IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 04; Issue no 11: November, 2023
DOI: 10.56734/ijahss.v4n11a4

A CASE STUDY OF BBQ BECKY-THEMED MEMES ON X (FORMERLY TWITTER): USING A BLACK FEMINIST LENS

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Abstract

In 2018, a YouTuber captured a woman on video calling the police on a Black family for having a barbecue in the park. It went viral. Within days, the incident developed into a meme and the instigator, Jennifer Schulte, became known as "BBQ Becky." The public conversations that surfaced on social media featured an image of Schulte on a cellphone reporting the innocuous behaviors of Black people participating in various activities. This case study examines BBQ-Becky themed memes shared on X (formerly Twitter) and how they framed the incident. Our findings support the idea that nontraditional platforms provide alternate messages than those found in mainstream media.

Keywords

Online Memes, X (Formerly Twitter), Bbq Becky, Critical Race Theory, Black Feminism, Race, Gender, Racial Profiling, Visual Representations of Race

Introduction

Viral videos, memes and hashtags help shed light on a long-existing, previously under-documented issue of racial profiling. Frustrated with the inappropriate use of police enforcement, meme creators often use monikers for such cases to inspire change (Nichols & Levonna, 2019). The BBQ-Becky incident is one of the most documented instances of this phenomenon. The moniker, "BBQ Becky" surfaced after an incident during which a YouTuber captured a woman on video calling the police on a Black family for having a barbecue in the park. The woman, Jennifer Schulte, is wearing sunglasses and calling the police on her cellphone in the video titled, "White Woman Called Out for Racially Targeting Black Men Having BBQ in Oakland" (Williams, 2020).

Scholars have studied the BBQ-Becky incident from many angles and disciplines, including law, sociology, and education (e.g., Delfino, 2020; Maddox, 2019; Williams, 2020; Werth, 2021). Maddox (2019) examined the widely viewed "BBQ Becky" meme through the lens of bell hooks' oppositional gaze (1992) to highlight social commentary about racism and race relations in America. Offering another perspective, Gutsche et. al. (2022) examined news portrayals of people in the United States who called 911 to report the everyday behaviors of marginalized groups. They concluded that hashtags and monikers contributed to the process of symbolic annihilation of Black resistance by reducing the seriousness of the social policing they encountered. Likewise, Williams (2020) examined how memes reject dominant society's regulation of Black people in public spaces—making a connection between systemic racism and acts of hatred against the group. The researcher concluded that BBQ Becky-themed memes shared on Black Twitter (now X) disrupt White supremacist logic by framing individuals who report Black people for innocuous reasons as racist—not just disgruntled or entitled. Another study that examines the details of the case, within a lens of geography and gentrification, concludes such actions illustrate how some White women who share spaces with Black people use police force to establish their place in society's racial hierarchy (Werth, 2021).

While these articles offer valuable insights into the BBQ-Becky incident, our extensive literature review revealed few studies that focus on memes from a Critical Race Theory and Black feminist lens. To fill this gap in the literature, this study analyzes the public conversations that emerged on X (formerly Twitter) following the

release of the BBQ Becky video. Specifically, we explore racial profiling and the use of monikers in crisis situations- historically. Next, we examine the inclusion of historically racist narratives in the memes in our study.

Historical Use of Monikers

People have used nicknames throughout history to categorize events or individuals. The monikers, "Boston Strangler" and the "Virginia Shooter," were nicknames for mass shooters in news coverage of their respective cases. Black people created monikers for toxic individuals to warn family members and friends of their personality traits. "Miss Ann" was a common nickname during the period of enslavement for a White woman aware of her privilege used it to get her way (Grigsby Bates, 2020). The moniker reflected Black peoples' fears about security and safety in an oppressive society.

Monikers serve to identify individuals by the circumstances that made them unique. "Becky," for example, is a pejorative moniker for a woman who is clueless about racial and social issues. In 2019, the dictionary publisher *Merriam Webster* wrote that Becky was "increasingly functioning as an epithet, and being used to refer to a White woman who is ignorant of both her privilege and her prejudice." Figure 1 is an example of a BBQ Becky-themed meme.

Figure 1. BBQ Becky-themed memes feature "BBQ Becky" calling police officers on Black people for innocuous activities.

Grigsby Bates (2020) described the modern-day Becky as the sorority sister who states she doesn't "see color." However, she will not vote to admit any Black pledge candidates because they "won't fit in." Grigsby Bates stated, "Karen, on the other hand, can't be racist because she has a Black work friend or neighbor." The "Karen" character found a platform on Reddit after a user posted Karen-themed content about his ex-wife, and a high school student turned it into a subreddit (Romano, 2020). "'Karen' has a similar connotation but is associated with older women" (Can any Karen relate:?: r/AskWomenOver30 - reddit, 2020). The *Weekend Edition* also ran stories on the phenomena in July.

While the BBQ Becky incident is one of the more well-known cases, other women have been spotlighted for similar reasons. Monikers and hashtags help them earn media attention. #GolfcartGail was a 2018 case in which a White female soccer field marshal on a golf cart called police after a Black father yelled at his son not to argue with a referee in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. That same year, #CornerstoreCaroline, whose real name is Theresa Klein, went viral after she falsely accused a 9-year-old Black boy of sexually assaulting her in the Sahara Deli in Brooklyn, New York (Branigin, 2018). Klein was standing in line at a Brooklyn bodega when she felt something rub her backside (Shannon, 2018). She saw a 9-year-old Black boy with a backpack and began arguing with his mother, then walked outside and called 911. "I was just sexually assaulted by a child," she told the dispatcher. Citizens captured videos of the incident, which appeared on social media and digital news sites, using #CornerstoreCaroline (Shannon, 2018).

In another case, Amy Cooper called the police on Christian Cooper, a bird watcher, for asking her to put a leash on her dog (Rosenberg, 2020). Christian Cooper wrote on Facebook that the dog was going "through the plantings." He approached the woman and asked that she leash the animal (Rosenberg, 2020). In the video, Amy Cooper refused and called 911, telling the operator that "there is an African American man. I am in Central Park. "He is recording me and threatening myself and my dog." At one point, Cooper shouted to the operator, "Please send the cops immediately." She was later placed on administrative leave and fired—marking one of the few times someone has been punished for such actions (Miller, 2020). The misdemeanor charge of falsely reporting an incident was dropped in February 2021 after Cooper completed an educational program on racial bias (Bromwich, 2021).

The same year, a White Starbucks supervisor called police officers on two Black men who were preparing for a meeting, and a White person called the police on a Black Yale College student who was napping in a dorm

while studying for finals. #CondoCathy, also known as #ApartmentPatty, put the spotlight on Hilary Brooke Mueller, another White woman who called the police on a Black neighbor as he entered his building in the St. Louis area the same year (Gomez, 2018). Permit Patty called the police on an 8-year-old Black girl selling bottled water. Pool Patrol Paula allegedly assaulted a Black teen and told him he did not belong in the community pool and then called police (Mohdin, 2018).

Similar cases have arisen in which Native Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans have been the victims of attacks related to imagined crimes or outright racism. A Native American woman slapped a White woman after she told her to "go back to Mexico" in an attack at a gas station in Phoenix, Arizona (Geanous, 2020). In another case, a White woman yelled at a Hispanic couple, "Y'all go back to your brown country, b*****s!' Twitter labeled her the "TJ Max Karen (Reyes, 2021). When the couple called her a racist, she yelled, "I'm married to a Black man," and continued calling the couple "brown."

During the pandemic,Asian Americans experienced an increase in attacks—often centering on mask-wearing and blame. A bystander filmed a so-called "Karen" who confronted a woman and pushed away her phone after she had allegedly told the woman to "go back to her country." The explanation of the video said, "Rabid Karen was verbally harassing my mom and I at our hotel, calling us Asian b*****s who should back to our country" (Ke, 2022). Then she assaulted me twice trying to take my phone." Another case centered on an individual who was upset after a Korean news anchor ate dumpling soup for New Year's Eve. She said she was being "very Asian."

BBQ Becky Background

Source: https://imgur.com/MrR6YqW
Figure 2. BBQ Becky-themed memes range from living in the White House to styling hair without a license.

Figure 3 Becky with the good hair offers an example of signifying on Black Twitter. It builds on a song by Beyonce' and good hair as defined by Black culture.

An article that traces the origin of the BBQ Becky meme asserts it surfaced in response to @currentmscook's Twitter post, "Please tell me BBQ Becky with the Terminator sunnies (sic) was standing across the street crying into her phone." The original meme is based on the video of a woman identified as Jennifer Schulte calling police on a Black family holding barbecue at a park was posted on YouTube by Michelle Snider on April 29 just hours after the incident. The story went viral after Snider and her husband, Kenzie Smith, shared it on May 9. During the first call, Schulte, 41, told a male dispatcher that two men were using the grill at a non-designated area in Lake Merritt, demanding that the situation be "dealt with immediately" so "that coals don't burn more children and we don"(sic) must pay more taxes" (Zhao, 2018).

In a second call, she asked the dispatcher why the police had not arrived. The dispatcher responded, "What's the panic over a barbecue? I don't understand. So why are you in an argument with these people? Can you walk away?" She explained that the family followed her out of the park before a female in the background yelled. "You're the one harassing people!" The dispatcher asked her for her name, which she refuses to disclose. "I'm really scared! You gotta come quick!" She responded (Zhao, 2018).

Oakland Police said responding officers took a police report, but no citations were issued, and no arrests were made. On May 24, police released a log that reveals more details about the call. "The officer told dispatchers he reportedly evaluated her for a 5150 psychiatric hold, but determined that she "didn't fit the criteria," according to the report obtained by KTVU-TV" (Jennifer Schulte, 'BBQ Becky:' 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know, 2018). Days after the video went viral, Black Twitter labeled Schulte "BBQ Becky," and the incident developed into a meme featuring her wearing sunglasses, talking on a cellphone while reporting the behaviors of Black people doing various innocuous activities. The memes contributed to a national debate about White tears, racial profiling, and the dangers of living while Black in America (Figure 3).

Meme Culture

Media messages play a role in how people perceive minority groups. They offer a visual image along with text to frame a topic. "Memes reproduce by various means of imitation, and they follow the rules of competitive selection" (Shifman, 2013, p. 373). Memes help facilitate conversations about race, since humor offers a viable alternative that allows individuals to engage in conversations about racial truths and trends (Rossing, 2014).

Previous studies describe memes and identify the role they play in influencing political debate, protest, and online conversations (i.e., Dawkins, 1992; Hristova, 2014; Shifman, 2013). They conclude memes may influence public opinions (Harlow, 2013; Hristova, 2014; Sci & Dare, 2014). For example, Papacharissi (2012) and Florini (2013) observe that Black people use a distinct language to express solidarity and coded messages of humor that build on Black narratives or "signifying."

Memes intentionally convey multiple layers of identity. One example of signifying is offered in the reference to "Becky with the good hair" in the meme in Figure 2. To understand the meme, one must be familiar with the lyrics in Beyoncé's song "Lemonade," *He only wants me when I'm not there / He better call Becky with the good hair*. Beyonce's song refers to a White woman with whom the narrator's partner had an affair. One must also be familiar with the term, "good hair," which refers to Black hair that is long, straight, or wavy (Messino, 2020).

Theoretical Design

CRT and Black Feminist Theory operate under the assumption that scholars may help disrupt dominant narratives and expose how dominance negatively impacts society. They promote the examination of the Black social experience while providing a means to contextualize systemic racism and social movements. In facilitating media studies, they move beyond examination of cultural narratives and stereotypes of Black people and offer steps for advocacy, advancement, and viable solutions for ending systemic racism—particularly for issues like the BBQ Becky incident that involve a Black family.

Black feminism often aims to go beyond traditional representation-themed studies that examine stereotypes and narratives of Black women and provide a dual lens for researchers to authentically investigate the nuances of Blackness through a gender/race-oriented perspective that examines class, sexuality, and social-political issues. Black feminists in the digital sphere often are thought leaders for modern feminism "characterized by (1) an ideological distinction between "civil rights" and "liberation;" (2) critiques of capitalism and nationalism, alongside class analysis; (3) the deconstruction of hierarchical power relations, with emphasis on children, queer and trans folk; and (4) the leadership of queer Black women" (Jones, 2019).

CRT is concerned with consciousness-raising, emancipation, and self-determinism. CRT scholars examine race, racism, and power, and place them in a broader context to include economics, history, and other factors. A primary goal is to re-center inquiry and experience from a marginalized perspective (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991).

Black feminism and CRT have become more important as citizens battle two crises—a racial reckoning and the COVID-19 pandemic. Following George Floyd's death on May 25, 2021, America reached a tipping point. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests took place around the world, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement highlighted how descendants of the enslaved have continued to struggle with systemic racism.

Society and Black Feminism

Black feminists strive for an active commitment to fighting "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression. They have successfully used social media to engage in critical discussions about shared experiences and navigating systemic racism (Williams, 2015; Williams & Gonlin, 2017). Steele (2021) points to the history of Black feminist digital communities in the United States and its ability to decenter White supremacy and patriarchy. Members of the group are changing the landscape of feminism by using social media as a storytelling tool to promote well-known movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. They have also used social media to spotlight racial injustices, such as the BBQ Becky case. Many of the hashtags that are associated with these cases that feature an overreaction and racial profiling have gone viral.

Kendall (2020) notes that social media platforms have made it easier to share inflamed emotions in a public setting. "Facebook and Twitter are places where the marginalized can't be silenced as easily. It's a place where attracting attention to social ills is easier if solutions aren't necessarily forthcoming." On social media, the narratives around anger, especially public anger, can be skewed by the collision of different social norms. But to paraphrase James Baldwin, to be aware of what is happening in this world is to be in an almost perpetual state of rage. Everyone should be angry about injustice, not just those experiencing it. And we can't afford to shy away from anger" (Kendall, 2020, p. 253).

Menes and X (formerly Twitter)

X (formerly Twitter) has helped pave the way for Black communities to control public conversations on systemic racism (Pruitt, 2015). It offers a venue for civic activism or as an active facilitator of deficit-based Black cultural stereotypes (Brock, 2012). Black Twitter includes user-generated content Black people share on topics important to the Black community. Previous studies have defined Black Twitter, compared it with other cultural types, and looked at the prominent hashtags on Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Clark, 2015; Klassen et. al., 2021; Stevens, & Maurantonio, 2018). Such studies are important, since Hispanic and Black social media users (46% and 45%, respectively) are more likely than White users (29%) to say they have looked up information about protests and rallies in their area on social media in the past month (Auxier, 2022).

Black Twitter has evolved to operate as a think tank. Twitter offers an online space for Black people to navigate racism and to challenge racial bias and systemic violence (Brock, 2012; Lavan, 2015; Lee, 2017; Stevens, & Maurantonio, 2018; Klassen et. al., 2021). Peterson-Salahuddin (2022) examined Black feminist hashtag conversations across Twitter and Instagram to expand the current understanding of how Black feminist frame issues. Likewise, Tillery (2019) examined the extent to which members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) used Twitter to communicate ideas about racial issues during the 113th Congress (2013–2014).

The Current Study

Based on this review of the literature, we look specifically at how individuals used memes as a method of activism following the BBQ Becky incident and how they used Black Twitter – in particular – to share memes about it. CRT and Black feminism are all-encompassing in their mission to end oppression.

Three research questions guide this analysis:

RQ_1: What were the general themes of BBQ Becky-themed memes?
RQ_2: How did the memes reflect a narrative of racial profiling and White Privilege?
RQ_3: How did the memes build on popular culture?

Methodology

A primary goal of CRT is to re-center inquiry and experience from a marginalized perspective, in this case—content shared on X (formerly Twitter). In analyses, Delgado and Stefancic highlight the following tenets of CRT: 1) Racism is "ordinary" in American culture, thus is difficult to address because it is not acknowledged; 2) An "interest convergence" because racism advances a large segment of society; therefore, there is little incentive to eradicate it; and 3) A "social construction" which highlights that race is product of social thought and relations.

CRT scholars examine how messages portray underlying ideologies that reflect social relations of domination based on a pervasive yet unobtrusive racial hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1991). Parker and Lynn (2002) characterize CRT as incorporating storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in law and society. They also encourage scholars to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct and to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ono, 2009; Squires, 2010). CRT examines how messages portray underlying ideologies that reflect social relations of domination based on a pervasive yet unobtrusive racial hierarchy (Aylward, 1999; Crenshaw, 1998).

We used the following list of keywords, "BBQ Becky," "Black Twitter," and "memes," and a Twitter search to identify memes about the incident one year after it occurred. We speculated that Black people would be more likely to create memes that include the hashtag #BlackTwitter. A total of 500 memes were downloaded from the site for analysis. The unit of analysis was the entire meme, photo, and caption. We identified the most prominent themes. This analysis revealed the underlying social messages embedded within the memes in our sample.

Findings and Discussion

General Themes in BBQ Becky-Themed Memes

The first research question asked what are the general themes of BBQ Becky-themed memes? Table 1 offers a look at the general conversations shared. The memes impart two general messages: 1) Black people are reported for activities that might help individuals better themselves, 2) a segment of the population is willing to make up stories and/or use tears if it will help stifle progress in marginalized communities. The memes tend to build on news articles and offer general information such as the barbecue's date, time, and location in the park event. There is an even distribution of men and women featured in the photos.

BBQ Becky's implied threat to call the police hints at the expectation from law enforcement to arrest or harm the Black person in the photo because of White privilege. Almost all the pictures feature a woman (wearing sunglasses) who appears to be hiding, making a phone call. The Black people she is contemplating reporting to the authorities are participating in a public activity and are oblivious to her presence.

Themes
Historical reference: Civil Rights movement; Selma; MLK
Black people making progress: BBQ Becky shows up to document Black people making progress, I'm the White House, Golden Globes, etc.
The regulars: Use popular meme templates: Black man on phone, woman, and Bad Luck Brian
White fragility: Permit Patty, Barbecue Becky, Barbecue Becky style of reporting Black people for innocuous crimes
False alarm: BBQ Becky shows up and the person is not really Black, or it is a Black person who sympathizes with White people.

Table 1. Themes that surfaced in BBQ Becky Memes

Civil Rights Movement

The commonality the memes share is that they usually include images of well-known historical figures. They emphasize recognizable historical images that were previously published in notable magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet*. The photographs are recognizable, save for the addition of BBQ Becky, which has been added to make a statement about the BBQ Becky incident. That is the hallmark of a meme; they use a recognizable photo as a base; and the creator adds an image or text to it.

Common memes we encountered included references to civil rights events, progress in the Black community, racial stereotypes, and White fragility. Images with photos from the civil rights movement offer a chance to consider a historical event during which Schulte was not alive. Anachronisms--such as a cellphone, modern clothing, or buildings--offer an off-beat twist to well-known moments in history.

One meme that includes a familiar photo of civil rights leader Rosa Parks includes a caption that reads: "HELLO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION; THIS OLD BLACK LADY IN MY SEAT AGAIN." An image of Parks sitting at the front of the bus has a superimposed image of Becky, who was sitting in the back of the bus and using her phone to report Parks to authorities. The image is a familiar one of Parks wearing an overcoat and glasses. A tailor who decided she was tired of sitting on the back of the bus, Parks refused to give up a seat to a White man and, inadvertently, helped launch the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1955.

Other memes feature a famous photo from the civil rights era that was taken in 1960 when six-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first Black person to attend an all-White elementary school in New Orleans. Our sample included photos of federal marshals escorting Bridges into schools with images of BBQ Becky superimposed into them. One meme has a superimposed image of Becky in the foreground with a cellphone in her hand—in preparation to report Bridges for integrating a White school.

Memes also include images of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One image, shared on theroot.com, features King looking out over the crowd gathered at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington where he made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Becky is featured using her cellphone to call police officers to report him for this historic moment. Meme creators used the same image and other depictions of King with BBQ Becky.

BBQ Becky shows up at other historical events including a civil rights lunch counter sit-in. She is featured reporting on a Black man sitting at a lunch counter with a group of angry White men. The addition of BBQ Becky's photo adds irony, as the civil rights movement was in response to racism, which is still prevalent today. The Montgomery bus boycott and lunch counter sit-ins led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which prohibited discrimination in public places. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed poll taxes and other discriminatory practices to prevent Black peoples and other people of color from voting.

In keeping with the significance of highlighting important historical events with connections to race, former President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, are featured in BBQ Becky-themed memes. One meme features BBQ Becky superimposed into an image of President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama when he was sworn into office as the 44th president of the United States in 2009. Spoiling the joyous occasion is BBQ Becky, who is featured in the image wearing sunglasses and making a phone call on her cellphone. In another meme featuring the first Black president of the U.S., BBQ Becky appears behind him in the Oval Office. Her presence paints him as a criminal—since she is using her cellphone to report him for something he hasn't done. Another White House-themed image gives BBQ Becky another name, "Susan." The caption beneath the superimposed image of BBQ Becky states: "Hello, Officer, it's me, Susan. There is a Black man in the White House. He must have broken in. This cannot be right. I don't feel safe."

The underlying message in many of the memes in this category is Black people are making progress; White people need to monitor them. Many of the images included in memes represent the pinnacle of success—holding office as the U.S. president. But the incidents often target everyday mundane activities, such as selling lemonade, studying in the library, or walking in the park are—actions Americans traditionally consider part of the American Dream.

Pop Culture Icons in BBQ Becky Memes

The second research question asks, how did BBQ Becky-themed memes build on popular culture, and how might they influence perceptions of the incident? Sci & Dare (2014, p. 16) note that memes emerge from "memorable, humorous, or iconic photographs." The photographs are often popularized in society because they have been shared by family members or peers. Memes tend to highlight the "arresting nature" of a photo by "replicating the most eye-catching part of it, as a means to retain the public's attention" (Sci & Dare, 2014, p. 16). In this case, the most notable aspect of the photo was Schulte holding her cell phone and wearing sunglasses. This is the most common part of the image that was photoshopped into memes.

Memes include images from television shows, magazine articles, and videos. The one identifying factor is that they attach to something already popular in society. We saw the regulars, including Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Black Man on Cell Phone, Kermit the Frog, and many others. Ryan Coogler's Black Panther was the top-grossing superhero film of all time in North America in 2018 (McClintock, 2018). It's not surprising that BBQ Becky showed up in a meme featuring the fictional land of Wakanda. The meme shared by LL Kool Dre

(@llkooldre50) included the text: “Hello, Oakland police. This is #BBQBecky. There's a Black man with ten knives in his hands looking at me, and I fear for me live (sic). He has a Gang with him to (sic).” Another meme featured an image from the popular video for Donald Glover’s song, “This Is America.” The video includes metaphors about race and gun violence in America. BBQ Becky is depicted spying on Glover as he and his cast-mates make the video. The topic of the video parallels with the BBQ Becky incident, which involves police officers and Black people.

Another meme highlights the popular Black Guy on Phone icon. These often drew a parallel between the obnoxious nature of both occurrences. The Black Guy on the Phone meme originated after former Republican congressional primary candidate Martin Baker was photographed talking on his cell phone during an event to support Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown in 2014. The meme aligns photos of Schulte and Baker next to one another and includes a caption mentioning their race-related actions. One caption announces: "Black Twitter Meme Council, I respectfully propose that ‘Black Man on Phone' be replaced with "White Lady Spoils BBQ.'" In other memes, the "Black Man on Phone" chastises "BBQ Becky" and offers advice such as, “Karen, we talked about this. First, you must wash the chicken; then season it." Another meme depicts "BBQ Becky reporting "The Wiz," in which Black characters depict the characters in the Wizard of Oz., to which The Black Man on the Phone responds: "You are late, and you are no good at this."

Another meme features "Bad Luck Brian," a staple in the meme-sphere. The BBQ Becky-themed meme in our sample focused on Brian hosting a barbecue for friends and getting reported to the police officers by Becky. This meme was less about race and strictly for fun. It builds on a family meme and adds to an already established log of meme photos, which is one of the attractions of memes. Bad Luck Brian memes feature Kyle Craven, whose fame began after his high school friend Ian Davis posted his intentionally "ridiculous" high school photo on Reddit on January 24, 2012. It went viral.

Imitation is central to a meme's survival. In each meme, Schulte is featured wearing sunglasses and behaving in a sneaky manner. Meme creators use the same photo of her; however, they Photoshop it onto other photos to create different messages with a similar theme—it is wrong to report people for crimes they have not committed. The use of popular icons and other photos traditionally used in pop culture indicates that the BBQ Becky incident struck a nerve in society. There was something about the content of the video and the caller’s behavior that made people want to speak up on behalf of the family she targeted. Memes and the usual cast of characters that appear in them offered a viable platform to speak up against the increase in cases of White women calling police officers on Black people. Individuals use social media to respond to hegemonic mainstream narratives that frame Black people as criminalistic. People were upset that the family was not able to have a barbecue in the park in peace without being interrupted.

False Alarm-Themed Memes

We labeled another group of memes in our sample “false alarm memes” to highlight depictions of BBQ Becky accidentally calling the authorities on individuals who turned out to be White or “OK” Black people. Memes that feature Kanye West and Rachael Dolezal are in this category. Dolezal is a civil-rights advocate and former instructor of Africana education at Eastern Washington University who made national headlines in 2015 after her parents revealed she had misrepresented herself as Black since 2006. In 2013, Dolezal posted a photo of herself with tight curls on Facebook with the comment, "Going with my natural look as I start my 36th year" (Kelly et al., 2012).

Memes include a photo of Dolezal with a photo of BBQ Becky added. She’s posed to report Dolezal, but realizes she is White. Similar memes that feature West include photos of the musician with an image of BBQ Becky next to him ready to make a phone call, but stopping after realizing the Black person she has encountered is “one of the cool ones.” In some cases, superimposing her image into photos of other people served to show she is the ringleader of individuals made famous in popular culture for reporting Black people to authorities for an innocuous act. While these memes are humorous to some audience members, they also offer a lesson—do not overreact to situations that involve people of color because they can have detrimental results.

Debates arose over spotlighting women for these actions. Many debates surfaced regarding the use of monikers for individuals. Wright (2018) pondered if the cutesy names trivialized the actions of this group of women. He speculates that the use of cute nicknames, such as Permit Patty and BBQ Becky, might make dangerous people appear harmless. In other words, the nicknames might shield racist individuals from the consequences they should face for putting innocent lives in danger. To counter this argument, Julie Bindel, a U.K. journalist and author, argues the “Karen” moniker is actually sexist, rather than racist. She believes most incidents in which the names are used are “woman hating” and based on “class prejudice” (Hernandez, 2020).

Other critics believe the memes are not sexist because they are not aimed at all women. Individuals assigned monikers are not always female. While many of the memes that went viral featured women, social media users also labeled men nicknames like “Ken” or "Kevin.” Black men reported a White man who tried to crash their party while they were gathered for a celebration at Cove Park Beach in Stamford, Connecticut. The so-called “Kevin” pulled a knife and used pepper spray on the men who he perceived as a threat. In response to the incident,

one Twitter user posted: "This is a perfect example of how people have DIED in this country due to racism." On July 4, 2020, another meme went viral when Michael Lofthouse, then a chief executive officer for Solid 8 Cloud Transformation, flipped off an Asian family in a restaurant and told them to go back to where they came from. Lofthouse, who is White, was labeled a "Kevin." He later resigned from his position in the wake of the negative social media coverage (Reese, 2020).

Narratives of White Fragility

The third research question asked how did the memes promote racial profiling and reflect a narrative of White fragility? The memes articulate the idea that BBQ Becky was wrong for profiling the Black family in the first place —but she was even more at fault for resorting to tears after she did not get the result she wanted. Another consistent theme that emerged was to think twice before calling police officers, since it could lead to the early deaths of Black men and sometimes, Black women. The memes illustrate key points in DiAngelo's book *White Fragility*. DiAngelo (2018) wrote: Being perceived as White carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges denied to others (p. 24). DiAngelo devotes a chapter in the book to "White Women's Tears," and the meme world seized on that, since there were numerous memes with Becky and other White women crying in memes. In Di Angelo's words, "Whether intended or not, when a White woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her ..." and "people of color are yet abandoned and blamed" (p. 134).

Memes provided access for groups to network, support one another, and express concerns to authority about the power of privilege and White tears. Memes articulate the idea that BBQ Becky was wrong to report the Black family in the first place—but she was even more at fault for resorting to tears after she did not get the result she wanted. The memes provide a means of catharsis for meme creators who fear for the lives of their family members who have experienced similar situations or might become victims in the future. Findings support the idea that nontraditional platforms provide alternate messages than those found in mainstream media. Memes allowed users to express fears about White tears and privilege without fear of backlash. A common thread in the memes was the perceived double standard society has toward Black people in comparison with White people. Many of the memes were found to have a negative connotation with the "fearful White woman" archetype. Studies of humor can play a crucial role in revealing the social inequities that exist in society by analyzing the narratives that appear.

Conclusion

This study examines Black Twitter's portrayal of White women who call police officers on Black people for innocuous actions, such as barbecuing at a park. BBQ Becky-themed memes offered a means for us to continue Black Feminist Theory and CRT research. We chose to highlight it in a case study because it occurred amid a string of viral incidents during which White individuals called authorities on individuals of color for various causes. In 2018, alone, there were several cases revealed in the media and later hashed out on social media. Black Twitter continued to grow in importance in 2019 after America experienced a racial reckoning spurred by the death of George Floyd at the hands of White police officers. Black Twitter offered a forum for problem-solving and discussions on systemic racism. Black people used Twitter to strengthen social support within the Black community. Continued studies of Twitter are important, since they offer a view of the trends in communication for Black who people seek out others with whom they racially identify and draw support (Brock, 2012).

Our analysis adds to the growing body of literature on how people use Black Twitter to respond to social injustices and to drive visibility to discussions about Black life and culture. Findings illustrate Black Twitter's of memes to build community and connect with one another to create, share, and replicate an understanding of the incident using memes. Black Twitter provided a platform for Black individuals to share their views with less fear of backlash, similar to findings by Smit and Bosch (2020), who concluded a Twitter feed provides a space for recognition and group identity for Black people. Memes play a role in influencing narratives and fostering discourse on race-related topics. They include content that creators use to frame a subject, and they can be shared and manipulated to reframe issues for different messaging.

Our analysis indicates Twitter allows Black people to reframe racist experiences and highlight Black excellence despite systemic obstacles to their success. Twitter users connected with their own community members online via the platform to share memes about the BBQ Becky experience. We found that user-generated content was responsive to what has been labeled "fragile Whiteness" with the onslaught of social media memes depicting BBQ Becky reporting Black people participating in various activities, such as sitting in the Whites-only section of a bus or working in the White House. Memes are a play on the progress Black people have made, as well as a testament to the fear that some White people might experience because Black people are making progress. Fear is an underlying theme of each meme. There is always the threat of dying when s police officer is contacted for an innocuous "threat."

Memes continued the conversation beyond the incident and encouraged the creation of images for activists looking to follow the BBQ Becky incident. Meme creators used social media activism to challenge women, like Schulte, for acts of racism where they resorted to White fragility and tears and were usually absolved of responsibility for their actions. Memes we examined place a humorous twist to otherwise serious topics, i.e., White fragility, racial stereotyping, the Black Lives Matter movement, and police brutality. The most salient themes characterized the BBQ Becky incident related to "the Black experience" and "history repeating itself." They represent "part of a long tradition to use humor to try to cope with the reality of White privilege and anti-Blackness."

In this case, memes played a role in facilitating change. Legislators have passed legislation in several states to address instances of frivolous calls to law enforcement based on discrimination. The Oregon State Senate passed a bill that allows victims of racially biased emergency calls to sue those who make the calls with discriminatory intentions. A similar bill proposed in New York, the Caution Against Racially Exploitative Non-Emergencies Act — or the CAREN Act – died. It was a tongue-in-cheek nod to "Karen," the viral nickname used to label individuals who raise trivial complaints to a person in authority, whether it be a manager or the police. Similar bills were introduced in other states.The laws have a similar thread—they make it illegal to fabricate a 911 report based on someone's race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender, or sexual orientation.

Scholars must continue to study social media trends using various paradigms and case studies. Social media users are innovative and creative in using humor to acknowledge social and systemic racism by developing memes that resonate with their audience(s), particularly those who understand overt and subtle systemic racism and/or racist policies against people of color. Our study serves as a springboard to support and encourage imperative discussions, empirical studies, and critical cultural analyses on the tenets of CRT. In the present socio-political climate, memes continue to grow in importance, particularly regarding issues related to race and gender. We offer evidence that user- generated content and social media activism play a role in keeping conversations about social issues, such as systemic racism in the media cycle, which may, in turn, facilitate change in laws – as well as in the mindsets of individuals.

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