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## **Forging Collective Identities on Social Networking Sites: Effects of Facebook on Discourse in the #Free21Savage Campaign**

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**Forging Collective Identities on Social Networking Sites: Effects of Facebook on Discourse in  
the #Free21Savage Campaign**

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# **Forging Collective Identities on Social Networking Sites: Effects of Facebook on Discourse in the #Free21Savage Campaign**

## **Introduction**

On February 3, 2019, She'yaa Bin Abraham-Joseph, better known under his stage name 21Savage, was arrested by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). 21Savage's visa had expired in 2006, one year after he came to the United States of America (USA) with his mother at the age of twelve. Presently a well-known rapper and songwriter, his arrest swiftly spawned attention among numerous celebrities, various human rights organizations, and, most notably, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM claimed that the motivation for the detainment of 21Savage had a racist background (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). Co-founder of the BLM movement Patrisse Cullors started the campaign #Free21Savage, to raise awareness of the unfair treatment of 21Savage, calling on elected officials to "investigate the excessive force and abuse ICE uses against immigrants" (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). Herewith, BLM incorporated the issue of immigration into their agenda by launching the campaign, which was, to a substantial degree, organized online via various social media platforms. Therefore, the campaign #Free21Savage provides an intriguing case to study a movement's collective identity formation on social media.

The increasingly widespread adoption of new forms of digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) has significant implications for our political and social lives and various aspects of social movements. It is of utmost importance to study the notable changes in our dominant media as "the sharing of words and deeds in an intimate and bounded setting forms the basis of our political and moral lives" (Frost, 2016, p. 272). Multiple studies that have investigated the relationship between ICTs and social movements have found that mobilizing structures are transformed by the use of ICTs (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Leong et al., 2019; Storer & Rodriguez, 2020; Tufekci, 2014; Turner, 2013; Young et al., 2019; Zheng & Yu, 2016). Consequently, the need for an explanation of the specific mechanisms behind this grew. One crucial mechanism was found to be the effect social media has on the formation of collective identities (Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Milan, 2015; Pond & Lewis, 2017; Stewart & Schultze, 2019).

It is widely accepted that collective identity and the related formation of common patterns of perception is a key feature and a primary goal of social movements and crucial to movement's outcomes (Benford & Snow, 1988; Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam et al., 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Thus, how does the use of social media influence the formation of a movement's collective identity? On the one hand, in the case of "My Stealthy Freedom", an Iranian women's rights cam-

paing, Facebook was found to have practical and discursive affordances for the formation of a collective identity (Khazaree & Novak, 2018). For instance, in this case, Facebook was found to provide useful tools for the framing efforts of activists (Khazaree & Novak, 2018). On the other hand, an investigation of the "Occupy" movement in Toronto, Canada, has found that social media facilitates activists in the formation of a collective identity (Milan, 2015). However, individuals take along their very personalized grievances and cultural, ideological backgrounds (Milan, 2015). Such a personalized collective identity is "experimental, conflictual, and multilayered" (Milan, 2015, p. 6-7). Here, a collective identity is certainly forged over social media but is short-lived and may therefore fail to foster long-term collective action, which is necessary to achieve certain policy outcomes (Milan, 2015, Tufekci, 2014).

This study will contribute to the understanding of the creation of a collective identity in social movements that rely on social networking sites (SNSs) to organize by answering the specific research question: How did the use of Facebook influence the collective identity formation in the 'Free21Savage campaign? Regarding social media as an actor and collective identity as a crucial feature and core goal of social movements, this study will systematically analyze the content of social media communications in the #Free21Savage campaign and its role in the formation of a collective identity. The following sections will introduce the main concepts of this study and provide an overview of existing literature on the relationship between social media and collective identity. Then we will turn to the empirical study of communication on Facebook and then present the results, followed by the conclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the following section, I will first discuss the concept of collective identity and its discursive turn. Then, collective identity will be operationalized by introducing three collective action framing tasks and three spheres of negotiated meaning-making. Second, social media, or more precisely, SNSs and Facebook, will be conceptualized, and the argument will be presented that social media are actors, rather than solely tools. Third, existing literature regarding the relationship between social media and collective identity will be reviewed critically to see what aspects of this relationship have already been investigated and where potential gaps exist. In all, these three parts will provide the rationale and guide the expectations of this study.

### **Collective Identity and Social Movements**

Collective identity defined as an "individual's cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285) is taken into account by social movement scholars to explain why collective actors come into being

when they do and why actors participate in the absence of selective incentives (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Further, its study aids in comprehending the cultural effects of social movements that lie outside the formal political sphere (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). The above-cited definition of collective identity by Polletta and Jasper (2001) is prominent and provides a valuable foundation, but the process of the social construction of collective identity does not factor sufficiently in this definition (Coretti & Pica, 2015). The constructivist and discursive nature of collective identity will be discussed in more detail below.

The importance of collective identities is not solely acknowledged in the social sciences but also by activists themselves. Shaping collective identity is an interactive and shared process (Milan, 2015), but it is also increasingly becoming a strategy and a primary movement goal for social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000). The upcoming section will focus on the discursive nature of collective identity by elaborating on the mechanisms of meaning-making and collective identity construction through discourse.

### **The social practice of constructing Collective Identities**

This paper adopts a constructivist approach to the formation of collective identity. Collective identities are mediated, constituted, and reconstituted via various discursive practices (Georgalou, 2017). Discourse can be seen as "language as social practice" (Georgalou, 2017, p. 12) or "mediated action" (Steinberg, 1998 p. 853). It is the social practice of meaning production and is essentially dialogic in that it is the interindividual product of communications (Steinberg, 1998). The roots of the construction of a collective identity through discourse are therefore to be found not within but between us (Steinberg, 1998).

Interaction and discussion are the grounds and means for constructing collective identities (Coretti & Pica, 2015). In an online environment, characterized by the absence of audio-visual contexts, textual information and words become crucial (Benwell & Stokoe, 2013). The situational context differs between online and offline communications. However, this paper follows Barton and Lee's argumentation (Barton & Lee, 2013) that the essence of identities forged online or offline does not differ substantially. For one, all our interactions take place through discourse. In an online environment, we type and post instead of talking identities into being (Georgalou, 2017). Second, identities are often the product of a combination of online and offline discourse, so they cannot be distinguished definitely (Barton & Lee, 2013).

Regarding collective identities as products of discourse allows us to analytically investigate the communication streams between participants and draw meaningful conclusions about the formation of collective identities from the form and content of these communications. In order to do

this, the upcoming section will operationalize aspects of collective identity, keeping in mind its discursive nature.

### **Features of Collective Identity Construction through Discourse: Core Framing Tasks and Spheres of Negotiation**

Collective action is the essence of social movements, and it is widely accepted that collective action frames are the sine qua non of the construction of collective identities and subsequent successful collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Collective action frames are "action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 164). Collective action frames allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614) events within their lives. Simply put, frames aid understanding and thereby guide collective action (Khazraee & Novak, 2018).

Collective identities are talked into existence through the process of framing (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). On an operational level, collective action frames are discursive processes such as speech acts and written communication (Benford & Snow, 2000) and cognitive processes such as symbolic activities that shape perceptions (Leong et al., 2020). Benford and Snow (2000) identify three core framing tasks, diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. These framing tasks are seen to be vital to the successful production of collective identities (Benford & Snow, 2000; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Diagnostic framing refers to the process by which a problem and its causes are identified (Benford & Snow, 2000). This includes identifying the victims, culpable agents and drawing the boundaries of good and bad (Benford & Snow, 2000). Prognostic framing is the proposed solution for a problem, entailing the suggested methods to solve the problem (Benford & Snow, 2000). Prognostic framing processes correspond to diagnostic framing processes, as the identification of specific problems confines the range of reasonable, available, and useful solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000). Finally, motivational framing constitutes the rationale for engaging in collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000). This entails the development of vocabularies of motive (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Melucci (1995) identifies a distinct but related set of criteria that is essential for constructing a strong collective identity. Three spheres of negotiation are involved in the construction of a collective identity, a cognitive definition of the movement, active relationships with other participants, and the creation of emotional bonds with the movement's constituencies (Melucci, 1995). Subsequently, Coretti and Pica (2015) develop the assumption that the scope of communication is three-fold: participants need to "understand, interact, and bond together" (Coretti & Pica, 2015, p. 953). They further identify three preconditions for collective identity building: the potential for one-to-

one communication, solidarity among the movement's members, and the quality of the content (Coretti & Pica, 2015). These preconditions can be viewed as characteristics of communication, which provide the basis for the formation of collective identities.

Prognostic, diagnostic, and motivational framing (Benford & Snow, 2000) and the three spheres of negotiation (Melucci, 1995), further conceptualized and operationalized by Coretti and Pica (2015), provide valuable criteria for studying communication for collective identity construction. The present study adopts the concepts of the three spheres of negotiation and the three core framing tasks to investigate whether Facebook provides a suitable platform for the construction of a collective identity in the case of the #Free21Savage campaign. To do this, a more detailed understanding of the independent variable, namely Facebook, or more broadly, social media and SNSs, is necessary. This will be done in the following section.

### **Social Media and Social Movements**

As stated above, communication constitutes the ground and means for the construction of collective identity. Media play a central role in how societies have access to, perceive, and make sense of the world (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Literature investigating the effects of media on social movements has a long history (Zheng & Yu, 2016). The communicative side of social movements is being integrated to broaden social movement theories, and new communication technologies are increasingly acknowledged as having a significant effect on the form of social movements and collective action (Mattoni, 2017; Pond & Lewis, 2019). The relation between ICTs and media, on the one hand, and social movements on the other is a multilayered one. Many studies focus on activists as the main actors in the relationship and study how they appropriate and integrate media and communication technologies to further their cause (Mattoni, 2017). Theories from the field of media studies help to elicit the limitations of the assumption that only the active appropriation of media by activists is worth studying. In media studies, it is widely accepted that the medium significantly impacts the sender, the receiver, and the content and form of a message (Latour, 2005). Following a short conceptualization of social media and SNSs, the issue of the medium's agency will be dealt with in some detail.

### **Social Media, Social Networking Sites, and Facebook**

Social movements are increasingly using social media for various purposes, but the concept of social media itself is highly ambiguous and comprises a wide variety of technologies and services. As this study focuses on Facebook, which is a technology and a sociocultural arena (Georgalou, 2017), the specific classification as a “social networking site” (Elison & boyd, 2013) is more



appropriate. SNSs are networked communication platforms in which participants have unique public profiles, can publicly articulate connections to their users, and can consume, produce and interact with user-generated content (Ellison & boyd, 2013).

### **Social Media as Actor**

Social media and SNSs are "cultural ideological artifacts with an agency of their own" (Milan, 2015). Phenomena at the intersection of the material features of technologies and the symbolic nature of social construction are becoming increasingly important in the study of social media (Milan, 2015). Social media plays a broker role in many ways when it comes to meaning construction in social movements, and the increasingly widespread use of social media rearranges forms of social action (Milan, 2015). The algorithms that make up social media platforms modify content, as they profile users based on their behavior and the behavior of others with whom they interact and subsequently provide specific personalized information to the users (Milan, 2015). Algorithms thereby "provide a means to know what there is to know and how to know it" (Gillespie et al., 2014, p. 167). Since users may gradually modify specific layers of the interface of social media but not change the basic infrastructure, Milan (2015) goes even further to say that there is a fundamental power asymmetry between users and producers of social media and SNSs. Users are "trapped" (Milan, 2015, p. 3) in the terms of agreement as soon as they use a platform. The producers (often in the form of algorithms) not only determine how content comes to the users but may also step in at any time, taking on a role as gatekeepers when policing certain content (Milan, 2015; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

Communication on social media and SNSs is therefore seen to not only be influenced by users' interactions but also by the functionality of the networks themselves. Acknowledging this, it becomes possible to make inferences about the effect of social media on the content of communication. As stated above, collective identities are socially constructed through communication, on, for example, Facebook. Regarding social media and SNSs as actors, meaningful inferences about the effect of SNSs on the construction of collective identity can be made by investigating communication on these networks. In the upcoming section this paper will critically review existing literature on the relationship between social media and collective identity construction in social movements.

### **Literature Review: Social Movements and Collective Identity in the Digital Era**

Previous research has identified various effects of social media on collective identity and, therefore, on social movements more generally. This resulted in the formulation of multiple theories and concepts which guide this paper's expectations. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) find that a shift in the way individuals engage with movements has taken place, which is caused by the use of social

media. This leads them to question the relevance of the traditional collective action models and collective identity as such and to develop the concept of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), individualized orientations of people lead to a change in political engagement since the bases for engagement are "personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743). The boundaries of the public and the private are blurred by social media, and the basis of participation becomes "personal expression and recognition or self-validation" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752). Consequently, traditional group ties are replaced by fluid, decentralized networks operating through social media, and the construction of a collective identity by framing processes is no longer relevant for social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have provided a practical theoretical approach to understand social movements in the digital era, but two shortcomings must be mentioned. First, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) do not differentiate between different social media and, more broadly, ICTs. As different technologies and social media platforms provide a multitude of different services, they also provide different affordances for users and consequently also have varying effects on the form of contention (Milan, 2015; Pond & Lewis, 2019). Second, an in-depth analysis of social media is missing. Social media and the networks forged via them are not regarded as actors in their own right. It is problematic to disregard that content and infrastructure are intimately linked since this prevents further investigation of the deeper sociotechnical aspects of social media to explain why they have the influence they do (Milan, 2015).

Stefanie Milan (2015) introduces another concept that differs from connective action in three main ways. "Cloud protesting" (Milan, 2015) regards how social media shape rather than merely facilitate interactions. In addition, the relation between social media and movements is sociotechnical in nature and not merely sociological and communicative (Milan, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the intersection of "the material of human-machine interactions and the symbolic of human action" (Milan, 2015, p. 2). Lastly, the volatile, imagined, and empirically thick connective action and identity Bennett and Segerberg (2012) find do not justify the rejection of collective identity. Collective identity still matters. It binds actors together in an instance of organized collective action, no matter how personalized, decentralized, and fluid these ties are (Milan, 2015).

According to Milan (2015), through the use of social media, networks become more informal and characterized by short-lived, action-oriented clusters of protest. Generally, motivation for action is highly personalized, and social media use in the context of social movements subverts the term of identity encouraging engagement and deterring sustainability (Milan, 2015). A personalized collective identity is the product, and this identity is intersubjective, experimental, conflictual, and

multilayered (Milan, 2015). Collective action begins and ends with the individual, but this is not enough to dismiss the significance of collective identity (Milan, 2015).

On the one hand, previous research is of one mind regarding whether the increasing use of ICTs and social media impacts the construction of collective identity. On the other hand, the specific mechanisms causing the change and how to best categorize this altered collective identity are still unclear. This paper argues that the context matters. Of particular importance to the development of collective identities is the actual device, platform, and service used by activists. These differ substantially from one another, and the effects they have on collective identity vary accordingly. Therefore, the investigation of collective identity on Facebook in the #Free21Savage campaign should be seen as a starting point and basis for further studies investigating the effects of various other platforms on collective identity. Following Milan (2015), it does not seem appropriate to abandon the notion of collective identity in social media altogether. Rather, this paper seeks to empirically add to the understanding of how and to what degree collective identity can be forged through specific mechanisms on a specific platform, namely Facebook.

## **Methods**

This study's dependent variable of interest is collective identity, which is seen to be forged by three core framing tasks and by three spheres of negotiation, as mentioned above. Acknowledging that the use of Facebook, the independent variable, has an impact on the content of computer-mediated communication (CMC) permits making inferences about the effect of Facebook on collective identity formation by analyzing CMC in Facebook. To produce meaningful findings from the content of posts and comments on Facebook, a constructivist, discursive approach to the construction of collective identity is suitable. A two-step textual content analysis was done to garner empirical evidence for the presence or absence of a collective identity. All methods will be explained in greater detail in the following sections.

### **Case selection**

To apply the theory of the core framing tasks and negotiation spheres, as identified by Benford and Snow (2000) and Melucci (1995), respectively, to the online realm, a thorough textual analysis of content is necessary. For this reason, research in the form of a case study is appropriate. To investigate collective identity formation through negotiated meaning-making in an online environment, the case of the #Free21Savage campaign on Facebook has been chosen for various reasons. Theories on collective identity in the digital realm have been drawn from various "new social movements" (McAdam et al., 1996). Additionally, the study by Khazraee & Novak (2018) has applied the three core framing tasks, namely diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing, to an

online women's movement campaign in Iran. While the present paper takes on a slightly different approach, it extends the body of research by applying negotiated meaning-making and framing theories to movements focusing on racial injustices and organizing over Facebook.

BLM in its entirety is a very heterogeneous movement that has been active for many years and recently gained new momentum (Nummi et al., 2019). Instead of taking on the impossible task of studying the entire trajectory of BLM in regards to collective identity formation on social media, this article seeks to focus on one recent campaign of BLM and thereby seeks, by focusing on one specific example, to illuminate the process of collective identity formation in the BLM movement and movements focusing on racial injustices more generally. Campaigns can be seen as coalition-building processes, which further collective identity-building mechanisms in the broader movement (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). The BLM movement started the #Free21Savage campaign on social media and fostered great attention, and eventually led a coalition of prominent individuals and civil rights movements (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019).

The issue of immigration was first incorporated into BLM's agenda with this campaign. For this reason, it is relevant to see whether a collective identity was forged regarding this issue, as it is related to but distinct from the main focus of BLM, namely police violence against African Americans (Nummi et al., 2019). More generally, the investigation of collective identity formation in social media in the #Free21Savage campaign provides a test of whether the environment provided by Facebook is suitable for the construction of collective identity and whether members were able to use this environment to forge a collective identity around the newly integrated issue of immigration. Further, this paper investigates whether engagement in the three core framing tasks by a social movement focused on racial injustices and organized over social media can contribute to the successful construction of a collective identity.

### **Data collection**

Facebook was just one of the platforms that BLM used to mobilize for the #Free21Savage campaign. However, it provides various advantages for the study of collective identities compared to other platforms that were used, such as Instagram and Twitter. In general, in the absence of face-to-face cues in communication, words become a crucial form of cultural capital (Benwell & Stokoe, 2013). Further, expressions of identity on Facebook, or other platforms rich in text, are usually initiated more intentionally, selectively, and consciously than in face-to-face interaction (Georgalou, 2017), which adds value to the analysis of communication on Facebook. Regarding the discursive nature of collective identity, textual communication is the most valuable to investigate. Facebook is the most appropriate platform to analyze contextual information and investigate beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and ultimately collective identity because of its relative richness in text.

Various individuals were using the hashtag #Free21Savage, and support was garnered from various organizations. However, BLM was the first organization to post the hashtag #Free21Savage, which became very prominent, and BLM ultimately led the coalition of various organizations (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). In addition, the official Facebook page of the BLM movement accumulated much attention, as BLM is currently a prominent movement in the USA and around the world (Nummi et al., 2019). All these reasons provide the rationale for why a post on the official Facebook page of BLM was chosen for this study.

The present study investigates the comments on one status update, also called a "post", from February 4, 2019, one day after 21Savage was incarcerated. The post did not contain much information, only the hashtag and a link to a petition. All Facebook users could comment on the public post and respond to other comments, called "replies". 718 comments were posted in a time frame of two years. Even though 21Savage was released about three weeks after he got detained, the discussions about immigration went on for two years. The instance of the detainment of 21Savage sparked the discussion about the situation of African American asylum seekers. As this led BLM to integrate the issue into its agenda, the discussion has relevance beyond the specific instance of the detainment of 21Savage. The comments will be analyzed independently through a two-step content analysis, which will be explained below.

## **Research design**

As mentioned above, collective identity is "mediated, constituted, and reconstituted, via the varied discursive practices in which we participate" (Georgalou, 2017, p. 12). The process of the formation of a collective identity is influenced by the medium used for communication (Milan, 2015). To measure the presence or absence of collective identity on Facebook, it is necessary to study the content of the discourse held on Facebook in the comments of BLM's post in the #Free21Savage campaign. The systematic textual content analysis provides an unobtrusive way of data collection and allows us to analyze peoples' perceptions and attitudes (Halperin & Heath, 2016). Analyzing Facebook comments will be done by using a two-step content analysis. The first part will regard characteristics of the communication in the comments in a quantitative manner, and the second part will qualitatively investigate specific comments and search for the three core framing tasks. Combining these two methods makes it possible to get a comprehensive picture of the communication in the comments and see if Facebook allows its users to form a collective identity through communication via comments.

### ***Step one: Three characteristics of spheres of negotiation***

The first step of the content analysis follows the methodology put forward by Coretti and Pica (2015). Grouping, or coding, content according to the three main dimensions of collective identity as put forward by Melucci (1995), namely the cognitive, the emotional, and the interactional dimension, permits drawing inferences about the characteristics of the communication in Facebook (Coretti & Pica, 2015). As stated above, if the environment does not allow the formation of these three dimensions, a strong collective identity cannot develop (Coretti & Pica, 2015). Simply put, communication platforms must allow users to understand, interact, and bond (Coretti & Pica, 2015).

Two preliminary steps are done to make the body of data suitable for content analysis. First, all comments that did not contain any text were excluded. Second, comments that were created by non-human agents and consisted of advertisements were excluded. It must be acknowledged that content produced by bots may have an impact on users and the content. However, for the present study, content produced by humans is deemed more important for the formation of collective identities.

The first characteristic considered necessary for constructing a collective identity is whether a dialogic or trialectic nature characterizes communication among users. This investigates if users only respond to BLMs status update or if they also engage in conversations with each other. Some comments contain text, and therefore qualify for the content analysis but are entirely unrelated to the topic of either the administrator's post or other comments. These comments were coded as "unrelated". The remaining comments were coded as "status-related" if they only responded to the main post and "discussion-related" if they also engaged in discussions with other users. Flanagin et al. (2006) find that trialectic communication promotes collective identities with strong ties, while dialogic and top-down communication only promotes affiliative ties.

The second characteristic relevant for this study regards the levels of approval towards the leadership and the campaign. Investigating if and to what degree users approve of the campaign allows drawing conclusions about the unity, cohesion, and levels of polarization inside the movement's campaign (Coretti & Pica, 2015). Comments were thus coded as "favorable", "unfavorable", "neutral", and "favorable to the movement but unfavorable to the campaign". The last classification was added out of necessity, as in this specific campaign, numerous comments approved of the BLM movement more generally but were opposed to the campaign #Free21Savage.

The third and final step of this initial stage of content analysis regards the quality of contribution to the discourse in the comments. Regarding the quality of content allows making inferences to whether a post contributes to an informed discussion or whether it merely expresses social presence (Coretti & Pica). Two indicators guided the coding of comments regarding the quality of the

contribution. First, comments were coded as "instrumental" if they contained any valuable information to the discussion or "phatic" if they only served the purpose of establishing social presence (Coretti & Pica). Second, the length of the comments was coded, as extremely short messages are limited in the amount of qualitative and valuable information they can contain (Coretti & Pica). Posts were coded as "more than 140 characters" and "less than 140 characters". The 140-character limit was used as this is the usual length for other services, such as Twitter and SMS, which were, as stated above, deemed unsuitable for the study of collective identity construction due to their paucity of content (Coretti & Pica).

Together, these steps of content analysis allow for the assessment of Melucci's theory of collective identity and its relation to the technological environment wherein the cognitive, emotional, and interactional dimensions of collective identity are negotiated, as in the case of the #Free21Savage campaign on Facebook. The following section will introduce another step of content analysis to see whether minimum requirements of collective identity are met in comments coded as "favorable" and "instrumental" in the first part.

### ***Step two: Three core framing tasks***

In order to analyze the latent content and the deeper meaning of various comments, a more in-depth and qualitative content analysis will follow the quantitative one. Findings from the first step of the content analysis may give insight into the general characteristics of the communication in the comments on BLM's post. To investigate whether there is some coherence as to the three core framing tasks in the discussion, it is necessary to analyze specific comments more closely. These are investigated to see if those comments which are favorable to the campaign and are instrumental - and thus are of high analytical value - contain traces of the three core framing tasks. This follows the assumption that posts coded as "dialogic" and "less than 140 characters", even if not ideal for forming a collective identity, may still contain relevant information on the three core framing tasks. Accordingly, posts coded as "phatic" or "unfavorable" are deemed inappropriate for the in-depth study of the core framing tasks. The analysis will be guided by whether users coherently identify the problem, the victims, the culpable agents, and the means to combat this problem. Regarding the final framing task, namely motivational framing, this essay's concern will be with whether the comments contain vocabulary of motive, such as a call to arms, so to speak.

The qualitative analysis of the comments will allow us to draw conclusions about whether the minimum requirements of a collective identity are present in the discussion on Facebook. Even if the characteristics do not point in this direction, there may, theoretically, still be the possibility of

a more limited number of comments that help frame the issue successfully and contribute to forming a collective identity. The following sections will present some background information on the case and then turn to the results of the analysis.

## **Analysis**

### **Black Lives Matter: Leading the Campaign on #Free21Savage**

BLM is a social movement that seeks to "eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2013). It was first formed in the USA in 2013 in response to the death of Trayvon Martin and the non-guilty verdict of George Zimmerman, who stalked and killed Martin (Clair, 2016). The movement is inclusive in that it represents a wide variety of American citizens and incorporates many themes and campaigns into its agenda (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2013). The #Free21Savage campaign was a response to the incarceration of the artist She'ya Bin Abraham-Joseph (21 Savage) by the ICE (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). Taking on this specific issue, BLM wanted to stop the deportation of 21Savage, raise awareness for the 619,000 Black undocumented immigrants living in the USA and "change the policies that impact other Black immigrants facing similar circumstances (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). BLM garnered the support of multiple celebrities in the entertainment industry, started a petition signed by over 500,000 individuals, and led the coalition of influential individuals and other organizations to free 21Savage (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019). Like many other BLM campaigns, the campaign was organized online (Nummi, 2019), over various social media platforms with the hashtag that is also the name of the campaign #Free21Savage. 21Savage was released three weeks after the campaign was launched, but the dire circumstances of undocumented immigrants became an important issue for BLM (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2019).

### **Arguments Revisited**

Forming a collective identity is essential for a social movement to reach its goals (Benford & Snow, 1988; Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam et al., 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Even though the short-term goal - freeing 21Savage - was reached, it remains an open question whether BLM and its members managed to build a collective identity around the issue of undocumented immigrants. The SNS Facebook played a major role in the discourse on this topic. The discussion following the post on #Free21Savage continued for several years, the last comment being posted 21 weeks prior to the writing of this thesis in May 2021. Discussed via comments and "replies" (i.e., comments on previous comments), the discourse cannot be seen as separate from the network on



which it took place. Facebook alters what the users see and provides a specific medium for individuals to communicate (Milan, 2015). So, were BLM and its members able to forge a collective identity on Facebook regarding the newly integrated issue of Black, undocumented immigrants?

## **Findings**

### ***Step one: Interaction, Levels of Approval, and Content Quality***

The first step of the content analysis focused on the characteristics of the communication on Facebook regarding relationships between users, levels of approval, and quality of the content. The two preliminary steps, excluding comments without text and spam comments, resulted in the exclusion of 213 comments. From the initial 731 comments, 22.85% only included pictures, links, or emojis. Another 1.64% was spam content, mostly advertisements. This leaves us with 518 comments for further content analysis. For the purposes of the analysis to follow, these 518 comments will be treated as constituting 100% of the data set.

The first step in this analysis considered whether comments responded only to a post from the BLM administrators (i.e., dialogic) or if they engaged in trialogic discussions, that is, engagement between the users themselves. 27 comments (5.21%) were coded as "unrelated". The content of these comments did not relate to other comments or posts in any way. These included, for example, a discussion that erupted about the band The Beatles. 292 comments (56.37%) were coded as "status-related". These comments did not directly or indirectly respond to another peer's comment. The remaining 199 comments (38.42%) engaged in a trialogic discussion, that is, with the main post and, more importantly, with their peers. Many of these posts engaged in active discussions about the issue of immigration.

The second step investigated whether comments support or oppose the movement, with two further, intermediate possibilities. 82 comments (15.83%) were coded as "favorable". These comments actively supported the campaign and the BLM movement in general. 233 comments (39.19%) were coded as "unfavorable". These comments openly opposed the campaign and the BLM movement. Surprisingly, 222 comments (41.86%) were coded as "neutral". Many of these posts asked questions regarding the campaign's background, and various others engaged in a discussion about the discussion itself. Interestingly, many comments condemned the level of hate speech and harassment in the comments. 11 comments (2.12%) were openly in favor of BLM but opposed the campaign. These comments mainly criticized the integration of immigration issues into the BLM movement, as these comments did not consider immigration a civil rights issue.

The third step investigated the quality of the content by looking at two criteria. An astonishing 301 comments (58.11%) were coded as "phatic". These comments did not contribute to the discussion of the subject matter. A majority of these comments insulted other users and used strong

language. Many more consisted of outcries of emotions and banal statements that mainly served to establish a social presence. 217 comments (41.89%) were coded as "instrumental". These posts contributed to the discussion in a meaningful way, and some will be analyzed in depth in the second step of the content analysis. Finally, 143 comments (27.61%) were coded as "more than 140 characters," and 375 comments (72.39%) were coded as "less than 140 characters".

The above findings point in a particular direction. First, as users may directly reply to peer's comments, the possibility for trialogic communication is given and is used by a considerable number of users. Beyond this finding, though, it cannot be said that Facebook promotes communication that enables the formation of a strong collective identity. Levels of polarization are high, as can be seen by the fact that many comments oppose the campaign, and the number of purposeless comments that use strong language is very high. The high number of neutral posts points to two things. First, many people were ignorant of background information on the detainment of 21Savage, and many others found the discussion itself to be more compelling than the topic of the discussion. Again, this might be related to the high number of insulting posts. Additionally, the discussion is characterized by short comments, further reducing the possibility of adding valuable information to the discussion and forging a strong collective identity. In all, while Facebook does allow for trialogic communication, it mainly promotes discussions with little value for the establishment of strong ties between users and does not promote the exchange of instrumental information. These factors point to the conclusion that Facebook is not suitable for forming collective identities and that no collective identity was formed in the #Free21Savage campaign. However, as mentioned above, those instrumental comments supporting the movement may still contain relevant information for the construction of a collective identity. This will be investigated in the second step of the content analysis.

### ***Step two: Three Core Framing Tasks***

The second step of the content analysis investigated whether there are coherent frames regarding the three core framing tasks in the comments coded as "favorable" and "instrumental" in the first step. In total, 57 comments (11.01%) are both favorable to the campaign and also instrumental. Diagnostic framing is the first of the three core framing tasks. It entails the identification of the problem, the victims, and the culpable agents (Benford & Snow, 2000). No unity prevails over what precisely the problem is. While some comments regard the unfair treatment of asylum seekers as the main problem, numerous other comments point to different problems such as the discounting of the history of slavery, police brutality against African Americans, or the privileging of White-centered viewpoints and historical narratives. Regarding the identification of victims, there is relatively more

coherence. Black people are seen as the primary victims, but surprisingly, an equal number of comments also see Black children as the primary victims. A majority of comments identified Trump and the police as culpable agents. However, various other posts also identified the media, ICE, and other government institutions as culpable agents.

Prognostic framing refers to the identification of how the problem, as identified in diagnostic frames, can be solved and which means to use to effect that end (Benford & Snow, 2000). Since there is almost no coherence in the identification of what the problem is, it is difficult to investigate this second step meaningfully. However, it will nevertheless be attempted in order to see whether any specific means are prevailingly viewed as appropriate. One strategy that was proposed is protests or marches. It is not explained why or how these should occur, but they are seen to be the primary means to tackle various issues. Interestingly, another set of comments, reacting to comments opposing the campaign, deem it necessary to change one's attitudes towards the issue of immigration. So rather than changing external circumstances, they believe it is vital to change individual's mindsets.

The third and final step is motivational framing. The results here are even more ambiguous, as there is no coherence in diagnostic and prognostic frames, making motivational framing difficult. The one recurring statement of motive is that the time for talking is over, and the time for action has begun.

Summing up, there is close to no coherence in the frames regarding the core framing tasks. The initial failure to diagnose the problem ultimately deems further prognostic and motivational framing meaningless. Therefore, even in the purposeful and supporting posts, a unified frame of the issue could not be established. In conclusion, there is no evidence supporting the claim that a collective identity was established in the wake of the #Free21Savage campaign on Facebook.

## **Conclusion**

The present study investigated collective identity formation on Facebook in the #Free21Savage campaign. The overall finding is that no strong and coherent collective identity was formed in the case of the #Free21Savage campaign. Building on constructivist theory that views collective identity to be a product of interindividual communication and drawing on insights from action-network theory (Latour, 2005; Milan, 2015), it became possible to tie the findings of collective identity construction through communication to Facebook's influence on the form and content of communication.

To analyze the comments and the effect Facebook has regarding collective identity, two theories of collective identity were drawn upon. First, Melucci (1995) stresses the importance of three spheres of negotiation, and second, the theory by Benford and Snow (2000) identifying three core

framing tasks. Interaction among users, levels of approval, and quality of contributions were analyzed. Additionally, in a second step of analysis, it was tested whether those comments deemed purposeful and supportive in the first step showed coherence regarding diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames.

In the case of #Free21Savage, Facebook did not provide the campaign with the environment needed to form a strong collective identity. The conversation was riddled with partially racist insults and senseless comments and was dominated by users opposing the movement. Therefore, the discussion was highly emotionally laden but of little substance. One possibility for the high number of neutral comments asking about the background of 21Savage's detainment could be the lack of information provided by BLM's post. Even though 21Savage was released and many signed the petition, it can be asserted with clarity that no strong collective identity was forged according to the criteria applied in this study. These findings have their limitations for various reasons, which will be discussed below, after naming some implications of this study.

The findings of this study inform the broader body of research of social media's influence on social movements by providing a specific instance where a movement campaign did not forge a collective identity. Facebook comments are inappropriate for engaging in communication that seeks to establish strong ties between users. Racial injustices are a polarizing topic in the USA, and communication on Facebook mirrors this. Even though this study did not investigate whether the increasing use of social media such as Facebook is partially causing polarization, it is safe to say that the discussion via Facebook did not help moderate or provide useful information to the debate. Rather, Facebook promotes a discourse, majorly characterized by insults, purposeless and short comments, and no coherent collective identity was found to result.

The first set of limitations relates to the validity of the present study and its findings. First, the general interplay between online-offline action was not regarded. For one, it is difficult to say how conversations about the #Free21Savage campaign on other platforms influenced the discussion on Facebook, neither is it possible to know whether offline collective action took place and in what way it influenced the discussion on Facebook. One instance has become prominent where supporters of #Free21Savage held an artistic sit-in on the night of the Grammy nomination (Easter, 2019). The effects of this and other offline actions and communications via different platforms or Facebook pages were not taken into account in the present study. Secondly, to increase validity and reliability, a second researcher should have coded the data. As content analysis is substantially interpretative work, double-checking the results would have provided an added level of reliability and validity in the findings. Thirdly, analyzing the content of written communication is just one level of approaching the study of collective identity formation in ICTs. Various other factors, such as Facebook protocols, which are not as easily accessible, could have been considered.

Further limitations relate to the reliability and generalizability of the findings. In general, the findings do not have global relevance as internet penetrations vary substantially in different areas of the world. Additionally, the platform-specific effects must be taken into account. As stated in the literature review, each platform and service has its shortcomings and benefits for communication. This means findings drawn from investigating Facebook comments cannot be generalized to other Facebook services, other platforms, or even ICTs in general. The sum of the present study's findings and the limitations mentioned above lead to the formulation of various implications for activists and suggestions for future research.

The implications for activists are that Facebook comments are not appropriate for forging strong ties and the subsequent fostering of a collective identity among movement members. While the use of SNSs may have various benefits in certain stages, and other ICTs may be suitable for this task, Facebook comments do not provide the appropriate environment for the construction of collective identity.

Implications for future research to extend the study of collective identity formation in ICTs more generally are two-fold. First, studies should investigate whether the present study's findings hold for communication in other social movements or campaigns. Second, future research must also focus on multiple other services, platforms, and technologies and their effect on collective identity formation. The analytical level should be extended to include the exact mechanisms influencing the form and content of communication. This necessitates the integration of information and technology studies into the study of social movements and collective identities. As social movements increasingly use ICTs for a myriad of purposes, it becomes crucial to take on the difficult task of studying the algorithms and protocols that govern online communication and interaction.

In conclusion, the present study contributes to the understanding of collective identity formation in the #Free21Savage campaign in the context of BLM in SNSs. Taking a constructivist view on identity construction, this study stresses the constraints of using Facebook comments to forge long-term, substantial and strong ties to movement members to conclude that Facebook comments do not provide an appropriate environment for forging collective identities.

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