, in Habermas’s view – rational discourse that ultimately seeks consensus toward meaning (Habermas, 1962/1989). The public sphere is the mechanism by which public meaning is formed and changed, and by which the public influences the direction of debate through mediated agreement, or at least acknowledgement and eventual acquiescence, of

definitions and outcomes. Habermas' ideas have been evoked in scholarship from everything on a study of bumper stickers in an Israeli election (Bloch, 2000) to discourse on the Jerry Springer show (Lunt & Stenner, 2005).

Digital technology long has been the subject of scholarly examination within the context of the public sphere. In 2002, for instance, Papacharissi (2002) argued that the Internet held enormous potential for a revived public sphere, but that this would depend not on technology but on how the audience used the technology at its disposal. Other studies have suggested Facebook and other social media have expanded accessibility to debate, a key component of the public sphere (Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, & Agur, 2014; Douai & Nofal, 2012; Ndlovu & Chilombo, 2013).

A variety of criticisms have developed around the idea of the public sphere, most attacking Habermas's overly optimistic view of the sphere and his explication of how it *should* work, not necessarily how it *really* works. Many scholars, as in critiques of the First Amendment, have pointed out that Habermas's theory demands equal access to a debate of political equals. As political theorist Iris Young (2002) notes, this is an impossible situation. A society built on the ideals of free markets and individual merit, both in theory and practice, must necessarily provide more freedom for some than for others. For instance, scholars Wahl-Jorgensen and Galperin (2000) have argued for governmental regulation of the American newspaper based on Habermas's ideas of equal access to public debate. They note that the newspaper owner has no legal requirement to permit voices into her publication other than those with which she agrees. The result, they contend, is a stunted debate without real alternatives. Media scholar James Curran (1997) issued a particularly withering critique of Habermas's prescriptive ideas, arguing he failed to take into account how power moves through institutions and societies, particularly what he termed the apparent collusion between government and industrial interests. Habermas later acknowledged the shortcomings of the metaphor, but he has continued to argue in favor of the structural and theoretical elements of the public sphere as the preferred arena for determining meaning (Habermas & Derrida, 2003).

The theory of the public sphere can be used to examine the ideas of debate that goes toward meaning. Theories of geography and cultural landscapes help explain the environment in which that debate takes place, as well as content that goes toward

defining that space. Since the mid-1980s, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the study of cultural geography. The post-modernist influence on geographic ideas and the way researchers examine space have expanded the parameters of what is defined by traditional geography. Geographic research before this shift looked at the physical and cultural aspects of people in their environments. The idea of social construction, or post-modernism, implies that "all aspects of human beings are socially constructed" and therefore, can be examined. Culture and race are part of that construction and can be examined analytically and critically, with topics including racism, identity, gender, political beliefs, and many others. Post-modernist thought has expanded not only the subject matter of what can be researched with regards to space, but also the way in which researchers apply specific theories and ideas of space, race, gender, and other less physical traits (Kobayashi, 2004).

Geographer Don Mitchell (2000) breaks down space as physical attributes, places where scenes transpire. Space can be a home, a street, a suburban neighborhood, a city block, or a region. It also can be broken up by culture, as in a cultural landscape, which can be examined through many different forms. For instance, the photographs on Twitter can be looked at as a landscape, which can be analyzed and discussed geographically. Mitchell explains that culture can mean many things to many people. It can "signify a 'total way of life' of a people, encompassing language, dress, food habits, music, housing styles, religion, family structures, and, most importantly, value" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 13). This study uses the definition of the cultural landscape as the stage in which the photographs published on *Twitter* become the text, which can be examined and explored.

As Tyner (2006) explains, "Geography, as the study of space, is well positioned to contribute to an understanding of racism and other forms of injustice (p. 5)." It "is concerned with the forwarding of 'alternative' geographies, of transformed spaces (p. 8)." In his study, Tyner described the Civil Rights movement as a "series of crucial civil, political, social, and economic battles" and defined black radicalism as the remaking of those spaces. He argued black radicals differentiated between "segregated spaces" and "separate spaces," and the solution was not integration but the elimination of segregation (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Images on Twitter can be considered as "transformed space."

Nayak (2011) argues for “an appreciation of the different lines of enquiry and the possibilities for an enhanced intersectionality between what is loosely defined as the ‘social’ and ‘cultural (p. 549).” This means examining and researching topics and issues that are “socially responsible and culturally theorized.” By exploring the non-physical and less traditional geographies of race, Nayak suggests that these ideas can be valuable, “in as much as the concept of race is not ‘real’ but is given meaning to through effects, projection, psycho-dynamic imaginings and deep emotional registers.” He argues the need for social and cultural geographers to examine race more completely, “in all its impermanent and mobile manifestations,” while at the same time using the sensory aspects of effect, event and encounter. The photographs on Twitter fit into this paradigm. By examining and discussing the postings on twitter through a social and cultural lens, the photographs can bring together race, identity, awareness, and self-description within the larger context of contested space.

Visual Rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is a subset of the much wider field of rhetoric, which traditionally has focused on language as a way of communicating through symbols (Foss, 2005). Though images long have been important in the communication of meaning (Lamp, 2011), visual rhetoric began to gain prominence in the 1970s as the academy recognized the need to expand traditional fields of discursive study to include a wide range of human activity designed to impart messages to mass audience, including photography, music, theater, art, and other artifacts beyond language (Sloan et al., 1971).

The study of photographs as rhetoric seeks to tease discursive meaning from images (Foss, 2005). This has been used in a wide variety of contexts, with much attention being given to advertising (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Grancea, 2014) and the role of visual symbols in marketing, as well as politics, where image has been seen as communicating specific, persuasive messages (Schill, 2012). Like other communication, photographs as rhetoric can be viewed as expressive, such as digital memes (Jenkins, 2014); a representation of reality (Lumsden, 2010; Zeng & Akinro, 2013), and as specific attempts to influence others (Seo, Dillard, & Shen, 2013) in a wide variety of contexts, such as the labor movement (Tonn, 2011) and national culture (Hope, 2006).

Photographs in connection with news events mostly have been studied from the viewpoint of the news media and the impact of specific images on the public. For instance, Maurantonio (2014) argued a 1970 *Philadelphia Daily News* photo of Black Panther members being stripped-searched by police represented journalism's power to connect the past and present through "historic rituals of bodily trauma." Booth (2008) used news photographs from Hurricane Katrina to connect the ideas that news visuals are both an extension of the events as well as a force in shaping them. Van Leeuwen and Jaworski (2002), in examining newspaper portrayals of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, suggest how news photographs are displayed and selected can be representative of news outlet framing.

Images also are a powerful way to look at race, social movements, and activism, with researchers connecting visual rhetoric with protests as well as hegemonic reinforcement of the status quo through the media. For instance, Chidester (2008) studied the television show *Friends* through a visual rhetorical lens and found a reinforcement of notions of national "whiteness," while Landau (2009) connected print newspaper photographs to ongoing attempts to construct gay families as normal only when they fit into the heterosexual ideal. Thornton (2013) found visual media depictions of the March Against Fear in 1966, in which activist James Meredith was shot by a white gunman, as primarily an emotional exploration of the politics of fear, in which the white establishment fought against elevating African-Americans to a different place in society.

One way scholars have explained this contention connecting visual rhetoric with protests is through the concept of reclaiming identity, in which marginalized groups seek to exert their ideas and belief systems back into the public sphere. Merskin (2010), for instance, has argued that Native American groups fought to rename roads, valleys, towns, rivers, and other places to take out the word *squaw*, a highly offensive word to some tribes. The reasoning to change the place names "is not just a matter of politeness, it is an effort to reclaim indigenous identity and decolonize the landscape" (p. 345). She concludes the use of such historically insensitive descriptors is not only harmful but conveys the wrong messages to American society and the mass media. In other words, those who maintain control over the naming of places maintain control over the identity of a group and hold power over that group.

Media scholar Judy Isaksen (2012) used identity reclamation to explain African-Americans using radio an “unseen medium, [which] enabled whites to pass as blacks... simultaneously capitalizing—financially—on the beauty of ethnic voices while silencing authentic black voices” (p. 751).

Fighting for space, both physically and metaphorically, that is, digitally in this case, can be seen throughout recent history. Geographer Jonathan Leib (2002), for instance, argued contention for space in the cultural landscape in describing protests associated with the placement of a statue of African-American tennis star and human rights activist Arthur Ashe on an historic avenue in Richmond, Virginia. The controversy arose from both white and African-American residents on whether or not to put the statue among Confederate Civil War heroes along Monument Avenue. Although their rationale was different, neither group wanted the statue alongside monuments of “Southern heritage.” Leib argued that the debate was not just about the location of the statue but the importance of a “symbolic landscape centered on issues of race relations, identity and power” (p. 288).

Social media, defined by Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) as audience-generated content shared through a technological network, has been studied as sites for social protest with high impact with the Arab Spring in 2011. Lim (2012) argued that though social protests have been common throughout history, the advancement of a digital means of communicating and organizing allowed Egyptian protest leaders to shape message frames and build networks unlike at other times in history. In examining use of social media during the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protest, Penney and Dadas (2014) found that protesters using Twitter were able to create geographically distant networks that were able to circumvent images and messages disseminated through traditional media. Further, they found that Twitter users involved in the protest over perceived Wall Street excesses felt retweeting messages were just as affective and empowering as creating original compositions. In looking through the other end of the issue, Everbach, Clark, and Nisbett (2017) studied how traditional media covered the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown, concluding legacy media outlets tended to ignore the protest while those posting with the hashtag used Twitter in an effort to bypass the media.

Researchers, however, have just started to examine images associated with social media and news events through the lens of visual rhetoric. In studying President Obama's so-called "Beer Summit" following the arrest of an African-American Harvard professor by an Irish police officer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Patterson (2011) argued a photo montage of Obama associated with the event that made its way through social media streams was an example of "rhetorical abbreviation." He argued the meme was a rhetorical device designed to keep Obama captured in his place as a male politician and not an African-American. Patterson suggests, in fact, "the rise of social media as sites where ideological expression is populist, largely unmediated, and increasingly visual; therefore, the visually implicit message is in dire need of additional analysis and comment" (p. 450). Goodings and Tucker (2014), though not addressing news events directly, argue social media can be seen as representations of both offline and online actions, with the creation of images being one way to navigate the chaotic structure of social media.

By connecting the theories of the public sphere and rhetorical, geographical contention for space, the following research questions were developed to guide this study of images associated with the hashtag #ifiweregunneddown:

RQ1. What themes can be identified in the photos posted to Twitter associated with the hashtag #ifiweregunneddown?

RQ2. What characteristics of the postings could indicate a contention for space in the media?

RQ3. How were the photos connected and contested in the debate over meaning, and in this case, what do black youth look like in the public sphere?

METHODS

The methodology used in this study employs author Rose's (2012) "compositional interpretation," which calls for the examination of images through several components, including content, color, spatial organization, light, and expressive content (p. 58). The method's strength is that it demands a close reading of the image, itself. The disadvantage, as Rose points out, is that it has the potential to describe images without consideration to social and environmental practices of visual imagery, that is, where and how the images appear and possible meanings beyond the immediately visual. Rice (2004)

makes this argument by suggesting visual rhetoric methods should include elements of post-modern critical analysis, in which images are seen as constructed rather than reflections of reality, per se. In this, Rice echoes Foss (1994) in her foundational examination of images as meaning rather than representations of provable fact. This study combines Rose's concrete approach to images with the later scholarship that references reading the images for context and meaning within a wider environment.

Composition and content are integral in determining meaning in photographs. The content of an image explains what the image actually shows. Does the image depict a smiling young male in a graduation gown in front of a large building? Or, does it depict a male figure holding a large bottle to his mouth drinking? Color refers to the hue, the saturation, and the value of the colors in the image. Spatial organization refers to lines, shapes and subject matter and their relationship within the image. Is the person in the image close-up to the camera? Or, can a background be seen? Light considers the type of lighting used. Was the image taken indoors or outside? Expressive content refers to emotions, both within the image and the reaction to the image. Is the subject smiling, frowning or indifferent? Does the subject look angry? Because many of these elements are subjective and may have alternate meanings, a thorough understanding of photography is essential. The photos will be discussed and examined as text.

In this study, the authors examined the images on the Twitter stream associated with the hashtags “#ifiweregunneddown” and “iftheygunnedmedown.” The hashtags were launched at the same time and users often intermingled them, with searches in Twitter for either hashtag often bringing up the other. The hashtags were active for more than a week, though the nature of social media is such that precise timeframes of beginning to end are impossible to calculate.

The stream ultimately involved more than 1,000 images posted over seven days. For the first two days, the authors each examined every posting associated with the hashtags, seeking to identify overall themes and messages. As they independently studied the posted, they digitally captured postings they felt were representative of messages being offered. They then conferred on overall themes. For instance, both independently noted overt sexuality vs. socially acceptable as one of the themes. They agreed on definition of what constituted each theme, such as sexuality being implied by manner of dress, facial

expression, and body position in the photograph. Once each dominant theme was identified, each author independently captured a number of images that represented the themes. The authors then independently grouped the captured images according to the themes. They then exchanged representative images of the themes identified and discussed what was represented and possible meanings, as guided by the theory and research questions.

RESULTS

Overall, this study found Twitter users seeking to challenge media representations in the geography of the public sphere by juxtaposing two extreme images, one in socially desirable settings and one in socially unacceptable settings. The hashtags “#ifiweregunneddown” and “iftheygunnedmedown” appeared to define the general parameters of the protest, with users staying largely within the overall message that traditional media tended to show those involved in violent law enforcement encounters in a single dimension, rather than the far more nuanced and complex range humans actually experience. This representation, the protest suggested, tended to be negative, especially when involving young, male, African-Americans who were the object of police actions. Examples associated with the hashtag were found spanning races, ages, and genders, though the majority were of younger African-American males and females. Though no specific sizes or configurations of images were noted for the protest, the majority of the postings consisted of two photographs placed side by side. One side depicted a presumed positive image and the other a presumed negative. The majority of postings were accompanied by short lines of text. For this study, the text was studied only as an aid for context and potential theme placement. For instance, if the text appeared to contradict the images or indicated the posting was designed to mock the protest, the sample was no longer studied. Figure 1 represents a typical posting. As with many of the Tweets, this typical posting asks only “which picture would they use?” with no further accompanying information. The left image is sexually suggestive while the right image is of the same woman in a graduation cap and gown. The graduation photograph, taken in the daytime with the sun lighting the trees in the background, is bright and cheerful while the sexually

suggestive image is darker and tinted blue. The tone and lighting in both photographs enhance the positivity and negativity of each image.



Figure 1. Typical posting associated with the hashtag #ifiweregunneddown.

In regards to RQ1, what themes associated with the hashtag could be found, this study found a variety of themes that represented the extremes of identity. For the undesirable extreme, five predominant themes emerged: sexual; substance abuse, threatening, silly or humorous, and negative stereotypes, which clearly were intended to be ironic. For the socially acceptable extreme, three dominant extremes emerged: academic achievement, well dressed, and admired occupation.

Each theme was associated with identifiable traits, designed to challenge traditional media representations. For instance, one poster created a dual image of herself, a tight shot of her face, with wide, sad eyes and no smile on the right, and a smiling, mid-range shot on the left in which she is wearing a cap and gown and holding her diploma. The right image evokes the culturally significant aura of the traditional mugshot associated with being arrested. The left suggests the equally culturally

significant but opposing aura of achievement and social acceptance. Tables 1 and 2 break down the traits of each theme, along with an exemplar post.




Table 1
Negative Themes and Traits Associated with the Hashtag #ifiweregunneddown

Theme	Primary image traits	Example
Sexual	provocative poses; suggestive gestures	 <small>Samantha (@samanthac) · Aug 15 If I were gunned down, which image would the media use to portray me? #ifiweregunneddown pic.twitter.com/19BZAG98 Reply · Retweet · Favorite · Flag media</small>
Substance abuse	drug use; alcohol bottles present; dazed expressions	 <small>Abba Crutchfield (@abba) · Aug 15 If I were gunned down, which image would the media use to portray me? #ifiweregunneddown pic.twitter.com/19BZAG98 Reply · Retweet · Favorite · Flag media</small>
Threatening	dress that evokes gang imagery; hand gestures; jewelry; weapons	 <small>Abba Crutchfield (@abba) · Aug 15 If I were gunned down, which image would the media use to portray me? #ifiweregunneddown pic.twitter.com/19BZAG98 Reply · Retweet · Favorite · Flag media</small>
Silly or humorous	props; masks; farcical facial expressions	 <small>Abba Crutchfield (@abba) · Aug 15 If I were gunned down, which image would the media use to portray me? #ifiweregunneddown pic.twitter.com/19BZAG98 Reply · Retweet · Favorite · Flag media</small>
Negative stereotypes	hair styles; dress	 <small>Abba Crutchfield (@abba) · Aug 15 If I were gunned down, which image would the media use to portray me? #ifiweregunneddown pic.twitter.com/19BZAG98 Reply · Retweet · Favorite · Flag media</small>

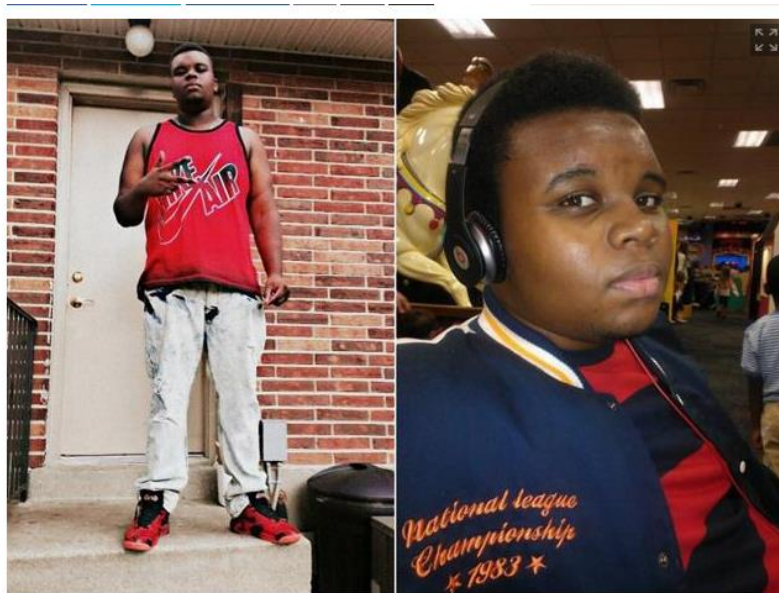
In regards to RQ2, what evidence could be found for the contention of space in the media, this study found a variety of indications that the posts were designed (as was the protest) to challenge imagery occupying space, or geography, as offered by the traditional media.

This is best seen in the way the photos, overall, were presented in similar frames, from similar angles, and in similar sizes. To illustrate this argument, it is necessary to briefly discuss the way in which some traditional media displayed images of Michael

Table 2
Positive Themes and Traits Associated with the Hashtag #ifiweregunneddown

Theme	Primary image traits	Example
Academic achievement	cap and gown; diploma	
Well dressed	gowns; coat and tie; smiling or non-threatening facial expressions	
Admired occupation	dress such as uniforms; instruments such as stethoscopes	

Brown, though a thorough examination of the practice is outside the scope of this study. This can be seen in *New York Daily News* coverage of the Twitter protest (Walsh, 2014). Figure 2 shows two of several images available to the media.



BIGMIKE JR BROWN VIA FACEBOOK
 Mike Brown's death sparked Internet trend #ifiweregunnedmedown, referencing the media's portrayal of young black youths.

Figure 2. Representative images available to the media.

The left shows Michael Brown in a position some would consider threatening. He is making a gesture with his left hand, is wearing baggy pants and a tank top revealing muscular arms, his facial expression is stern, and the camera angle is from a lower position. This is best seen in the way the photos, overall, were presented in similar frames, from similar angles, and in similar sizes. To illustrate this argument, it is necessary to briefly discuss the way in which some traditional media displayed images of Michael Brown, though a thorough examination of the practice is outside the scope of this study. This can be seen in *New York Daily News* coverage of the Twitter protest (Walsh, 2014). Figure 2 shows two of several images available to the media. The left shows Michael Brown in a position some would consider threatening. He is making a gesture with his left hand, is wearing baggy pants and a tank top revealing muscular arms, his facial expression is stern, and the camera angle is from a lower position. The environment is in front of a brick-faced home, similar to an apartment complex or other multi-family structure. In the right image, Brown's face is highlighted, he is wearing headphones and a sports letter jacket. The environment is an arcade or other relatively benign, social setting. The camera angle is straight on, rather than up. The left image implies, though subtly, urban, black youth, which has a connotation of threat and potential violence. The right image suggests a more placid, non-threatening social setting.

The images as displayed by the *New York Daily News* take up the same physical space, though they depict different types of range, a mid-range full body shot vs. a tight-range shoulder and head shot. The protest, overall, adopted the news conventions of using a similar size and space to offer audiences an image of the subject being reported on. In many cases, these adopted the middle- and tight-range shots. J-Lyn Tha Sanga, a hip-hop artist with 15,000 Twitter followers, offered a typical dual image. On the left is a close-up photo of her taken during the making of a music video (see Figure 3). She is gripping a pistol with both hands, wearing dark sun glasses, and the bottom strands of her hair are colored pink, all indicative of a threatening, anti-social environment. In the right image, is a full-body, longer shot in which she is wearing a blond wig, black dress, white pearls, and tilting her head in a provocative manner.



Figure 3. Typical Twitter dual image in the contention for space.

Further evidence that the typical protest tweets were part of a visual, rhetorical battle for space in the public sphere could be found in non-typical postings that did not fit news conventions. This suggests that while a few taking part in the protest were focusing on the underlying message of how young African-American males were being treated by law enforcement, the clear majority were engaging in essentially a media critique, arguing that different messages should be displayed in the same space provided by the traditional media. For instance, Figure 4 displays a text-based meme rather than images of human bodies or faces. If the Twitter protest were not one based in the idea of contending for space within media portrayals, many more variations would be expected associated with the hashtag.

The idea of using Twitter as rhetorical battlefield can be described as a racial landscape or a socially constructed space where categories and identities can be occupied, fought over, altered, redefined or controlled.



Figure 4. A typical meme associated with the hashtag.

Schein (1999) argues a “cultural landscape can be racialized, and a racialized landscape serve to either naturalize, or make normal, or provide the means to challenge racial formations and racist practices” (p. 189). The images and memes on Twitter play to this idea of a fight for control over how the posters are viewed.

In regards to RQ3, could characteristics be identified in the images that suggested a contention for meaning through the public sphere, this study found several such traits. While the themes explored above, such as the negative identity of oversexualization and the positive identity of achievement, illustrate the overall nature of the protest through challenging media representations, common characteristics in the visual rhetoric were identified that suggested a contention for what it means to be African-American. A typical posting, Figure 5, by a younger African-American male illustrates how the opposing images suggesting identity are designed to convey opposing meanings. They are:

1. Dress indicates societal identity, coat and tie vs. black T-shirt and off-center cap.
2. Facial expressions suggest inviting and welcoming vs. stern and threatening.

3. Hand gestures on the left can be viewed as threatening, while on the right no hands are shown.

4. The background environments, while subtle, are highly suggestive of differing environments. On the left, pale, cinder-block walls suggest prison or some other institutional setting, while the beige walls, exit sign, ceiling fixture, and door configurations on the right suggest a public conference area, such as a hotel or other venue.

Overall, the two images represent two entirely different meanings. The left suggests a young African-American male in an institutional situation, his dress and manner suggestive of defying authority. The right image offers, in many ways, opposite meanings, with the dress, environment, and facial expressions suggestive of rather than defying authority, being the authority.



Figure 5. Using image to suggest differing meanings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest an important interplay between technology that connects disparate individuals and groups and a public sphere where matters of general

concern are debated and discussed. In this case, the discussion was in the form of a visual contention for space, or cultural landscape, that served as both a critique of traditional media portrayals of young African-Americans and a reach toward a new meaning. The hashtag #ifiweregunneddown, itself, served as a platform for protest, offering general parameters for a cohesive assault against what was filling the space of many traditional media outlets. The protest centered on the historical theme of identity.

The protest suggests a dual message. The first is that what the traditional media report matters. This is unstated, but existence of the protest and the ferocity developed over a short time span argues for this interpretation. The second is perhaps a counter-intuitive argument that while what the media report matters, those most effected – young, African-American males – should be allowed to determine their own identity. By offering dual images of themselves using traditional news conventions of the mug shot and mid-range body images, the Twitter users, in effect, are arguing to be treated as humans not inanimate objects by the media.

This is reminiscent of Emmett Till's mother's decision to not only display the mutilated body of her son in public but to allow extensive media coverage, including photographs. When asked why, she implied the power of image through visual rhetoric: "People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying race hatred could be. People had to consider all of that as they viewed Emmett's body. The whole nation had to bear witness to this" (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 271).

Mamie Bradley Till was arguing, in subtle ways that could be seen decades later in the pleas of Trayvon Martin's family in the aftermath of his death, that her son should be granted the status of a human being, that his life should be treated with nuance, texture, and the range in which it was lived. She chose to do this by forcing the nation to examine two images. The first was a photograph displayed by the corpse of a well-dressed, smiling young man. The second was the actual corpse, itself, bloated and disfigured from being in a river for two weeks before being found (Harold & DeLuca, 2005).

At the time, of course, Till engaged the only technology available to her, an in-person appeal to the traditional media. What gave her appeal more power was the backing of her community, including relatives, friends, neighbors, and clergy. This was done in-

person and through the occupation of a physical geography, a church, that presented the media with a scene to display to their wider audiences.

As this study demonstrates, social media have amplified those traditional methods of protest and debate in the public sphere by allowing individuals with access to technology to not only add their presence but to actively take part through the creation of their own content designed to occupy their own space. This is more than amplification of traditional messages. This represents an additional dimension where the audience is not passive consumers of visual rhetoric but active participants, or combatants, in the dialogue.

Technology, in this case Twitter as a digitally-based social media stream, served as the delivery mechanism for messages, simultaneously confining the messages through its own rules of creation and expanding potential participation through the viral nature of followers following followers and so on. Yet, this can be seen as a far more organic process than the orchestrated Till case or even the Martin case. This is illustrated in the various themes associated with the hashtag, particularly those connected to lighter messages of silliness, stereotypes or over sexualization. The clear implication is an argument that African-Americans be portrayed as humans through the range of experience. Though the rhetorical device of extremes was employed, the varying categories of extremes suggest that identity should not be portrayed as binary, either saint or devil.

The fact Michael Brown's death came at the hands of a white law enforcement officer was not central to this particular Twitter protest. Law enforcement themes, in fact, were not detected by the authors, which they argue is evidence for the idea that the protest represented a rhetoric toward a deeper cultural meaning of the divide not just between white and black in America, but between the media and blacks in the United States.

CONCLUSION

Social media, as they have evolved, have become more than a distribution channel for information. It has become geographical, a space where ideas, comments, and images collide as society negotiates for meaning. This study argues a confirmation of those ideas. Overall, this study identified eight themes, five negative and three positive, in which

Twitter users employed hashtags to protest media representations of young African-Americans. The findings suggest the protest represented a contention for space in the public sphere over identity: What do young African-Americans look like, threatening or human with a range of experiences and outlooks? This is an important area of study. As social media become ubiquitous, the various platforms offer researchers opportunities to explore public dialogue in ways not before possible, leading to theory generation and new insight into the interplay between technology, news, the audience, and power for groups to assert control over how they are represented.

This study was limited in a variety of ways. The hashtag represented an extreme, racialized event that had caught the nation's attention and therefore offered a rare opportunity to examine how the medium was being used by an engaged audience. An examination in more routine times might have different findings. Further, no attempt was made to ascertain the potential effects of the protest. Additional research is anticipated that would seek to better explore how and whether the traditional media act on, or even pay attention to, such types of protests when directed at the media.

The methods employed in this study were adequate for answering the current questions, but the findings—as qualitative and based on examination rather than statistically valid empirical data—are not necessarily generalizable. Further research anticipates deploying varying methods to better determine the range of participation in such hashtag protests. In addition, no attempt was made to collect the demographics of the users. This is a potentially important element in any theorizing of the public sphere through the ideas of space representing a cultural landscape. If only certain elements of a population can or do take part in such a debate, legitimate criticisms can be launched as to whether the debate has any real meaning in wider culture and society. Future studies also anticipate a deeper examination of the images deployed in such protests. What do the selections of the photos reveal about attitudes toward stereotype and bias, in either direction?

Overall, the authors argue this study helps inform broader discussions on the potential impact of social media on the public sphere. By using the lens of geography associated with the concept of cultural landscapes, scholars can explore a wide range of implications for networked technology. In this case, the authors explored a textured

environment where protesters argued for a displacement of messages within the space offered by the traditional media. This argument reached toward new meanings for the identity of African-Americans.

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