(SOMETIMES) SPEAKING OUT: TEMPORAL ANALYSIS OF

INTERACTION WITH #DEFUNDTHEPOLICE ON TWITTER

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A Thesis

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by

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DEDICATION

To my parents and to Jo.

DEFUND THE POLICE
is the strategy

ABOLISH THE POLICE
is the goal

FUCK THE POLICE
is the attitude

-Kiwi Illafonte

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

(Sometimes) Speaking Out: Temporal Analysis of Interaction with
#DefundThePolice on Twitter
by
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Following the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, individuals and organizations began to discuss the perceived need to defund police departments and invest in alternatives on Twitter. While the Defund the Police campaign is rooted in a larger abolition movement that predates Twitter, the Twitter platform greatly facilitated the growth of the campaign in the aftermath of Floyd's death. This study aims to understand the development of the campaign on Twitter in the first two weeks following the death of George Floyd.

A sample constructed of top tweets each day in the two weeks following Floyd's death was analyzed using thematic, discourse, and sentiment analysis techniques in order to trace the development and contours of the campaign. The results showed a vibrant debate of the issue with several variables, including thematic content, discursive strategy, and sentiment polarity playing a role in which tweets gained top status at a given time.

These results show that individual user accounts are most often elevated as crowdsourced elites in the Defund the Police conversation. Additionally, tweets for and against defunding the police have contrasting characteristics, including on the level of gender presentation, that signal different points of emphasis for each perspective. These contrasts are rendered more visible through competing thematic interests represented by the two perspectives. However, similar discursive strategies are used in both tweets for and tweets against defunding the police, running as a common thread between the two viewpoints. Finally, sentiment polarity appears to be an important strategy leveraged by Twitter users in an effort to be heard.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At 8:27PM on Monday, May 25, 2020, police officer Derek Chauvin lifted his knee from the neck of George Floyd after holding it there for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, an act which ended Floyd's life, in the parking lot of a grocery store in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The entire event was filmed by witnesses (as well as being captured by various security cameras and police body cameras) and quickly went "viral," spreading through social media channels including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, as well as through more traditional media outlets.

The death of George Floyd galvanized online discussion related to policing and the state of police relations with Black America. Data aggregated from Twitter by Pex, an analytics management firm, shows that in the 12 days following Floyd's death, 80% of the most viewed videos on Twitter were related to Black Lives Matter, and an additional 10% were related to race and race relations more broadly. Additionally, "between May 25 and June 5, race- and BLM-related videos were watched over 1.4 billion times" (Blake, 2020).

In addition to the renewed interest in participating in the Black Lives Matter movement, the death of George Floyd has seen a newer online mobilization, #DefundThePolice, which can be conceptualized as a campaign rooted in #BlackLivesMatter, take hold and take off. Within two weeks of George Floyd's death, the Defund the Police campaign was mentioned 171,322 unique times on Twitter **(Figure 1).** Posts by popular celebrities such as Chelsea Handler (Handler, 2020) and organizations such as the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Lives Matter Movement (Black Lives Matter, Los Angeles, 2020) amplified the campaign in the days and weeks immediately following Floyd's death, and it continues to be mentioned regularly in response to debates about the role of police. While there is no unified consensus as to what exactly it means to "defund the police," (Kaba, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Taub, 2020), #Defunders fundamentally believe that
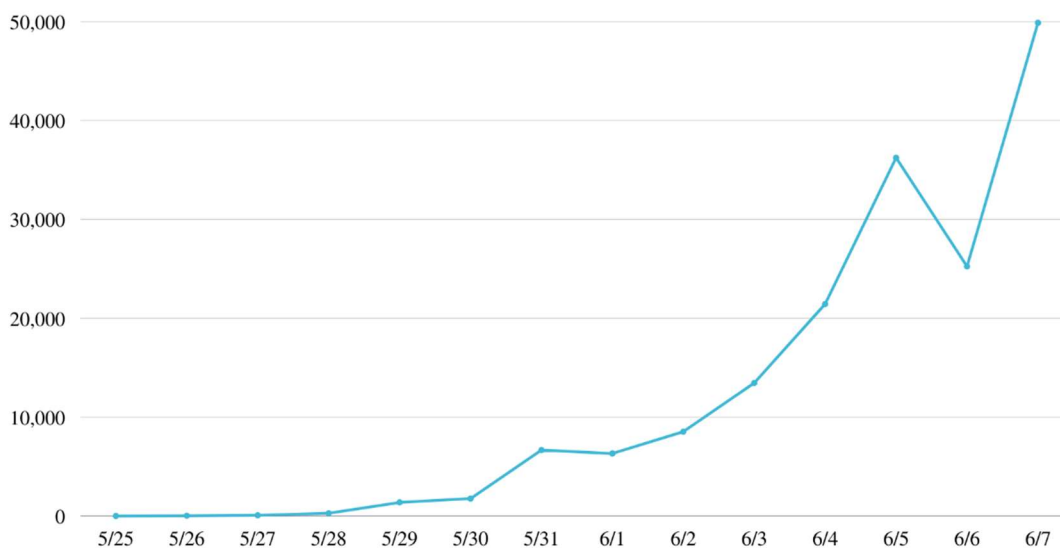
Figure 1. Total unique Defund the Police tweets by day.

government funds should be redistributed from police departments into programs and organizations that divert individuals from contact with the criminal justice system.

The sudden, widespread interest (positive and negative) in the concept of divesting funds from police departments can mislead individuals to believe that this is a novel idea. In reality, calls to defund the police can be traced to the concept of "abolition democracy," a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in Black Reconstruction in America in 1935 to denote the work that should have occurred following the abolition of slavery in the United States. Du Bois argued that the true abolition of slavery cannot occur in a society predicated on the exclusion of African Americans without democratic systems in place to equitably bring this marginalized population into the fold (Lewis & Du Bois, 2014).

Angela Davis, activist and scholar, later extended this argument to the abolition of the death penalty and to the abolition of prison systems more generally in saying that

> it is not only, or even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions. Although DuBois referred very specifically to slavery and its legal disestablishment as an economic institution, his observation that this negative process by itself was insufficient has deep resonances for prison abolition today. (Davis & Mendieta, 2005, p. 73)

In this same tradition, individuals who advocate for defunding the police, regardless of the degree of defunding they believe should occur, call for the reallocation of funds from police

departments to organizations and institutions that help individuals avoid criminal activity or contact with the criminal justice system entirely (Searcey, 2020). Just like Du Bois and Davis, organizations and individuals who advocate for defunding recognize that it is not simply enough to divest police funding. Rather, these divested funds must then be invested in the communities most affected by brutal and degrading policing systems.

In this sense, there are myriad examples of police defunding and reinvesting in communities. Programs such as the Oakland Power Projects in Oakland, California and White Bird Clinic's Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) in Eugene, Oregon (Jacobs et al., 2021; McLeod, 2019) encourage social workers and average citizens to rethink which situations require police intervention, as opposed to intervention by other emergency services or by systems of transformative or restorative justice. In the wake of the death of George Floyd, this defunding is occurring in Minneapolis; in 2021, the city of Minneapolis adopted a budget that reduced police funding by 15% and increased health spending by 19.8% from the previous year (City of Minneapolis, 2021). The use of #DefundThePolice on Twitter, then, is not simply a hashtag or a call to action, but it is linked to real, concrete actions and strategies being implemented by state and local governments to transform systems of policing.

#DefundThePolice, thus, is a key example of hashtag activism that should be studied in further detail. It is important to learn more about the various actors participating (and how exactly they participate) in the defunding conversation on Twitter to better understand how crowdsourced elites, which are "a hodgepodge of actors who became prominent network influencers" (Jackson & Welles, 2016, p. 400), are selected and elevated by Twitter users as a result of their defund the police tweets. This, in turn, leads to a better understanding of what makes for an effective, "viral" hashtag campaign that brings a controversial issue to the forefront of public discourse. In this study, I use thematic analysis and discourse analysis to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How did digital discourse about defunding the police change during the two weeks following George Floyd's killing, and what does this reveal about the shifting identities of emergent crowdsourced elites?

RQ2: What are the discursive strategies used by crowdsourced elites? Which strategies are most effective?

To situate my analysis, I begin by defining and discussing the public sphere and counterpublics and hashtag activism. Then, I discuss methods for this study, followed by presenting results. I close with a discussion of the study's findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND COUNTERPUBLICS

A study and discussion of publics and counterpublics on Twitter necessitates a broader understanding of the public sphere. While the public sphere began to be theorized and studied as such in the early 20th century, it was not until Jürgen Habermas' 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that public sphere studies began garnering widespread attention (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Habermas roots the critical concept of the public sphere in the historical bourgeois public sphere, which "flourished in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" and constituted "a realm in which citizens came together to form a public that, acting in an advisory capacity, debated the activities of the state" (Asen & Brouwer, 2001, p. 4). Stemming from this bourgeois public sphere, the critical conception of the public sphere emerges as a space where citizens can come together to discuss and debate matters of public importance.

Subsequently, researchers have pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere prohibited various actors--including women--from participating (Felski, 1989; Fleming, 1993; Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1988; Pateman, 1988). Habermas' historical account rests solely on the bourgeois public sphere without considering contemporary alternative forums for and modes of deliberating. These researchers assert that Habermas' theorizing itself suffers from a similar disinclusion of diverse actors; by conceptualizing a single, homogenous public sphere, Habermas overlooks the societal structures of power that privilege the voices of some over those of others. Thus, the public sphere is best understood not as a single, homogenous entity, but rather as a set of diverse publics.

This criticism has led directly to the theorizing of counterpublics. In a direct critique of Habermas' work, which was first translated to English in 1989, Nancy Fraser introduced

the concept of "subaltern counterpublics," which she defines as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). In other words, Habermas' public sphere should be reconceptualized as a "plurality of public spheres" (Felski, 1989, p. 155) representing various competing publics. Counterpublic sphere theorists also point out that there is a central tension present in counterpublic spaces: they are at once spaces to regroup and rejoin like-minded individuals which gives them a semblance of insularity and privacy, and yet they are still public sites where information is gathered and "arguments are...directed outward" (Felski, 1989, p. 167) with the goal of gaining support for ideas espoused by the counterpublic (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 1994).

The internet in general and Twitter in particular facilitate the formation of online, digital counterpublics. According to Hill (2018), the term digital counterpublic refers to "any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities" (p. 287). However, the formation and composition of digital counterpublics has been studied since the early days of the internet (Asen & Brouwer, 2001; McDorman, 2001; Mitra, 1997; Friedman & Resnick, 2001). For example, in 2001 Todd McDorman traced the online activities and strategies of DeathNET, the Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO), and The Hemlock Society, three right-to-die advocacy organizations which effectively used the internet and digital strategies such as listservs to generate discourse and mobilize activists. While the various campaigns created by these organizations were unsuccessful in changing legislation, they nonetheless brought a controversial issue to the forefront of discussion and debate. In one specific example, the Merian's Friends campaign, organized in Michigan in 1998, was able to use ERGO's listserv to garner enough attention for the right-to-die movement to get a proposition expanding the rights of the death and dying community on the ballot in November of that year (McDorman, 2001, p. 201).

Research on and interest in digital counterpublics has only increased as access to the internet has expanded. As of January 2021, over 90 percent of the U.S. population has internet access. Additionally, over 90 percent of those with internet access are mobile

internet users, and 80 percent use social media applications (Johnson, 2021). With the power and efficiency of the internet in their hands, these users have the ability to quickly tap into networked spaces of discussion. As a result, researchers have continued to explore the formation and contours of digital counterpublics, especially on social media platforms such as Twitter (Hill, 2018; Jackson & Welles, 2016; Kuo, 2017; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012) and, to a lesser degree, Facebook (Chan, 2017; Patil & Puri, 2021). In addition to tracing the formation of counterpublics in relation to a broad range of national and international social justice issues, these studies highlight diverse discursive strategies employed by the counterpublics seeking to advance those issues, including Facebook page jamming (Chan, 2017), hashtag hijacking (Jackson & Welles, 2016), and hashtag activism (Jackson & Welles, 2016; Kuo, 2017; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012).

HASHTAG ACTIVISM

Hashtags are composed of the number symbol, #, followed by a descriptive word or short phrase that allows other users to quickly identify the message as being related to a specific topic. On Twitter, the hashtag is a key mobilizing tool for racialized and feminist counterpublics, including the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements. Originally created as a categorizing function to easily and quickly retrieve tweets clustered around a common subject (Brock, 2012; Messina, 2007), activists have retooled hashtags as a method to widely circulate and encourage participation in discourse on subjects of social justice.

Studies have explored the use of hashtag activism across a variety of social justice issues, including African American rights (Hill, 2018; Jackson & Welles, 2016), women's and LGBTQ rights (Jenzen, 2017; Maas et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2018), and animal rights (Wonneberger et al., 2020). A common thread in these studies is the tracing of how activist hashtag dissemination occurs. Hashtags are formed, deployed, and disseminated through various interlinked communities on Twitter, joined through a common interest in a social justice issue. As ever-increasing numbers of users comment on or retweet posts using the same hashtag, Twitter's trending algorithm elevates that hashtag as a trending topic (Brock, 2012). This, in turn, allows the hashtag to reach an ever-broader audience, and allows for an ever-broader audience to join the conversation.

The true impact of hashtag activism is difficult to determine. While many researchers are optimistic, most acknowledge that hashtag activism on its own cannot effect change. Further, some researchers go as far as to deride hashtag activism as "slacktivism" (Linder et al., 2016; Skoric, 2012) --conducted from home with no real time investment from those participating and no real impact. Most frequently, however, researchers find that hashtag activism can be one useful tool of many employed by activists, which can be used to encourage offline organizing and activities that promote change (Christensen, 2011; Kaufman et al., 2019; Powell, 2015; Rentschler, 2018; Thompson et al., 2016). While hashtags themselves do not constitute social movements, they can contribute to them by garnering widespread attention for social justice issues (Jackson, 2016; McCauley et al., 2018; Yang, 2016). For example, in a study of Google search inquiries for metoo, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape before and after the uptake of #MeToo by actor Alyssa Milano and its subsequent virality, Kaufman et al. (2019) found significant and sustained increases in searches for these terms after Milano's October 2017 accusations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein. While it is difficult to measure how this translates to offline activities, it is clear that hashtag activism can spark interest in social justice issues and nurture information-seeking.

Hashtags can also contribute to social movements by elevating alternative, crowd-sourced narratives over those of traditional media (Jackson & Welles, 2016; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, for example, created by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman following his killing of Trayvon Martin, has captured and sustained the attention of proponents and critics alike because it rejects the idea of the "imperfect victim" frequently espoused by traditional media in relation to the all-too-often state-sanctioned murder of Black Americans (Hill, 2018; Langford & Speight, 2015). When these events occur, traditional media outlets focus on and report any misdeeds--real or perceived, proven or speculated--by the victim, signaling that these misdeeds make the victim unworthy of sympathy and justice. For example, after the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, the Ferguson police department released a video of Michael Brown robbing a convenience store shortly before being engaged by Wilson. Subsequently, mainstream media outlets "argued that they could no longer advocate for Brown's case"

despite the fact that "Wilson testified he had no knowledge of the store robbery when he stopped Brown for jaywalking" (Hill, 2018, p. 292). Online counterpublics signaled their rejection of this narrative by "the frequent usage of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in Black Twitter discussions" (Hill, 2018, p. 294) in relation to Brown's death. They have continued to do so in subsequent police shootings of African American citizens.

Additionally, hashtag activism can further enrich social movements by inviting participation and debate from a wider segment of the population than has been included in traditional social justice movements (PettyJohn et al., 2019; Rentschler, 2015). For example, in the immediate aftermath of the virality of #MeToo, Australian journalist Benjamin Law tweeted: "Guys, it's our turn. After yesterday's endless #MeToo stories of women being abused, assaulted and harassed, today we say #HowIWillChange" (Law, 2017). Here, Law is explicitly opening the #MeToo forum for men to discuss how they may participate in advancing the interests of the movement and supporting women. This call to action worked in mobilizing men, although much of the attention and participation garnered was negative (PettyJohn et al., 2019, p. 617). Still, this signals that hashtag activism has the ability to engage wide audiences and creates new and interesting ways to debate social justice issues.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND DATA

TWITTER API AND "CALLING" DATA

Data was downloaded from Twitter using Twitter's Academic Research Application Programming Interface (API). Twitter recently developed an API to allow academic researchers no-cost access to its full archive. This API allows researchers to "programmatically access public Tweets from the complete archive dating back to the first Tweet in March 2006" (Twitter Development Platform, 2021) depending on the search query used to request data.

Search requests are conducted in the API using search operators, which define the contours and limits of the search and data returned. Key search operators used in this request include those used to specifically target tweets about defunding the police.

SEARCH SUBJECT: "DEFUND THE POLICE" OR "#DEFUNDTHEPOLICE"?

In entering the query for this search, search operators were used to request that tweets using either the phrase "defund the police" or the hashtag "#defundthepolice" (or both) were included in the dataset returned by the search query. The purpose of including both possible search subjects was to ensure that no important contributions to the conversation were excluded. This is consistent with other researchers' work on hashtag activism. For example, in a study of the use of #Ferguson on Twitter in the week following the officer-involved shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, Jackson and Welles (2016) include both "Ferguson" and "#Ferguson" in their search query (p. 401).

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE CONSTRUCTION

This study was conducted using a purposive sample of top tweets. Purposive sampling involves "the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses" (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). There are several methods whereby purposive sampling may be conducted; this study specifically makes use of critical case sampling, which is "a method where a select number of important or 'critical' cases are selected and then examined" (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 3). The sample is a subset of tweets with the highest levels of engagement each day. Here, engagement means interactions with tweets in the form of likes or retweets. Replies are not included as a form of engagement for the purpose of this study because replies less frequently mean endorsement of a tweet than do likes and retweets. This is evidenced by the fact that Twitter has "develop[ed] a feature to allow users to moderate their replies" (Romano, 2020) as a form of combating harassment. The purpose behind defining top tweets as those with high levels of positive engagement is to create a sample of tweets with popular or broadly-shared views.

The sample of top tweets was created in a few steps. First, daily API calls were made from May 25 to June 7, 2020, inclusive (i.e. from May 25, 2020 at 00:00 to June 7, 2020 at 23:59). The reference period began on the day of the death of George Floyd and ended two weeks (14 days) after his death. For this sample, the API query included original tweets and quote-retweets (i.e., "forwarded" original tweets with content added by the forwarding party), but not retweets with no quote (i.e., "forwarded" tweets shared by the forwarding party with no alterations or additions). This is because retweets with no quote do not show engagement numbers for the retweet; they show engagement numbers for the original tweet. Excluding retweets with no quote ensured no such retweets were unintentionally included in the sample. In order to determine which tweets were the top tweets each day, a simple calculation of the number of likes plus retweets for each tweet (original tweet and quote-retweets) was conducted. This calculation yielded an engagement number for each tweet. After sorting by this number in descending order, the top tweets for each day were selected, up to 50 top tweets. In the first two days (May 25-26, 2020), there were fewer than 50 tweets each day. For example, there were only 5 tweets in the dataset for the first day; therefore all five tweets were included in the sample. This approach was also taken for the second day, during which there were 27 unique tweets. Every other day within the reference period had at

least 50 unique tweets. Upon combining the top tweets for each day, the sample construction process resulted in a sample of 632 tweets.

METHODS

This is a multi-method qualitative study drawing on thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and sentiment analysis to present a multi-dimensional account of the development of the defund the police campaign on Twitter from the day of through two weeks following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. These methods were chosen due to their inductive and exploratory natures, which complement the exploratory nature of this study more broadly.

Thematic analysis is an iterative method of analysis whereby the researcher links "different segments or instances within the data...by coding to a particular idea or concept" (Williamson & Johanson, 2018, p. 456). These ideas emerge as themes linking those data segments and providing a foundation for analysis. Categorizing and clustering texts (in this case, tweets) is simultaneously a process of data reduction and of going "beyond the data, thinking creatively with the data, asking the data questions, and generating theories and frameworks" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 30). More practically, thematic analysis is "a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible" (Guest et al., 2014, p. 15), and is concerned with presenting the voices of those providing the data as completely and accurately as possible. Themes are identified through the process of coding, which is conducted iteratively and with the assistance of a codebook created by the researcher, who "read[s] text in batches and modif[ies] the codebook as new information and new insights are gained" (Guest et al., 2014, p. 52).

For this study, thematic analysis and coding were conducted to identify whether tweets were for or against the concept of defunding the police, as well as key themes within those two broader categories. A codebook was constructed iteratively. During a first reading of the dataset, tweets were coded as being either for or against defunding the police. In the next reading, tweets against defunding the police were reread and annotated, and common categories were developed and refined. The same process of rereading, annotating, and developing common categories was then completed for tweets supporting defunding. At this

stage, the codebook was finalized and the full sample of tweets was coded according to the definitions established therein. Finally, a total of eight key themes were identified in tweets in the sample, four of which are found in tweets supporting the defunding of police, and four of which are found in tweets opposed to the defunding campaign. These themes were developed inductively, and more than four interesting or notable themes emerged among each of these two viewpoints (for defunding and against defunding). However, this analysis is limited to four themes for each of the viewpoints in order to provide relatively equitable coverage to both perspectives. Each of these is discussed individually, with special attention to the characteristics of tweets and the profiles of the Twitter users who write them. Daily frequency distributions of each theme by user account type are provided.

In contrast to thematic analysis, which is focused on identifying common themes and concepts, discourse analysis is "concerned with language-in-use; that is, how individuals accomplish personal, social, and political projects through language" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). Discourse analysis asks why a particular method of expression is chosen from among myriad possibilities. In other words, "our statements have specific functions and accomplish specific objectives" (Carbó et al., 2016, p. 367), and it is for the purpose of discovering these functions and objectives that discourse analysis is conducted.

Some researchers note that "there are no recipes" (Carbó et al., 2016, p. 369) for discourse analysis, but that "careful and intensive reading and rereading of the texts are necessary" (Carbó et al., 2016, p. 369) to identify systematic patterns of language use. Discourse analysis thus can be conducted using similar systematic steps to those used for thematic analysis.

Specifically, the data for this study were read and coded for salient discursive strategies. Similar to the thematic analysis process, discourse analysis was conducted iteratively, and additional entries were made to the codebook to code for discursive strategies. During a first reading of the data for the purpose of this analysis, the data were annotated and emergent discursive strategies were noted. In a second reading, common categories were developed and refined. The full sample was then coded using the definitions established in the codebook, and finally three key strategies were identified. Each of these is likewise discussed individually, and daily frequency distributions of each strategy are provided.

Sentiment polarity itself can be interpreted as a discursive strategy, one which can be difficult to code manually. Past studies have shown that "in discussion forums, people who use affective language in their messages receive more feedback than those who do not" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 223; see also Bail et al., 2017; Berger & Milkman, 2012), regardless of whether positive or negative emotions are expressed. For this sample, which is composed of tweets with the most engagement each day during the reference period, sentiment polarity may be an especially important strategy to analyze.

Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) define sentiment analysis as "a systematic computer-based analysis of written text or speech excerpts for extracting the attitude of the author or speaker about specific identities or topics" (p. 226). Sentiment analysis is concerned with both "the overall orientation (positive or negative) and intensity (weak or strong)" of sentiments (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 226).

Sentiment analysis was conducted for this study using the TextBlob library for Python. This library generates a polarity score within the range [-1.0, 1.0] for individual tweets, where -1.0 is very negative and 1.0 is very positive (Loria, 2020). These polarity scores were used to create daily sentiment histograms for the purpose of discourse analysis. These histograms are bar charts which plot the sentiment polarity scores for tweets by day, from -1.0 to 1.0. Sentiment polarity tends to cluster around 0, or neutral; however, an interesting pattern emerges when comparing the daily histograms.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

CHARACTERIZING TOP TWEETS AND TWEETERS

Of the 632 tweets in the top-tweet sample, only 191 (30.2%) use the hashtag "#DefundThePolice". The remaining 448 tweets in the sample have the phrase "defund the police" within the tweet, but do not use the hashtag. Of the 191 #DefundThePolice tweets, 188 (98.4%) are in favor of defunding the police; the remaining 3 tweets in this subset are against the movement.

Top tweets about defunding the police come from accounts in several international locations, but those that have location in their profile overwhelmingly come from the United States. Slightly more than half (n = 338) of top tweets come from users in cities in the United States, with the highest concentration of top tweets coming from the west and east coasts **(Figure 2).** Surprisingly, Los Angeles (n = 102) and the New York City area (n = 86) especially had many more top tweets than did Minneapolis (n = 21), the city in which George Floyd died. An additional 44 tweets come from users in locations within the United States, but whose location description does not include the exact city in which they are located. For example, 15 of these tweets come from authors whose location is listed as simply "United States", and 12 come from authors in "Georgia". Only 23 tweets come from users in countries outside of the United States, including Canada, New Zealand, and England. The remaining 227 tweets come from accounts which either do not have locations listed or do not have valid locations listed. For example, some users list fictional or facetious locations. One such user listed his location as "flavortown", and another user's location reads "Eric Garcetti's mentions".
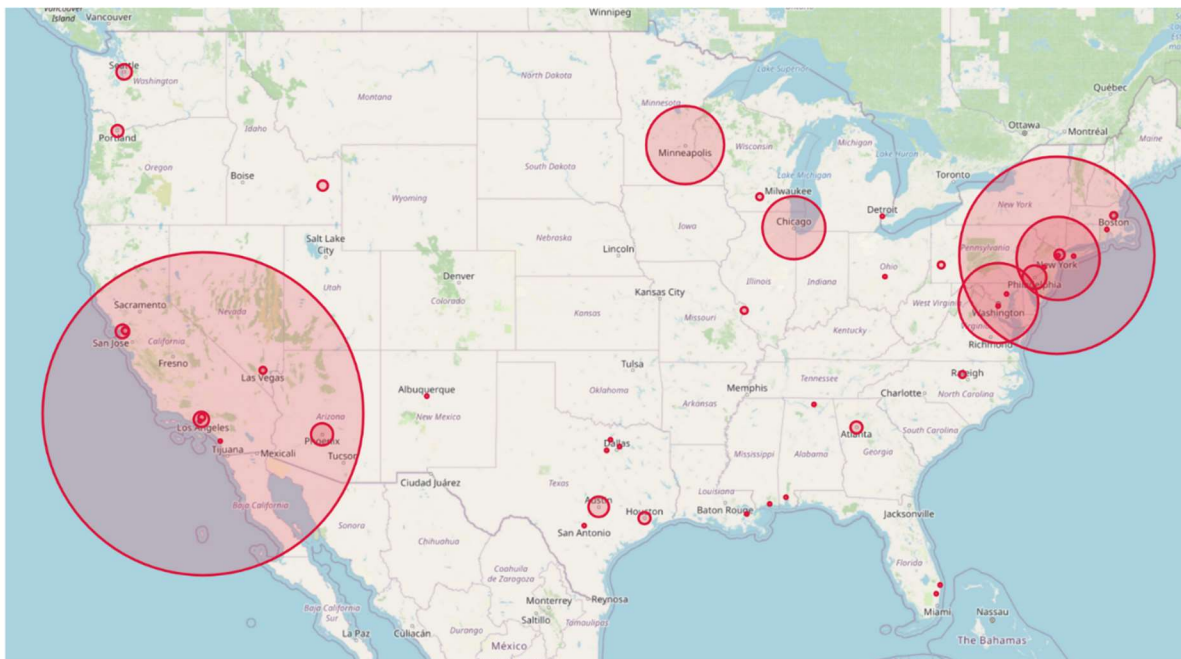
Figure 2. Top tweeting U.S. cities.

Of the 632 top tweets in this sample, 529 were identified as being in *support* of or *for* defunding the police (Table 1). Additionally, 95 of the 632 top tweets were against defunding, and 8 tweets had no bias towards the campaign. One such tweet, for example, reads "A lot of people saying we should defund the police." Because the author does not include himself in "a lot of people" but also does not say he is against the issue, this tweet was coded as being neither for nor against defunding the police, along with 7 others.

The distribution of top tweets for and against defunding the police varies significantly, especially towards the end of the reference period **(Figure 3)**. From May 25 to June 3, 2020, the top tweets each day are overwhelmingly in favor of defunding the police. Beginning on June 4, however, the number of top tweets against defunding the police begins to approach the number of tweets in favor of defunding. On the final day of the sample, June 7, 2020, 25 tweets were identified as being for defunding, and 23 were identified as being against. At no point in the sample does the daily number of tweets *against* defunding the police exceed that of tweets *in favor of* defunding, but the fact that it approaches that number is indicative of the controversial nature of the idea of the movement.

Table 1. Characteristics of Accounts Producing Top Tweets

Variable	Count	% of total sample	Mean number of followers	Median number of followers
Tweets for defunding the police				
Individual/person account	**421**	**66.6%**	**424,016**	**26,858**
Male	193	30.5%		
Female	195	30.9%		
Non-binary	15	2.4%		
Undetermined	18	2.8%		
Organization/Program Account	**108**	**17.1%**	**198,165**	**35,065**
Advocacy organization	70	11.1%		
News organization	13	2.1%		
Other	25	3.9%		
Tweets against defunding the police				
Individual/person account	**88**	**13.9%**	**1,216,267**	**489,424**
Male	71	11.2%		
Female	16	2.5%		
Non-binary	0	0.0%		
Undetermined	1	0.2%		
Organization/Program Account	**7**	**1.1%**	**849,888**	**1,252,714**
Advocacy organization	0	0.0%		
News organization	4	0.6%		
Other	3	0.5%		
Tweets neither for nor against defunding the police				
Individual/person account	**8**	**1.3%**	**170,970**	**11,641**
Male	3			
Female	2			
Non-binary	1			
Undetermined	2			
Organization/Program Account	**0**	**0.0%**		
TOTAL	**632**	**100.0%**		

Roughly 80 percent, or 421 of 529 tweets in support of defunding the police come from individual or personal accounts **(Figure 4)**. These accounts (individual, for defunding) have an average of 424,016 followers, and a median follower count of 26,858 followers. Individual accounts were coded for gender presentation. Note that gender presentation is not the same as gender identification. The nature of the data and collection process did not allow for self-identification of gender. Rather, a combination of Twitter profile characteristics was used to make a determination of gender presentation, by which is meant the gender identity an individual presents outwardly as perceived by the researcher, which may be different from the gender with which the individual identifies. Profile characteristics taken into consideration include profile description (a free-form text field in which users can enter a short description of themselves), profile name, pronoun indicator (a picklist setting that
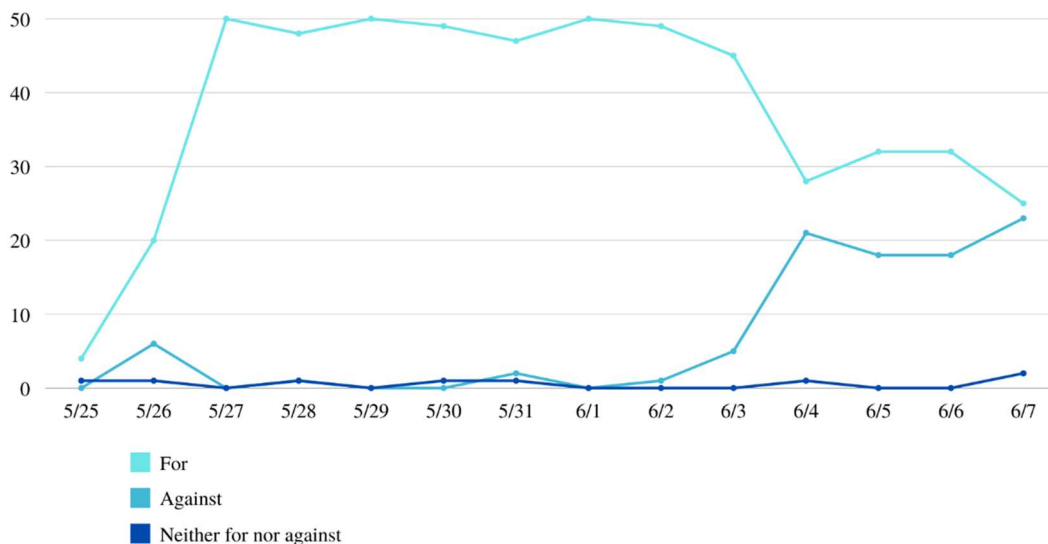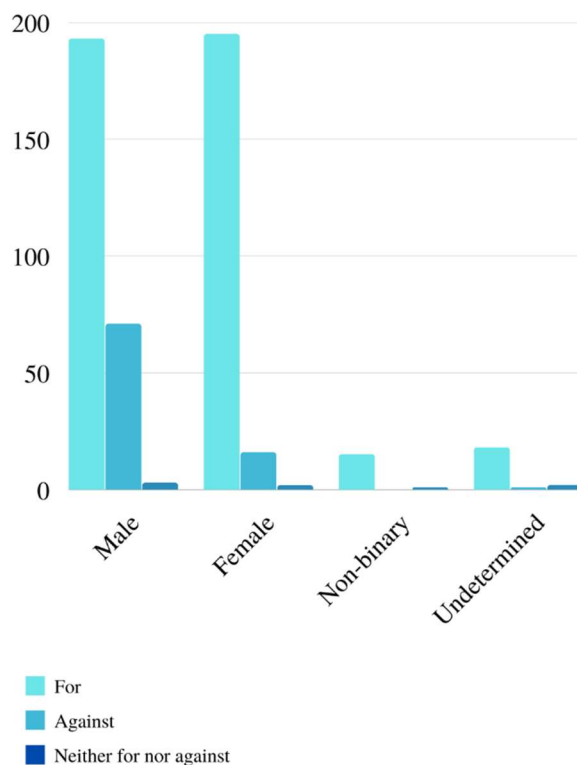
Figure 3. Top tweets for and against defunding the police by day.
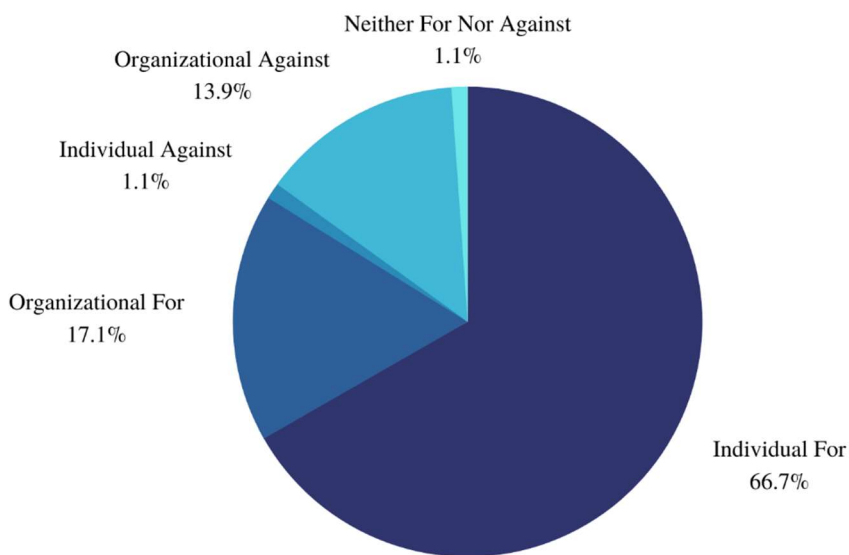
Figure 4. Top tweets for and against defunding the police by tweeting profile type.

Twitter users can choose to display or not display on their profile), and profile picture. If a clear understanding of the individual's gender presentation did not arise from a consideration of these characteristics, the profile was coded as "undetermined". Profiles coded as "non-binary" are those in which the profile description explicitly says "non-binary" and/or those in which the individual lists their pronouns as "they/them".

A nearly identical amount of top tweets for defunding the police came from male (n = 193) and female (n = 195) users **(Figure 5).** A much smaller subset of profiles tweeting in support of defunding the police are either non-binary (n = 15) or undetermined (n = 18).

For

Against

Neither for nor against

Figure 5. Top tweets for and against defunding the police by gender presentation.

The remaining 108 tweets in support of defunding the police come from organizational accounts. These accounts (organizational, for defunding) have an average of 198,165 and a median of 35,065 followers. These accounts were further coded for the type of organization (Figure 6). Advocacy organizations are those which advocate for a specific population or policy. News organizations are organizations whose purpose is to share information. All other organizations were coded as "other", a category which includes political organizations and entertainment organizations. The majority of tweets (n = 70) from organizational profiles in support of defunding came from profiles of advocacy organizations, including the national Black Lives Matter account (@Blklivesmatter) and several individual chapter accounts, such as Black Lives Matter Los Angeles (@BLMLA).

An additional 25 tweets came from organizations coded as "other", including political organizations such as Democratic Socialists of America (@DemSocialists) and entertainment organizations like Rolling Stone magazine (@RollingStone). Finally, 13 tweets in support of defunding came from news organization accounts, including magazines such as The New Republic (@newrepublic) and news programs such as Democracy Now (@democracynow). It is especially interesting to note that far fewer tweets from news organizations attained "top" status than from advocacy organizations and other organizations **(Figure 6)**. While it is not widely expressed in the sample, there are a couple of tweets that reveal cynicism towards traditional news outlets, which may provide an explanation for this lack of representation of traditional news. As one account highlights, for example,

> People are coming together to fix a broken system. The news are doing backflips to invalidate it right now. Remember that the system is designed to tire you out in times like this so just stay strong.

Another user tweeted, "That this headline could appear in the NYT shows that all the protesters have done is working" alongside a link to a *New York Times* article explaining the meaning of defund the police. These two tweets show a level of skepticism towards the role of traditional news media in the defund campaign, an observation which is compounded by the fact that no tweets from major news outlets, such as the New York Times, attained "top" status. It is possible that viewpoints other than those of such organizations are more important to the movement on Twitter. However, it is important to qualify this analysis by emphasizing that it applies only to Twitter; individuals may engage with the *New York Times* on other platforms, including the *Times'* website and phone application, in higher numbers than they do on Twitter. Additionally, this study is limited to the first two weeks after the death of George Floyd; it is possible that news organizations like the *New York Times* simply did not tweet anything that resonated deeply with users during the reference period, but may have done so subsequently.

Accounts producing top tweets against defunding the police have significantly different characteristics from those described above for top users in favor of defunding. Of the 95 tweets in this category, 88 are from personal accounts. These accounts have an average of 1,216,267 followers, and a median follower count of 35,065 followers. A higher proportion (92.6%) of top tweets against defunding the police come from individual accounts
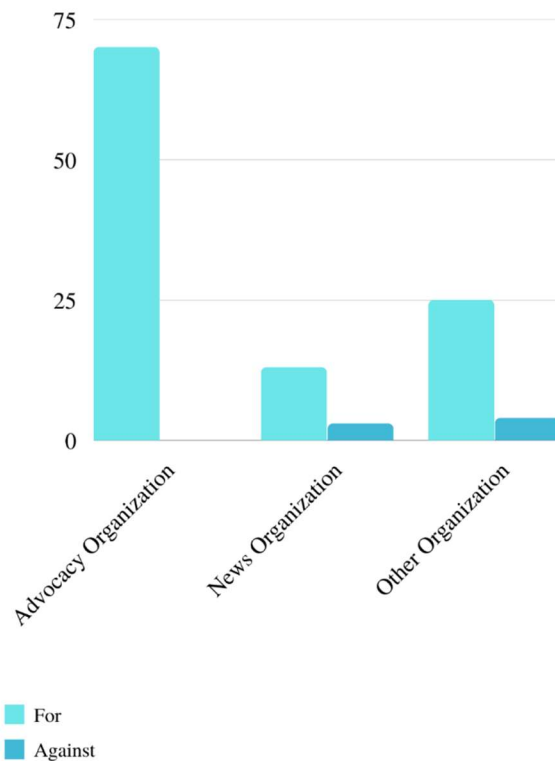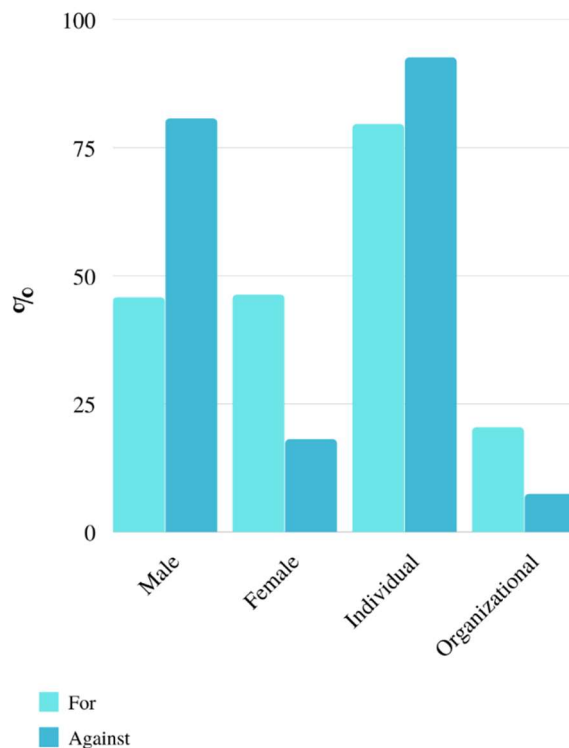
Figure 6. Top tweets for and against defunding the police by organization type.

than do top tweets in favor of defunding (79.6%). Additionally, a much higher proportion of this subset of tweets comes from users presenting as male than in the subset above, which had nearly identical amounts of tweets from male and female accounts **(Figure 7);** 71 of 88 (80.7%) tweets against defunding the police from individual accounts are from male users. In contrast, only 16 tweets in this subset are from female users, only one tweet is from an undetermined account, and no tweets are from accounts of non-binary individuals.

The remaining 7 tweets against defunding the police come from organizational accounts. These accounts have an average of 170,970 followers, and a median of 11,641 followers. None of these tweets is from an advocacy organization. Instead, three are coded as being from a news organization, and they all come from the same news source: Breitbart News (@BreitbartNews). The remaining 4 tweets are from other organizations, all of which are political organizations in this case.

Figure 7. Proportions (%) of top tweets for and against defunding the police.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

As described above, the sample was coded during a first reading to categorize tweets as being either for or against defunding the police. During subsequent readings of the dataset, key themes were identified and refined for each category. Four key themes were identified in tweets supporting the defunding of police, and an additional four were identified in tweets against defunding the police (Table 2).

Key Themes in Tweets Supporting the Defunding of Police

THE POWER OF PROTEST

The most commonly expressed theme in tweets supporting the defunding of police is the power of protest. Overall, 85 tweets were related to this theme. Top accounts began to express the need to protest in the first week following the death of George Floyd, but use of this theme soared during the second week **(Figure 8)**. This appears to be because as more

Table 2. Theme Frequency with Key Tweet

Theme	Week 1 (5/25 to 5/31)	Week 2 (6/1 to 6/7)
Themes in tweets for defunding the police		
The need to protest *That this headline could appear in the NYT shows that all the protesters have done is working*	24 (3.8%)	61 (9.7%)
Policing is a state system/institution *#GeorgeFloyd, a Black man, was murdered by police in Minneapolis this weekend. The officers have been fired but the *system* that allows this to continue will remain in place until dislodged. Vote to defund your local police force & share Mr. Floyd's story w/your people.*	49 (7.8%)	35 (5.5%)
Reinvest funds *Arizona was ranked 3rd worst in the United States public education system. Arizona was also ranked #3 in the nation for police brutality based on its population. Take the money out of the police force and put it into our schools. #DefundThePolice #phoenix #phoenixprotests*	37 (5.9%)	35 (5.5%)
Policing is murder *The @LAPDHQ won't put murder and George Floyd in the same sentence because they'd have to acknowledge their own murders #DEFUNDTHEPOLICE*	48 (7.6%)	19 (3.0%)
Themes in tweets against defunding the police		
Police stem the tide of rampant crime *I'm seeing a lot of people post things like "Defund the police" or "no more cops!". Do you guys know how bananas it would be if there was no law enforcement? If someone robs your house nothing will happen. If someone assaults you nothing will happen. We need good police officers!*	0 (0.0%)	22 (3.5%)
"Defund the police" is bad messaging *"Believe all women" was an unjust and irrational slogan, and "silence is violence" is hilariously dumb, but "defund police" is completely reckless and utterly insane. The Left has lost it*	1 (0.2%)	14 (2.2%)
Wealthy people can afford private security *Wealthy liberals like Hillary Clinton's former press assistant have no problem calling to defund the police—they can live in gated communities and hire security guards.*	0 (0.0%)	13 (2.1%)
Do it in your city *@carljpearson @Jacob_Frey It's your claim that we don't need police. Let me know when you have *ANY* evidence for that claim. Also, you don't live here. Stay out of the topic of police funding in my area, thanks. Defund your own state resources.*	2 (0.3%)	7 (1.1%)

protest events began to be organized and executed, tweeters had more material about these events to share and analyze. Some top Twitter accounts shared real-time updates about protest events such as, "The People's Budget LA is protesting at Mayor Garcetti's mansion right now. We are calling on @MayorOfLA to #DefundThePolice". Others, by contrast, described personal experiences with protesting, especially as related to police brutality, as one user shares,

> last night my husband and I got arrested on the stoop of our building on the UWS just after 8 pm. we were cheering on a peaceful protest on our block. this was my small visceral window into the police brutality black folks have experienced for centuries. #DefundThePolice
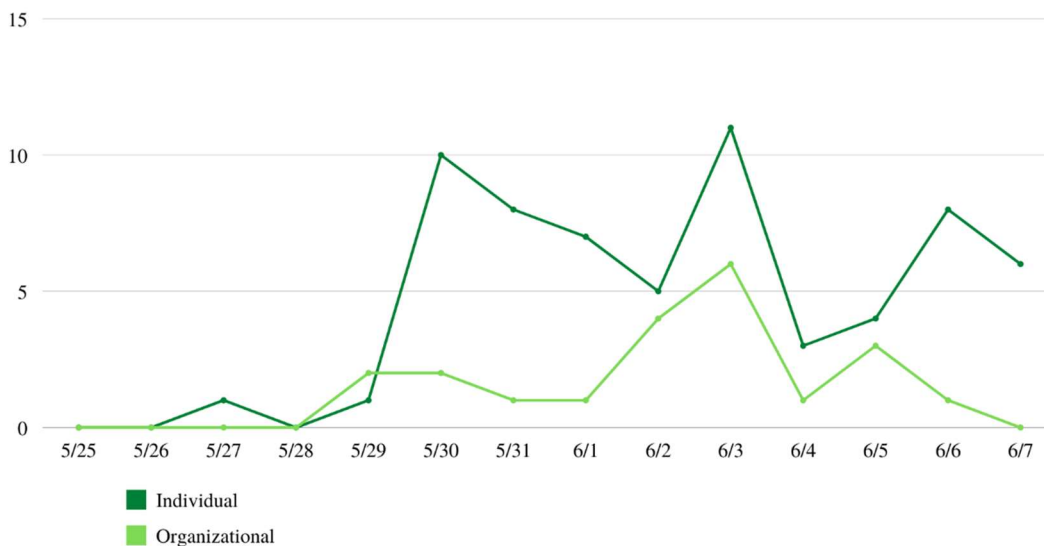
Figure 8. Tweets using protest theme by day and account type.

An important subtheme within the theme of the need to protest is the idea of the protest as an effective tool for creating change. In other words, several tweets coded under this theme analyze the efficacy of current protest efforts, including the online activism of the defund the police movement. For example, one such tweet reads,

> The $150 million cut to LAPD funding & reallocation of $250m to communities of color comes as a result of PROTEST and ORGANIZING. This step forward was won by the people. THIS happened the day before @MayorOfLA made his announcement... and we're not done...#DefundThePolice.

This tweet is accompanied by a video of protestors marching to and protesting at Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti's house the preceding day, and clearly articulates a link between in-person protest and policy change. Additionally, tweets such as

> Wow: @PHLCouncil is getting so many individual emails to #DefundThePolice #DefundthePPD of their $14m increase that they are training staff to filter them out. That means your fight for #fundourcommunities is breaking through. Keep it up and share widely

demonstrate the effectiveness of online or virtual activism. While this tweet does not speak to the effectiveness of protest on Twitter specifically, the fact that it attained top tweet status signals that it has had high engagement, and thus has imparted information that has reached a broad audience. The call to action to "keep it up and share widely" signals that the tweeting organization believes sharing on Twitter is an effective method to continue reaching an ever-broader audience.

Of the tweets related to the protest theme, 24.7% (n = 21) come from organizations; the remaining 64 tweets come from individual accounts (Figure 8). This proportion is slightly higher than the proportion of tweets in support of defunding from organizational accounts more broadly.

POLICING AS A PART OF A LARGER SYSTEM

Of the support-for-defunding tweets, 84 tweets discuss the police or policing as part of a larger system that needs to be challenged and dismantled. This idea was expressed 49 times in the first week of the reference period and 35 times in the second week **(Figure 9)**. The initial high uptake of this theme appears to be due to the perceived need to point out that the murder of George Floyd was not an isolated incident that could be remedied simply by punishing the officers directly involved. For example, one tweet reads,

> #GeorgeFloyd, a Black man, was murdered by police in Minneapolis this weekend. The officers have been fired but the *system* that allows this to continue will remain in place until dislodged. Vote to defund your local police force & share Mr. Floyd's story w/your people

Organizational Twitter profiles account for 23.8% (n = 20) of tweets describing policing as part of a larger system (Figure 9). The remaining tweets come from individual accounts.
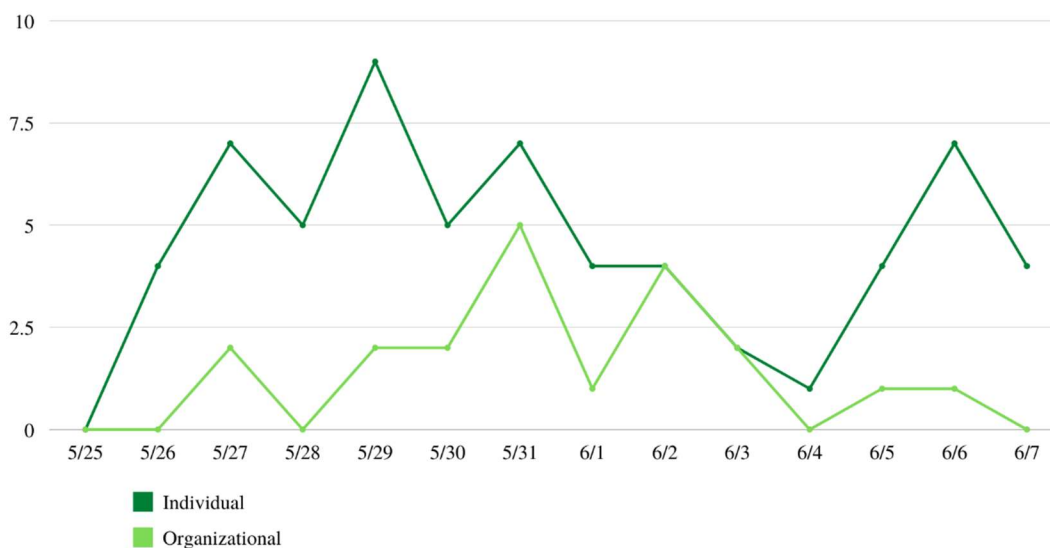
Figure 9. Tweets using system of policing theme by day and account type.

Of these tweets, 20 (23.8%) directly tag or speak to the Twitter accounts of individuals that are perceived by the tweeter to be a part of that larger system. Mayors of different U.S. cities, and especially those of Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and New York, are tagged this way most often (n = 13). For example, a tweet directly tagging the mayors of Los Angeles and New York City, as well as the governors of California and New York, reads, "This is systemic. This system is broken. @GavinNewsom @MayorOfLA @NYCMayor @NYGovCuomo #DefundThePolice #BlackLivesMatter". This pattern of addressing mayors is interesting because it indicates that tweeters often see their mayors as having the ability to affect change most directly, and as being complicit in what tweeters see as a corrupt system if they do not act.

While there is a variety of systemic components explicitly mentioned in these tweets, there are a couple of subthemes that especially stand out. For example, 9 tweets reference police unions as part of the system shielding corrupt policing, as one user expressed in writing,

> I'll commit, right now, to use whatever power I have in the labor movement to support elected leaders who bust the Minneapolis police union and defund the department. Union busting IS disgusting but white supremacy is worse.

This user articulates a direct link between the Minneapolis police department and the union, tacitly arguing that police officers are shielded by the union. The assertion that white supremacy is tolerated by the Minneapolis police union only serves to make this systemic link and the protection afforded by it to the Minneapolis police department more apparent.

Additionally, 8 tweets refer to "the police state" or to "state-sanctioned violence". This phrasing is used to draw a link between policing and the government more broadly (i.e., the state), and to suggest that the state legitimizes police violence. One tweeter indirectly describes how police violence has been legitimized in writing,

> @MayorFrey Work on eliminating the police state. We are so entrenched in thinking we need the police to protect us. It is a false narrative. Violence cannot be solved with violence

By describing collective thought as "entrenched" in seeing police as necessary to public safety, this user suggests that this idea has become normalized with the assistance of the state, as signaled by their address to Mayor of Minneapolis Jacob Frey.

HOW TO REINVEST FUNDS

A substantively important subset of tweets (n = 72) also share thoughts on how funds divested from police departments should be reinvested. The distribution of tweets with suggestions for reinvesting funds is relatively equal between the two weeks of the reference period, with 37 tweets authored in the first week and 35 in the second. Of these, 17 (23.6%) tweets come from organization accounts; the remaining 55 tweets using this theme are from individual accounts **(Figure 10).**
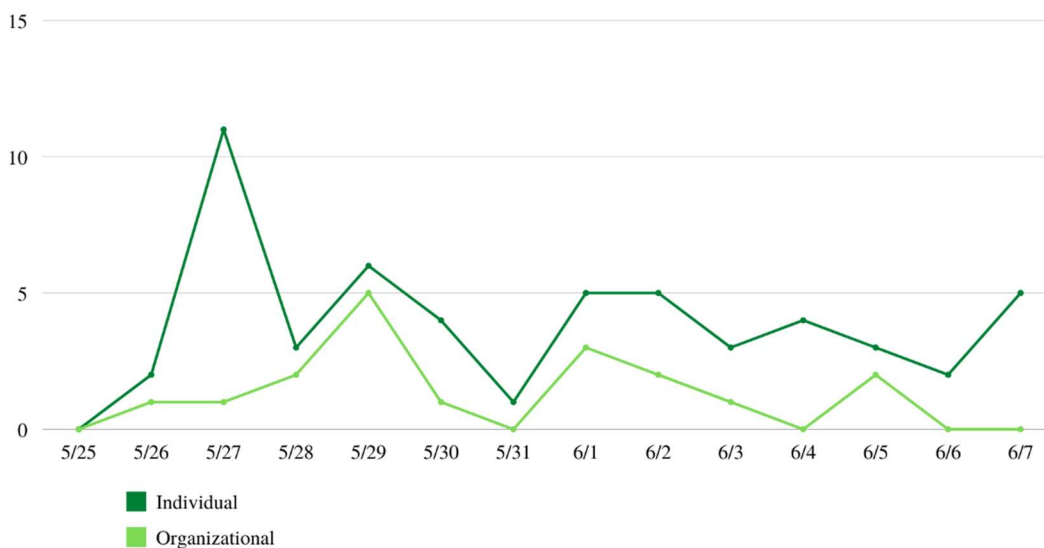
Figure 10. Tweets using fund reinvestment theme by day and account type.

Users describe various ways to use funds divested from police, and some describe multiple possible reinvestments in a single tweet **(Figure 11)**. Almost half of these tweets (n = 35) express that funds should be reinvested in "the people" or "the community". Some users express this sentiment in very general terms (e.g., "defund the police.. fund the people") while others mention more specific portions of the community (e.g., "Defund the police. Reinvest in communities decimated by policing"). A small subset of these tweets describe investing in communities of color as a form of reparations. One user, for example, observes,

> Defund the police & give those resources to community; especially Black and Native communities. We ain't seen a dime of reparations, no pay for our stolen labor nor our stolen land, but the police have been funded (millions on millions a year) to catch & kill us for 100 years+
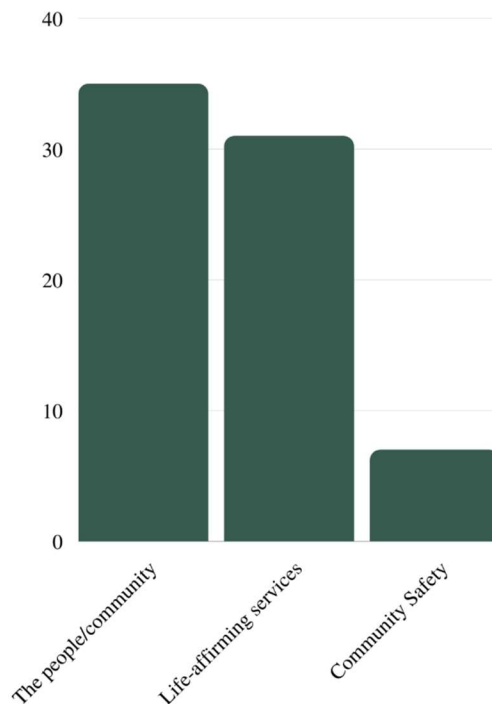
Figure 11. Fund reinvestment ideas in tweets using the fund reinvestment theme.

By invoking the interrelated histories of people of color and of policing in America, this user seeks to highlight the role that redistribution of wealth should play in long-overdue racial justice. This idea of redistribution of wealth to those who are disadvantaged is the common thread running through more specific and/or more racially-charged tweets like the one described above as well as through more general tweets in this subset.

Additionally, 31 tweets call for the reinvestment of funds into what one user describes as "life-affirming services" --including healthcare (n = 14) and education (n = 12). 5 tweets related to healthcare specifically reference the need for mental health resources. One user, for example, tweeted,

> 'It is time to fund public safety in the form of food security & housing for all, youth services, mental health counselors, community healers, & social workers trained to nurture oppressed and traumatized people & de-escalate conflicts in our communities'

Tying "public safety" to resources including mental healthcare demonstrates an understanding of the central role that mental health issues can play in an individual's criminal history. Additionally, several tweets calling for more healthcare funding mention the

COVID-19 pandemic as an especially dire situation towards which more funds should be invested (e.g., "Now is the time to demand police forces be defunded across the country & diverted into things we actually need like healthcare during a pandemic!"). Tweets calling for more funding for education compare the relative investments made by governments in education and policing. One user, for example, shared the view that "Police shouldn't have more funding for tear gas and riot gear than teachers have for books. #DefundThePolice". Some users took this one step further and pointed to poor educational outcomes as a reason to reinvest funds in schools, as one individual expressed in tweeting,

> Arizona was ranked 3rd worst in the United States public education system. Arizona was also ranked #3 in the nation for police brutality based on its population. Take the money out of the police force and put it into our schools #DefundThePolice #phoenix #phoenixprotests

Finally, 7 tweets suggest that funds should be invested in alternatives to policing that promote public safety. In doing so, some say that police make communities unsafe more explicitly than others such as the tweet reading,

> Minneapolis: we are going to defund the Minneapolis Police Department. We are going to invest in community safety without community terror. It can and will happen.Call/email/tweet at your council member and get them on board with #DefundMPD

However, each tweet in the subset conveys the idea that the current system does not promote safety. For example, even tweets that seem relatively innocuous such as

> So much crosstalk on my timeline about the slogan "Defund the police" rather than about the underlying premise: reallocate some money toward alternatives to policing

beg the question of *why* alternatives to policing are necessary. If the goal of policing is public safety and yet users express the need to invest in alternatives, it is possible that they do not believe policing keeps the public safe.

POLICING AS MURDER

An especially affective theme found in the sample is the idea of policing as murder, which was shared in 67 tweets in the first two weeks following the murder of George Floyd **(Figure 12)**. A much higher proportion of these tweets was authored in the first week (n = 48) than in the second week (n = 19) of the reference period. One potential explanation for the high concentration of these tweets in the first week could be the fact that the murder of
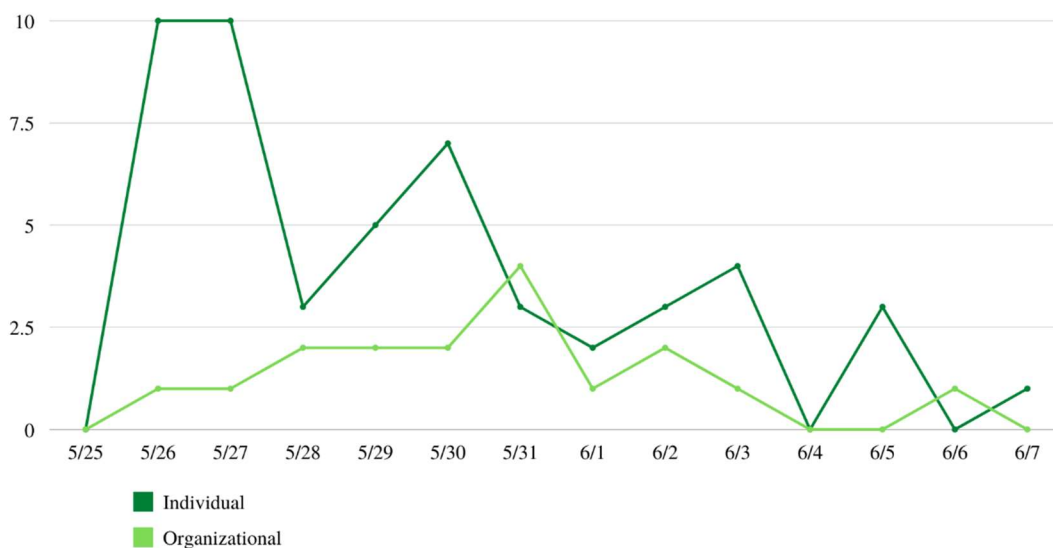
Figure 12. Tweets using policing as murder theme by day and account type.

George Floyd had just occurred. In fact, the two days with the highest daily concentration of these tweets were May 26 (n = 10) and May 27 (n = 11), the two days immediately following George Floyd's death. One tweet from May 26, for example, reads, "I can't believe we have heard ANOTHER young man tell the police #ICantBreathe just for them to outright murder him. Oh wait, yes I can. I can believe it". A factor that may have further limited the concentration of tweets expressing this theme in the second week of the sample is what some researchers have identified as "cognitive-emotional currents" (Bail et al., 2017, p. 1189). Cognitive-emotional currents are "a negative correlation between the frequency of cognitive and emotional language within public conversations about a social justice problem over time" (Bail et al., 2017, p. 1189). These currents are created by "saturation effects that facilitate the spread" (Bail et al., 2017, p. 1189) of, first, one, then the other type of language. In other words, a saturation effect may have been created because a high concentration of tweets expressed this highly emotional sentiment in the first week. This effect may have led Twitter users to engage with more rational/low emotion tweets in the second week of the sample, thereby elevating low emotion tweets to top status in the second week. Similar to the previous themes discussed, 23.8% of these tweets (n = 16) come from organizational accounts. The remaining 51 tweets in this subset are from individual users.

A small portion of tweets in this subset (n = 16) mention George Floyd explicitly. Some of these directly describe the murder as a murder (e.g., "The murder of George Floyd

should have been a moment of self-reflection for the police. Today, the police were more violent than ever. #DefundThePolice"), while others simply hashtag George Floyd in their tweet about policing as murder (e.g., "WE CAN'T MAKE A CHANGE IF YALL DONT #stopkillingus #justiceforgeorgefloyd"). Still others invoke George Floyd's name in broader calls to prosecute police who kill civilians. One tweet, for example, reads, "Two national demands: 1. Prosecute killer cops. 2. Defund the police. In the name of #GeorgeFloyd and all those killed by state-sanctioned violence". Regardless of how George Floyd's name is used in this subset, it is apparent that his murder specifically was top of mind for many users.

Additionally, 27 tweets mention Blackness in tweets about policing as murder. Similar to the way George Floyd's name is mentioned in this subset, some tweets explicitly describe police as murdering Black people (e.g., "@Jacob_Frey stop yapping and defund the police. No more tear gas and rubber bullets and salaries for cops to turn around and continually murder black citizens"). Others simply use the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in their tweets about police murder to link the two concepts. For example, one user tweeted,

> The protests in LA are not only about Minnesota. @LAPDHQ is the most murderous police department in the country. This is about their actions here in Los Angeles. #BlackLivesMatter #DefundThePolice

Again, regardless of whether Blackness is explicitly mentioned as a factor in police killings of citizens or whether #BlackLivesMatter is the only way that race is mentioned in the tweet, it is clear that racism and the differential killing of Black people are critical concerns for top tweeters.

Key Themes in Tweets against Defunding the Police

Only three tweets against defunding the police discussed in this thematic analysis were authored in the first week of the reference period. The oppositional response to calls to defund the police took off in the second week.

POLICE STOP RAMPANT CRIME

The most commonly-expressed (n = 22) theme in tweets against defunding the police is the idea that policing stops a tide of crime which would otherwise overrun communities **(Figure 13)**. Similar to the idea of policing as murder used in tweets supporting the defund movement, this is a highly affective theme used to appeal emotionally to other Twitter users.
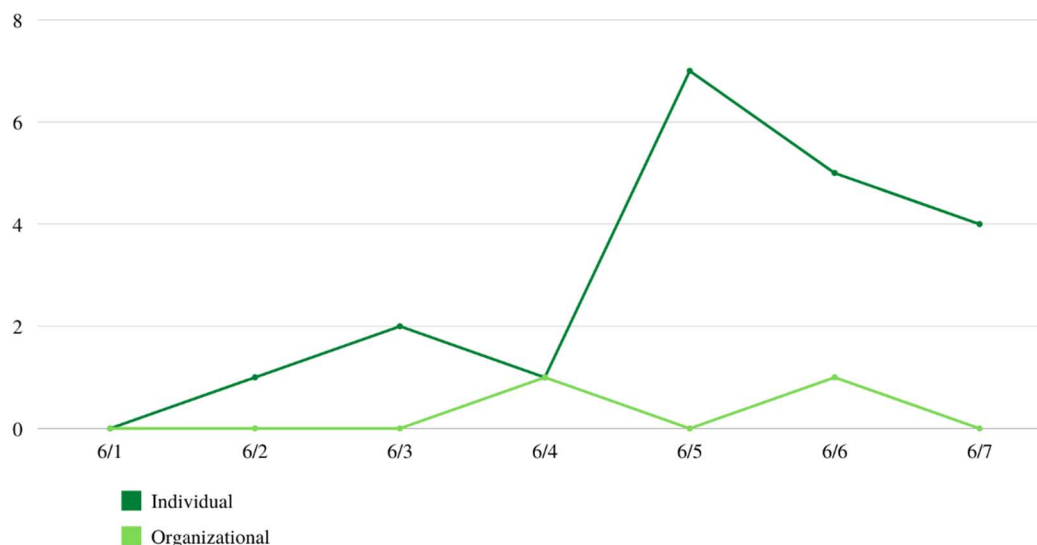
Figure 13. Tweets using rampant crime theme by day and account type.

Only two (9.1%) of these tweets come from organizational accounts; the remaining 20 tweets are from individual users.

Of these rampant-crime tweets, 10 present facetious arguments to relay the message that defunding the police would ultimately be dangerous to communities. For example, one tweet reads,

> Here's a solid plan: defund the police, release criminals from jails, refuse to co-operate with federal law enforcement, open the borders, get rid of bail, set a limit at which theft is allowed with no arrests, and stir up as much chaos as possible. #Democrats.

This user clearly does not believe the situation he describes should actually happen, and uses a sarcastic tone to highlight what he sees as the absurdity of the defund movement.

Interestingly, an equal number of tweets in this subset (n = 10) make a more sincere argument about uncontrollable crime. For example, one user wrote,

> I'm seeing a lot of people post things like 'Defund the police' or 'no more cops!'. Do you guys know how bananas it would be if there was no law enforcement? If someone robs your house nothing will happen. If someone assaults you nothing will happen. We need good police officers!

While these tweets have a different tone than those previously described, their intended effect is the same—to create anxiety in Twitter users about the potential of being the victim of crime as a result of police defunding.

A couple of tweets in this subset go further to suggest that people who support defunding want defunding to occur so they can take advantage of the resulting lawlessness. For example, one tweet reads,

> Democrats want to defund police for the same reason they want to take your guns. They want you to be left defenseless so they can hurt you, take your stuff, and burn down everything you love. The riots are a perfect foreshadowing of what they will do if they get their way.

"DEFUND THE POLICE" IS BAD MESSAGING

A subset of tweets (n = 15) opposed to defunding describe the defund the police movement as having bad or unpopular messaging **(Figure 14)**. One of these tweets was authored in the first week of the reference period, and the remaining 14 were authored in the second week. All 15 tweets in this subset were created by individual user accounts.
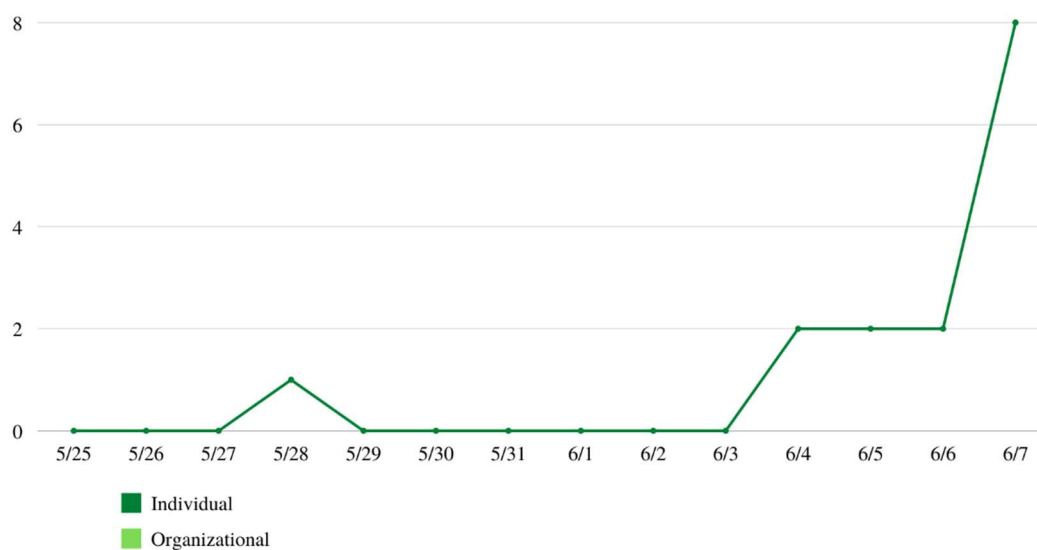
Figure 14. Tweets using bad messaging theme by day and account type.

Of these, 9 tweets express concern with how the slogan will play politically. The year 2020 was an especially divisive election year in the United States, and individuals with political ideologies on both sides of the aisle expressed how they predicted the messaging of the defund movement would disadvantage the Democratic Party. For example, one self-identified conservative user tweeted,

> Dear Democrats, Continuing to say 'Defund the Police' will only help get Donald Trump re-elected. Sincerely, A Conservative Who's Doing All He Can To Make Sure Trump Loses

On the other side, a more liberal user tweeted,

> I'm glad I'm not the only one thinking that 'defund the police' ain't it. I know it sounds catchy but as soon as I heard it, I knew it was going to be a problem. It's 2020...when are we going to stop giving the GOP talking points & easy outs to stop listening?

In this case, tweets representing different political views both express anxiety about the messaging and potential for this movement to affect the outcome of the 2020 election.

Interestingly, 6 tweets in this subset express some form of acknowledgement or agreement with the aims of the movement while criticizing the specific slogan of "defund the police." Some simply acknowledge understanding the idea, such as the user who tweeted, "I understand the sentiment behind 'defund the police'. But politically, it will destroy Democrats." This user acknowledges that the aims of the movement are legitimate, but that the messaging is not going to be widely popular. Other users seem more supportive of the aims of the defund campaign, but still criticize the way it is articulated. For example, one user wrote,

> Demilitarize police. Defund broken initiatives. Reimagine and transform policing. End systemic racism in the criminal justice system. Yes to all those things and more. But if the plain meaning of your slogan is 'disband all police departments,' you won't win and it isn't helping.

These tweets demonstrate how controversial the phrasing of the movement is, and the anxiety that its legitimate goals will not be taken seriously due to the way they are articulated.

THE WEALTHY CAN AFFORD PRIVATE SECURITY

A subset of 13 tweets, all authored in the second week of the sample, express the idea that the defunding of police will disparately impact those who are not wealthy, as wealthy people are able to contract private security and thus will not have their safety compromised if police are defunded **(Figure 15)**. A couple (15.4%) of these tweets come from organizational accounts, and the remaining 11 come from individual user accounts. This is a higher proportion than the proportion of top tweets against defunding the police coming from organizational accounts more generally (7.3%).
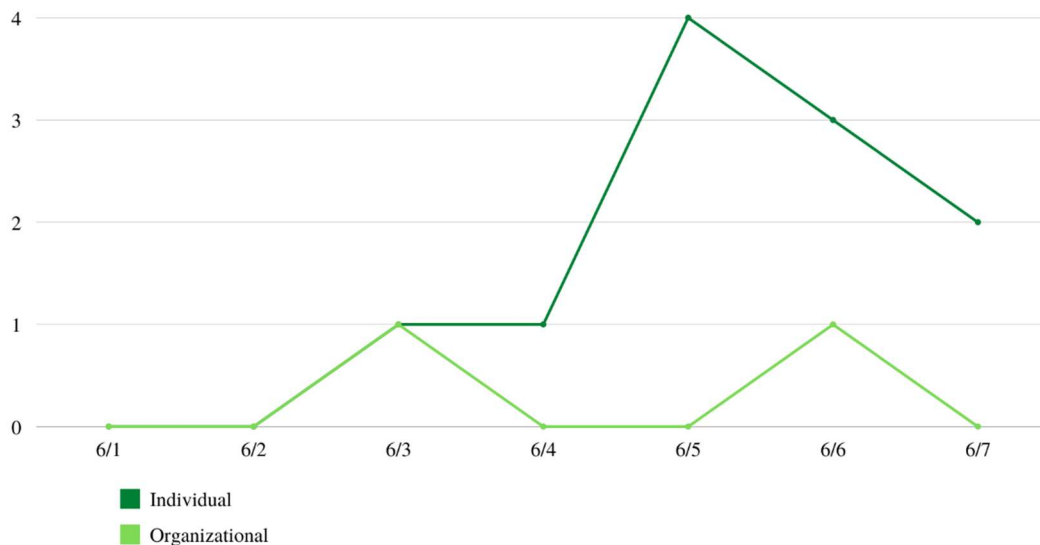
Figure 15. Tweets using private security theme by day and account type.

Some of these tweets describe wealthy individuals as being removed from reality. For example, one tweet reads, "When you're a multi-millionaire Entertainment Elite who can afford PRIVATE security, defunding the police seems like a great idea. #Elitist #OutOfTouch". Other tweets, however, suggest that the wealthy have more nefarious reasons to support defunding, as one user expressed in writing,

> Yep. The celebritie$ & politician$ you'll hear saying 'defund the police' are $AFE, can afford private $ecurity. THEY DO NOT CARE ABOUT REAL PEOPLE, their ultimate goal want to TEAR DOWN AMERICA #TopDownBottomUp

While this tweet does not specifically share why elites would want to "tear down America", the dollar signs interspersed throughout the tweet seem to suggest that money may be a motivating factor. Another tweet also suggests that some groups may have financial motivations to support defunding the police. By tweeting "'Defund the police!' This message has been brought to you by the private security contractors of America", this user expresses cynicism about who supports the movement and what motivations they may have to support it.

DEFUND POLICING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

A small but substantively important subset of tweets (n = 9) against defunding the police share the idea that proponents of the movement should defund resources in their own

communities **(Figure 16)**. Just two of these tweets were authored in the first week of the reference period, and the remaining 7 were written in the second week. All tweets in this subset were authored by individual accounts.
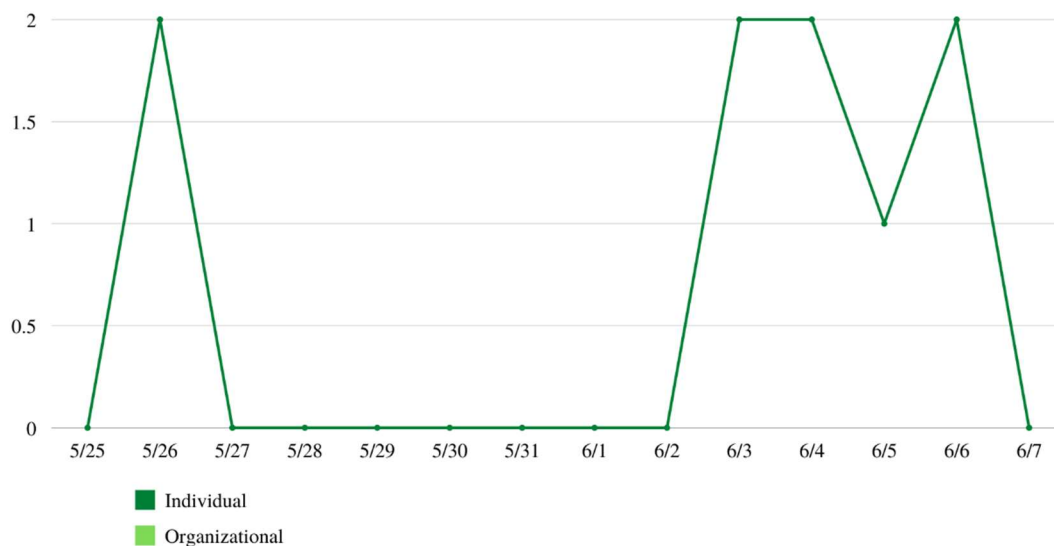
Figure 16. Tweets using "not in my community" theme by day and account type.

Similar to tweets grouped by the rampant crime theme, some of these tweets present the idea of defunding in liberal communities in more facetious terms (e.g., "To the #DefundThePolice proponents, Okay if we do a trial run in your neighborhood?"). Some, on the other hand, discuss the idea more seriously, as demonstrated by one user who tweeted,

> @carljpearson @Jacob_Frey It's your claim that we don't need police. Let me know when you have *ANY* evidence for that claim. Also, you don't live here. Stay out of the topic of police funding in my area, thanks. Defund your own state resources.

To recap, a total of eight key themes—four found in tweets in favor of the defund campaign, and four found in those opposed—were identified and analyzed to determine how exactly they were used and what made them effective. Themes found in tweets favoring defunding include the need to protest; the idea of policing as part of a larger carceral system; the importance of reinvesting funds divested from police departments; and the idea of policing as murder. Chief among these is the need to protest, both because it is the most widely used theme among tweets for defunding and because it allows users to tell the story of

current protest efforts and measure the efficacy of the defund campaign. Tweets within this theme use a broad range of tones; however, the message underlying each of these tweets is that now is the time for collective action and that there are practical steps that can be undertaken by those supporting the defunding campaign. As such, a quality of hopefulness permeates these tweets and raises them to prominence not just within the sample, but within the reference period more generally.

Key themes found and analyzed among tweets opposed to defunding the police include the idea that police stop rampant crime; the thought that the phrasing of defund the police is bad messaging; the idea that wealthy individuals will be unaffected because they can afford private security; and the idea that those in favor of defunding should do so in their own communities. The most interesting among these are the rampant crime and bad messaging themes, especially when considered together. The rampant crime theme focuses on highly affective arguments, while the bad messaging theme appeals more to rationality and strategic thinking. Perhaps this is why the concentration of tweets using the rampant crime theme peaks and begins to dip on June 5, whereas tweets using the bad messaging theme begin to take off at the same time.

Discourse Analysis

In addition to coding for salient themes, this sample was coded for key discursive strategies. During an initial reading of the sample for the purpose of discursive analysis, discursive strategies were noted and quantified. During subsequent readings of the dataset, key strategies were identified and refined. Three key strategies were identified in the sample: the use of the hashtagged phrase "#DefundThePolice"; the use of visual media; and the use of written emphasis.

Table 3. Discursive Strategy Frequency with Key Tweet

Key Discursive Strategy	Week 1 (5/25 to 5/31)	Week 2 (6/1 to 6/7)
Use of "#DefundThePolice" *Resist resist resist- everywhere! Sending our love, strength, solidarity and overwhelming gratitude to Minneapolis. #DefundThePolice and #BurnItDown*	84 (13.3%)	107 (16.9%)
Use of visual media *watch this. watch how peaceful it was. watch what happens. defund the police. [with accompanying video]*	60 (9.5%)	80 (12.7%)
Use of written emphasis *defund and abolish the police. literally *nothing else* will suffice. nothing.*	42 (6.6%)	59 (9.3%)

Use of "#DefundThePolice"

A key discursive strategy can be found in top users' decision to use or not use the hashtagged phrase "#DefundThePolice" in their tweets. As mentioned previously, only 191 of 632 (30.2%) tweets in the sample use the hashtag. Of these tweets, 188 are in favor of defunding the police, while only 3 are opposed. Roughly 44 percent (n = 84) of tweets in this subset were authored in the first week of the reference period, while the remaining 107 tweets were authored in the second week.

While it is clear that attitude towards defunding the police correlates with use of the hashtag, it is also apparent that the hashtag will not be employed by every Twitter user who agrees with the concept. One factor that appears to be especially relevant for hashtag uptake is location. For example, 67 of 102 (65.7%) tweets originating from Los Angeles and 53 of 66 (80.3%) of tweets that mention Los Angeles use #DefundThePolice. In contrast, only 9 of 86 (10.5%) tweets from New York City and 10 of 34 (29.4%) tweets mentioning New York City use the hashtag **(Figure 17).** This comparatively high uptake in Los Angeles may be due to several factors, including region-specific trends and concerns. For example, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent explosion in calls for defunding the police corresponded with local organizing in Los Angeles around community budgeting. In early May 2020, the Los Angeles chapter of Black Lives Matter spearheaded the creation of a coalition of activist groups known as People's Budget LA. The coalition sought to give greater voice to diverse members of the Los Angeles community through a participatory budgeting process, the results of which showed that citizens had "vastly different priorities than [Los Angeles] Mayor Garcetti's proposed budget" (People's Budget LA, 2020). On May 24, 2020, the day before the murder of George Floyd, more than 3,000 individuals participated in this budgeting process remotely in real time, and an additional 10,000 people viewed the session afterwards (People's Budget LA, 2020). In other words, many people in Los Angeles were already primed--and many activist groups were already organized--to discuss defunding the police. Tweets in Los Angeles tend to cluster around the hashtag, in contrast to tweets in other regions.
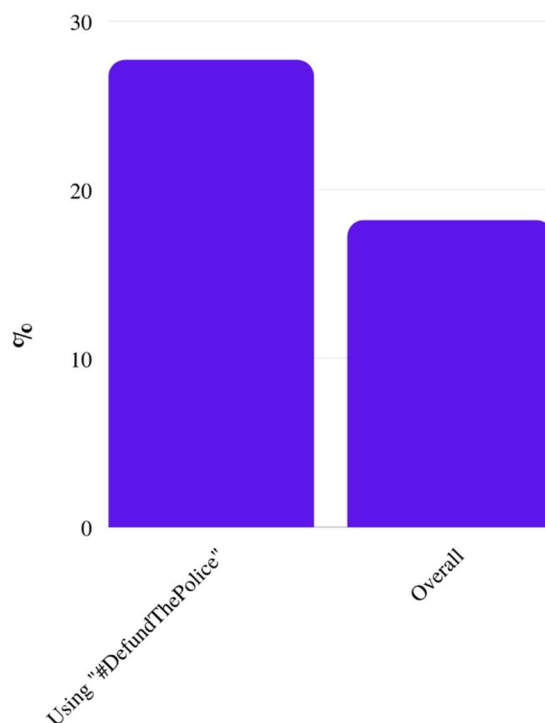
Figure 17. Proportions (%) of top tweets using "#DefundThePolice".

Additionally, there is a higher proportion of tweets with the hashtagged phrase "#DefundThePolice" from organizational Twitter profiles than tweets in the sample overall **(Figure 18)**. Specifically, 27.7 percent (n = 53) of tweets using #DefundThePolice are from organizational accounts, while only 18.2 percent of tweets in the overall sample come from organizational accounts (Figure 18). The Los Angeles chapter of Black Lives Matter (@BLMLA) alone authored 13 such tweets including, for example, the following message:

> We don't want to hug the police. We don't want to kneel with the police. We don't want to meet with the police. WE WANT TO DEFUND THE POLICE. #DefundThePolice #BlackLivesMatter

This further lends weight to the idea that Los Angeles was poised to participate in online conversation about defunding the police, while also signaling that use of the hashtag may be especially helpful to organizations seeking to enter the conversation more broadly. Only one tweet authored by @BLMLA in the sample does not include the hashtagged phrase, signaling that use of #DefundThePolice may have been a key discursive strategy for @BLMLA. The

Figure 18. Proportions (%) of top tweets from organizational accounts using "#DefundThePolice".

fact that 14 tweets from this single organizational account achieved top status demonstrates that this strategy worked in the organization's favor.

Hashtag co-occurrence, or use of other hashtagged words or phrases in conjunction with "#DefundThePolice", may also form an important component of this discursive strategy for some users. In the first week, 69 percent (n = 58) of tweets using "#DefundThePolice" also used one or more additional hashtags **(Figure 19)**. This number greatly dwindled in the second week of the reference period, with only 36.4 percent (n = 39) of tweets using "#DefundThePolice" including additional hashtags, although it is not immediately apparent why this may be. The most commonly co-occurring hashtag is "#BlackLivesMatter", which was used together with "#DefundThePolice" 20 times in the first week and 17 times in the second week of the reference period. Using "#BlackLivesMatter" allows tweeting users or organizations to conceptually tie the defund the police campaign to the Black Lives Matter movement in which the campaign is rooted. To some Twitter users unfamiliar with the Black Lives Matter movement, it may appear at first glance that the push to defund police is
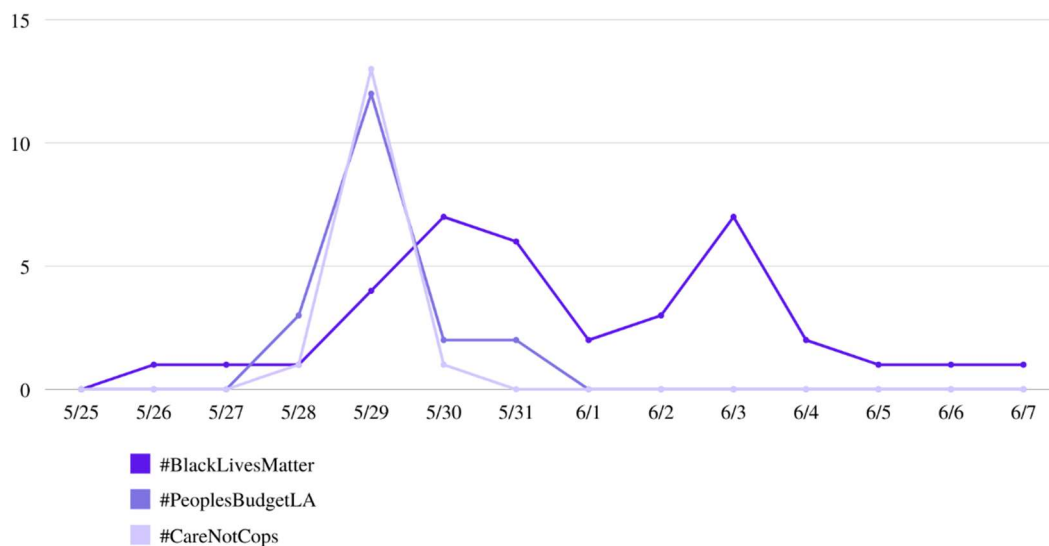
Figure 19. Hashtag co-occurrence by day.

completely unrelated to it. The use of "#BlackLivesMatter" allows proponents of the defund campaign to situate their arguments in a broader context. This is demonstrated in the tweet from @BLMLA included above. Two additional commonly co-occurring hashtags are "#PeoplesBudgetLA" (n = 19) and "#CareNotCops" (n = 15). Both of these hashtags appear exclusively in the first week of the reference period, and are exclusively included in top tweets originating from or referencing the Los Angeles area. One such tweet, for example, reads,

> If we #DefundThePolice, LA would have $3 billion to spend on real public health and safety solutions, such as rent cancellation to prevent homelessness, food, housing, jobs programs, childcare, clean air and water, public transit, and so much more. #PeoplesBudgetLA #CareNotCops

Again, tweets like this one lend weight to the idea that messaging around defunding the police in Los Angeles was highly organized as a result of activism that was already occurring in the area.

It is also important to consider the decision *not* to use "#DefundThePolice". For example, only 3 tweets opposed to the idea of defunding the police employ the hashtagged phrase. A key reason why Twitter users opposed to defunding may abstain from using "#DefundThePolice" in their messages is that a core function of hashtags on Twitter is "to index keywords or topics" (Twitter, 2021) to make it easier to find other tweets using the same hashtag. Within Twitter, a user can click on a hashtagged word or phrase to access

other tweets including that hashtag. Therefore, if a user tweets "#DefundThePolice", it may lead their followers to view more tweets using the hashtag, an outcome which is likely unwanted by those who disavow the campaign. Additionally, and perhaps more intuitively, using the hashtag may be taken by others as an endorsement of the campaign. This may especially be true in light of the salience and success of other earlier examples of hashtag activism, including #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

Use of Visual Media

The second most commonly-used (n = 140) discursive strategy is the inclusion of visual media to enhance the messaging of tweets. The vast majority (n = 134) of tweets with visual media are in favor of defunding the police. More top tweets employed this strategy in the second week (n = 80) than in the first week (n = 60) of the reference period. Additionally, a much higher proportion of organizational accounts authored tweets using visual media than tweets in the sample overall. Specifically, 34.3 percent (n = 48) of tweets using visual media are from organizational accounts, while only 18.2 percent of tweets in the overall sample come from organizational accounts **(Figure 20)**.
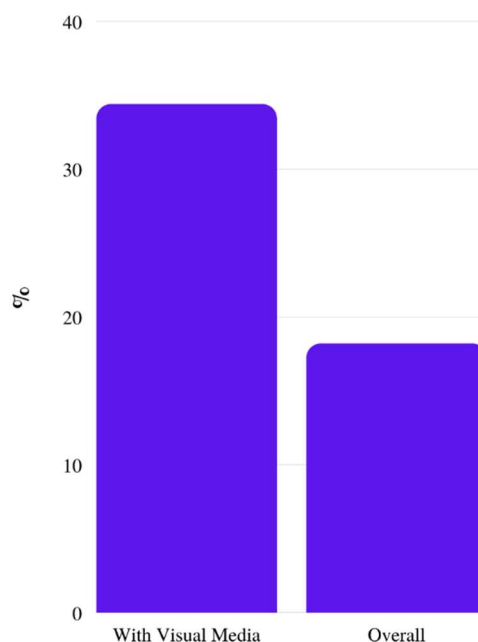
Figure 20. Proportions (%) of top tweets from organizational accounts using visual media.

In the first week following the death of George Floyd, 78.3 percent (n = 47) of tweets using visual media specifically used still images or illustrations **(Figure 21)**. Interestingly, despite the fact that more tweets used visual media overall in the second week of the reference period, both the count (n = 42) and the proportion (52.5%) of tweets using images specifically decreased. More than two-thirds (n = 61, 68.5%) of all images used in tweets in this sample are text-based. While this is a broad category encompassing a variety of still visual media (e.g., some text-based images are graphic illustrations, some are screenshots of articles or other tweets, etc.), there exist notable unifying characteristics. A primary purpose of use of text-based images is to impart additional information beyond the text of the tweet. For example, some tweets with text-based images make a call to action in the body of the tweet, then include a text-based image to share how exactly that call to action can be accomplished. This is the strategy employed by the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter two days after the murder of George Floyd, when the organization tweeted,

> Straight from our fam in Minneapolis who are rising up in the name of #GeorgeFloyd !! Call & demand MPD be defunded! Now is the time to demand police forces be defunded across the country & diverted into things we actually need like healthcare during a pandemic! #DefundThePolice

and used an accompanying text-based image to share Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey's contact information **(Figure 22)**. Others make an argument in the body of their tweet, then include an accompanying text-based image as evidence of their claim. For example, one user in Columbus, Ohio tweeted, "Even if 'defund the police' isn't your vibe (yet — give it time and attention), it's clear that @ColumbusGov's priorities are out of whack" alongside an image of a bar graph outlining the city's proposed budget for 2020, which clearly shows police spending far outpacing that of any other category **(Figure 23)**.

In contrast, still photographs (n = 28) serve a different purpose for these tweets. Users primarily include still photographs of protest events, and these serve the purpose of elevating protestors while denouncing police officers. Some of these photographs can be very explicit; however, even those that seem more innocuous still subtly accomplish this purpose.

An additional key purpose for the use of images, both text-based images and photographs, is that it increases the visibility of the tweet overall. Tweets with images take up more space in the Twitter stream than do tweets without images, and they provide visual
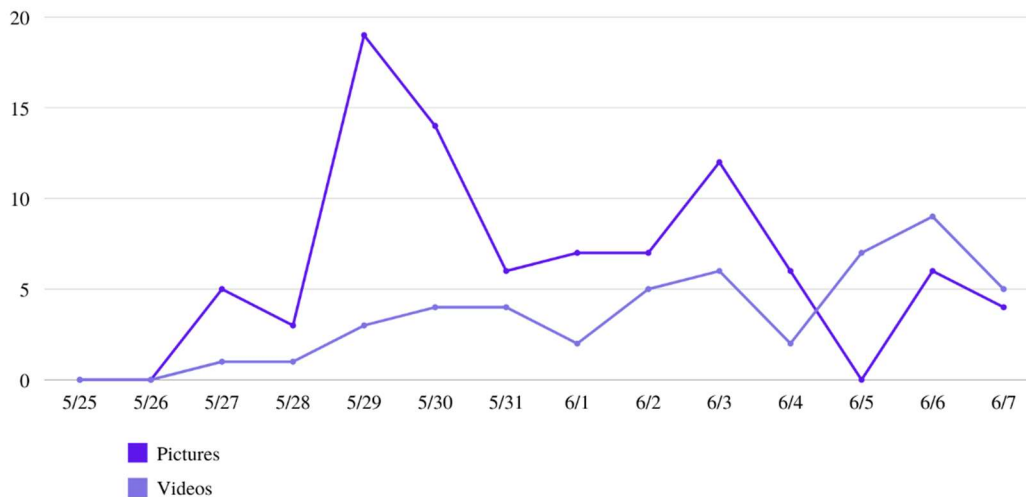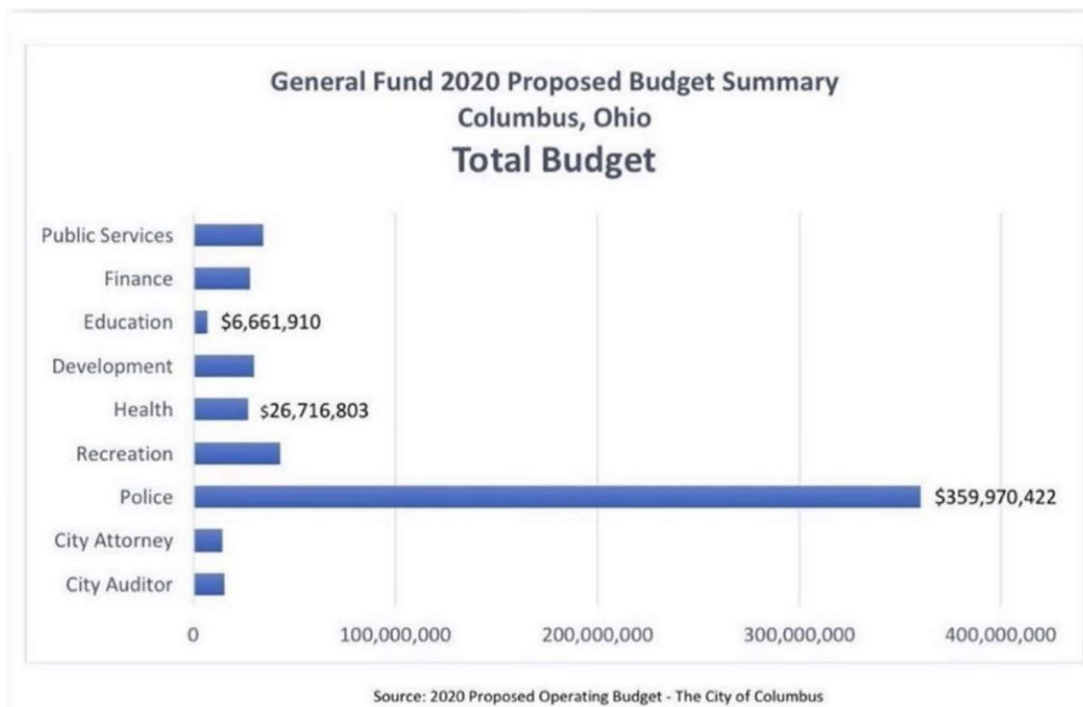
Figure 21. Tweets using visual media by day.

Figure 22. Text-based image accompanying tweet. Source: (Black Lives Matter, Chicago, 2020).

Figure 23. Text-based image accompanying tweet. Source: (Jones, 2020).

anchor points for users scrolling through their feeds. Images cut the wall of text that would otherwise exist without them. Even text-based images that simply restate the message in the body of the tweet create a visual difference that makes them stand out.

Videos were also used strategically in tweets about defunding the police. In the first week, only 13 tweets (21.7%) with visual media included videos specifically. However, this number swelled in the second week to 36 tweets (45%). A key reason for this may be found upon a closer look at the content of videos shared in these tweets. Close to two-thirds (n = 32, 65.3%) of the videos shared in tweets in the sample document protest events, some in real-time. The increase in use of video in the second week of the reference period corresponds to the increase in the occurrence of protests at the time. An additional 10 videos come from news segments covering or discussing protest events; these videos were also more likely to be created and shared in the second week of the reference period after a greater concentration of protest events had occurred.

Similar to those with images, tweets with videos are visually different from tweets without visual media. The inclusion of visual media provides a respite from text-only tweets,

which generally outnumber tweets with visual media; of the 632 tweets in this sample, 77.8% do not include visual media.

Use of Textual Emphasis

Additionally, 102 (16.1%) tweets in the sample employ some form of textual emphasis. Of these, 91 (89.2%) are in favor of defunding the police. Similar to the discursive strategies discussed previously, this strategy was used more in the second week (n = 59) than in the first week (n = 43) of the reference period **(Figure 24)**. However, in contrast, organizational accounts are not overrepresented in the use of this strategy, as only 21.6 percent (n = 21) of this subset of tweets was authored by organizational accounts. By far, the most commonly used form of textual emphasis is the capitalization of a word or phrase within the tweet (n = 90). However, a small but significant portion of this subset (n = 12) uses some other emphasis, described in more detail below.
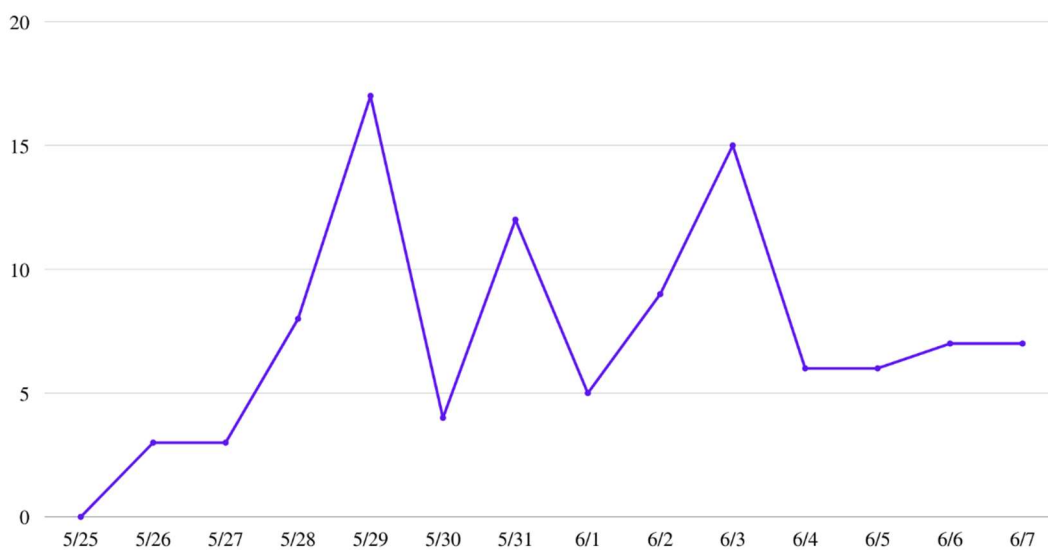
Figure 24. Tweets using written emphasis by day.

Users selectively use capitalized words or phrases in their tweets in a few different ways. For example, some users capitalize a few keywords that are especially relevant to the message they are trying to convey. The most common (n = 29) example of this is the selective capitalization of the word "defund" or the phrase "defund the police." One user, for example, tweeted

> Let's DEFUND THE POLICE. Shrink the size, scope & power of all aspects of the death-making carceral system. That means demanding electeds to take resources from these institutions & redirect them to things that *actually* keep people healthy & safe. And let communities thrive

This strategy is especially effective in longer tweets like the one above, as the capitalized words provide a visual anchor to which the reader can return. Others (n = 15) use capitalized words at the very beginning of their tweets to grab the reader's attention (e.g., "BREAKING…"; "FUNDRAISER…"; "FUN FACT…"; "WOW…"; etc.) before proceeding with the body of the tweet. Some users additionally use capitalized words or phrases to mimic conversational speech. For example, one such tweet reads

> Y'all. Y'ALL. They cancelled the police contract with public schools!! Ed folks wondering how to make an impact - THIS IS HOW. Abolition aint gonna happen in one fell swoop - cops out of schools keeps our kids safe AND cuts the police revenue #defundthepolice #AbolishThePolice

The repetition and capitalization of "Y'ALL" here convey urgency and excitement from the tweet author, and help to give the tweet a conversational tone.

A relative few (n = 12) tweets use some other form of emphasis, deliberately eschewing traditional capital emphasis while still highlighting specific portions of the text. More than half (n = 7) of these tweets place emphasis by using asterisks to frame the stressed word or phrase. For example, one tweet reads, "defund and abolish the police. literally *nothing else* will suffice. nothing". Here, the purpose of placing the phrase "nothing else" within asterisks is to create the same effect that capitalizing it would create. The reader is meant to note the phrase "nothing else" as one of particular emphasis within the tweet. A couple of users (n = 2) make use of the relatively recent trend of alternating capitals to convey mockery (Gallucci, 2019) while also adding emphasis to their tweet. For example, one such user wrote

> I got so many videos of police assaulting peaceful citizens today. Nobody was combative. Nobody antagonized them. I saw them beat women, shoot people with rubber bullets, and I myself got fucking dEtAiNeD while walking away. Fuck LAPD for life. #DefundThePolice

The use of alternating capitals conveys that "detainment" was an act that was simultaneously conducted seriously by police officers and complied with derisively by the author of the tweet.

Users producing tweets in this sample use a range of discursive strategies to enhance their message and heighten their visibility to others. For the first two discursive strategies discussed—the use of "#DefundThePolice" and the use of visual media—tweets coming from organizational accounts using the strategy are overrepresented as compared to the overall number of tweets authored from organizational accounts in the sample. This demonstrates that these strategies especially allow organizations to cut through the volume of tweets from individual accounts and make their messages heard.
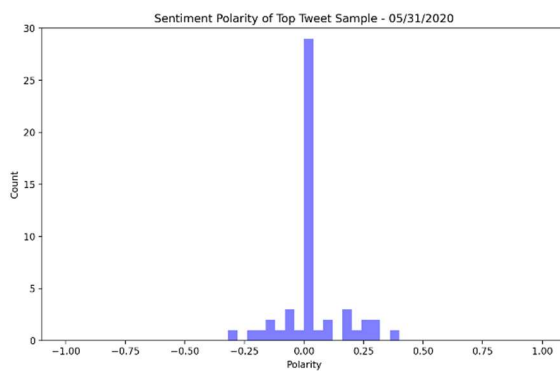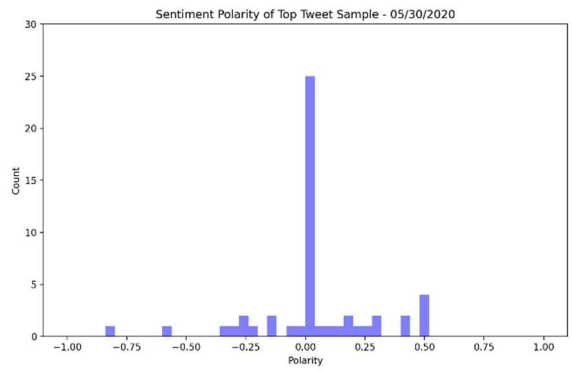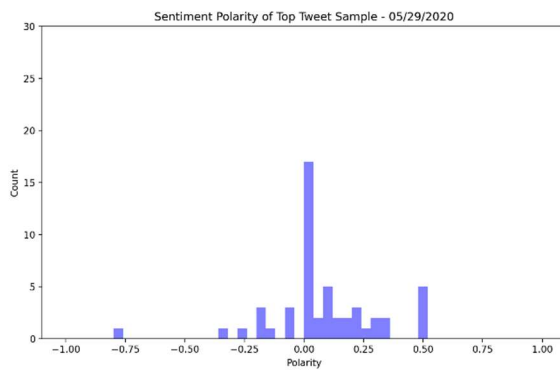
Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment polarity may also be interpreted as a discursive strategy that allows for some tweets to be more visible than others at certain times. However, because sentiment polarity was calculated and quantified differently than other discursive strategies, it is considered here separately. This sample, which was constructed using tweets with the most engagement each day, is especially useful for detecting interesting sentiment polarity patterns.

Sentiment analysis was conducted using the Textblob library for Python described previously. The library generated an individual polarity score for each tweet within the range [-1.0, 1.0], where -1.0 is very negative and 1.0 is very positive. The resulting scores are displayed by day in **Figure 25**.
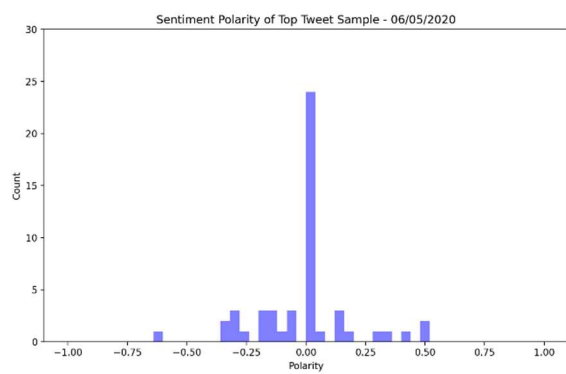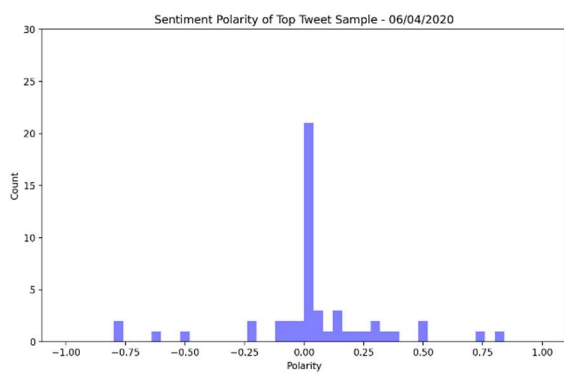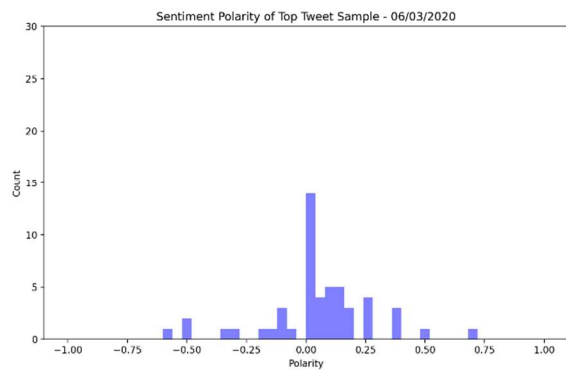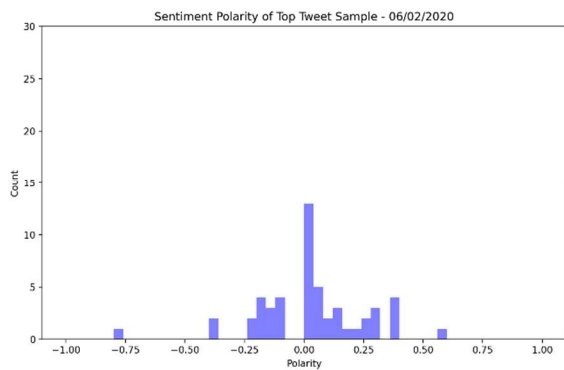
The histograms in Figure 25 show that each day, the average sentiment clusters around 0.0, or neutral sentiment. However, there is a detectable oscillation from day to day; some days, such as May 27 and May 31, have much higher numbers of neutral tweets than others, such as May 28 and June 2. This pattern is better illustrated in **Figure 26** and supports the idea that cognitive-emotional currents helped guide Twitter user engagement with the defund the police campaign. While Bail et al. (2017), in describing cognitive-emotional currents, share how advocacy organizations specifically take advantage of these currents to rise above the noise in congested conversations, the sentiment analysis conducted here seems to support the existence of these currents and their use by a wider variety of online accounts.

Figure 25. Sentiment polarity by day.

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/25/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/26/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/27/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/28/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/29/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/30/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 05/31/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/01/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/02/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/03/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/04/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/05/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/06/2020

Sentiment Polarity of Top Tweet Sample - 06/07/2020

Figure 26. Number of neutral tweets each day.

Days with high concentrations of neutral tweets are succeeded by days with lower concentrations of neutral tweets. For example, May 31 is the day with the highest concentration of neutral tweets. In the days before May 31, beginning on May 28, we see a gradual increase in the number of neutral tweets. In the days following May 31, a corresponding decrease is visible so that by June 2, the number of neutral tweets is roughly equal to that of May 28.

Melissa Gira Grant (2020), a journalist working with *The New Republic Magazine*, authored the top tweet on May 28. In it, she shares one of the earliest explanatory articles about the defund the police campaign, which she wrote, along with the simple message, "It's time to defund the police?? (new, from me)." Between the May 28 and May 31, this article was mentioned in 20 additional tweets in the sample, highlighting a period of more informative and neutral tweeting that peaked on May 31. As Twitter users read the article, familiarized themselves with the defund campaign, and formed thoughts on whether they agreed with its premise, a desire to express more emotive opinions and to elevate more emotive accounts was accommodated by Twitter users, so that by June 2, the peak of neutral tweets once again leveled out. This pattern is repeated several times in the sample, potentially demonstrating the social contagion and subsequent saturation effects that characterize cognitive-emotional currents (Bail et al., 2017).

      The results of the analyses conducted herein illustrate the idea that a variety of factors, including type of account, point of view (i.e., for/against defunding), topics discussed, discursive strategies used, and sentiment polarity, are important in understanding which accounts drive defund the police discourse at a given time. The shifting nature of these factors allows for different tweets and accounts to rise to prominence at various points in the reference period.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study sought to begin understanding the development of the defund the police campaign on Twitter in the first two weeks following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. More specifically, the study sought to characterize and analyze top tweets and the accounts that authored them in order to understand how the conversation was initially generated and then gained prominence and depth during the reference period. From May 25 to June 3, 2020, the vast majority of top tweets were in favor of defunding the police. However, beginning on June 4, tweets against defunding the police began to rise to top status, and the initial veneer of consensus developed in the first part of the reference period began to give way to a more vigorous debate.

Tweets for and against the defund campaign discussed different aspects of and ideas related to the prospect of defunding. For example, key themes in tweets in favor of defunding included the need to protest; the idea of policing as part of a larger carceral system; the need to reinvest funds divested from police departments; and the idea of policing as murder. In contrast, tweets against the defund campaign discussed the idea that police stop rampant crime; the point of view that "defund the police" is bad messaging; the idea that the wealthy will be the only ones unaffected by defunding; and the thought that those who advocating for defunding should do so in their own communities.

Additionally, these tweets used a variety of discursive strategies in order to make their points and to rise to top status. Key discursive strategies include the (dis)use of the hashtagged phrase "#DefundThePolice"; the inclusion of visual media; and the use of written emphasis. A much higher proportion of tweets using #DefundThePolice and/or including visual media are authored by organizational accounts than tweets in the sample overall.

Further complicating the landscape, the shifting distribution of sentiment polarity from day to day reveals that cognitive-emotional currents may have played a role in which

tweets were elevated to top status. For example, days of high sentiment neutrality were preceded and succeeded by days in which sentiment polarity was more distributed.

This study provides a foundation from which to begin understanding the continuing campaign to defund the police on Twitter. Future research should build on this study to enhance this understanding. Potential avenues for future research building on this study include extending this study's methods to a sample that covers a longer time period, and using this study's findings to build predictive models to determine the probability of a given tweet attaining top status.

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