

# Public Art and Social Justice: The Impact of Street Murals in the Black Lives Matter Movement Protests

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**Abstract.** Street murals became widely visible after the killing of George Floyd in 2020, when the BLM movement expanded across major U.S. cities. This study aimed to investigate the impact street murals had on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Activists painted street murals of victims, the Black Lives Matter slogan, armed police officers, and messages to support the movement. The qualitative study recruited eight participants for interviews. Participants were college students selected through convenience sampling. Interviews were recorded via Zoom, transcribed, and coded using Nvivo to identify patterns in the data. Thematic analysis revealed that murals united the public in support of BLM, enlightened the public about racial injustices, and increased calls for police reforms. However, the destruction and removal of some murals reveals political divisions in the country, which will delay racial justice in the country. The study concludes that murals are powerful forms of public art that activists can use to highlight social problems and increase support. The study is significant because understanding how the public responds to visual activism reveals the crucial role of art in social change.

**Keywords:** Street Murals; BLM; Art Activism; Social Justice.

## 1. Introduction

Social justice, particularly racial justice, has remained a contentious issue in America for many decades. African Americans have fought for equality and fairness due to prolonged injustices, such as police brutality and systemic racial discrimination. Art plays an important role in exposing these injustices and challenging society to invent new norms (Bell & Desai, 2011). During the 2020 BLM protests, activists used public art to rally support and highlight injustices caused by police brutality. Street murals appeared in various cities across the country. Protestors painted murals of George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and other victims of police brutality. Additionally, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” was painted on roads and streets across the country. Further, murals of police in riot gear, enslaved African Americans, and abstractions of freedom emerged in various cities. These murals were a form of public art used to highlight police brutality as an injustice against African Americans and unite people behind a common cause.

This study investigates the role street murals played in highlighting the problem of racial injustice and educating the public about racial relations in the country. Local governments worked with activists to install BLM street murals to show support for the fight against racial discrimination. The united approach heightened the rally cry for racial justice and police reforms. For example, leaders in Minneapolis promised to ‘end’ the police department (Phelps, Ward, & Frazier, 2021). The study answered the following research questions.

1. In what ways did BLM street murals embed messages of police brutality in the country?
2. How did the public perceive and interpret the murals?
3. How should the BLM movement interpret the removal of these murals by city governments?

## 2. Literature Review

In social justice, art attacks controversial issues and helps the public understand the underlying phenomena. Artists use various art forms, such as paintings, sculptures, and murals, to criticize controversial and political issues, such as discrimination and racism (Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012).

Images, paintings, songs, and poems address contentious issues that contribute to injustices against certain groups in society. Artists and activists use art to draw attention to political and social issues whose solution requires a combined effort in the country. In addition, art offers a unique way for the audience to construct knowledge, analyze an idea, or act (Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). Artists use their creativity to design artwork that explains phenomena or provokes the audience to think critically about an issue. Art also educates the audience about social challenges, such as racial discrimination.

During the BLM protests, street murals became a common public art used to draw attention to police brutality and racial injustices against African Americans. Murals were effective forms of activism because they united the community. Artists painted murals, and allies added messages on the murals to communicate their support for the BLM movement (Hemmerich, 2021). Allies, such as White people, held up signs near the murals, marched along the street, and wore supportive clothing to show solidarity with BLM protestors. Art transformed public spaces into canvases of protest and resistance (Tait, 2023). Murals of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other victims of police brutality were plastered on walls in cities across America. Activists painted “Black Lives Matter” on major streets across the country to communicate their dissatisfaction with police departments in the country. These murals transformed roads and walls into canvases of dissent and desire for a just America.

Despite the noble reason behind the murals, political divisiveness was inevitable. In Portland, a mural of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor was vandalized (Bastos & Blandy, 2024). The mural had become a community board where people wrote messages of hope and left flowers to memorialize the deceased. In Tulsa, the city government removed the BLM mural due to political pressure from Republican leaders (Lennon, 2022). Similar removals occurred in other parts of the country. Conservative politicians interfered with public art meant to increase support for BLM and social justice. Lennon (2022) sees the removal as an intervention to preserve bureaucracies that form the basis of racial capitalism. The BLM protests called for the disbandment of police departments or the implementation of policing reforms. These changes would alter the balance of power and threaten the political class that relies on police officers to maintain its rule over African Americans. Therefore, removing murals neutralized the threat to power by making BLM less prominent in certain cities.

Hall’s theory of representation was adopted for this study. The theory posits that cultures use signs, images, and language as representations of real-world objects, events, or people (Hall, 2020). Meaning is created through interpretations of the image or signs, which are influenced by the relationship between the objects and the mental representation. Hall (2020) argued that meaning is not fixed but is produced as people interact with images or signs. This theory is ideal for interpreting BLM street murals because audiences produce different meanings. The murals are symbols of the fight for racial justice and equality in the country, but some people saw them as acts of rebellion and defacement of public infrastructure. However, African Americans and their allies saw the murals as a reminder of systemic injustices and police brutality that have held back the Black community for many centuries.

### **3. Methodology**

The goal of this research was to understand how people interpreted the symbolic message communicated by BLM murals. Therefore, qualitative research was ideal for exploring the rich contextual interpretations of the murals. Qualitative research provides deeper insights into real-world problems (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). The study used a semi-structured interview to collect data. Interviews were ideal for exploring perspectives and opinions about the impact of murals on BLM protests. Semi-structured interviews were selected due to their flexibility since they allow researchers to explore responses further and collect more detailed responses.

The target group was four male students and four female students from Santa Monica College art department. These students were familiar with public art, social justice, and the BLM movement. The

Also, discussions of racial relations are common on social media, increasing the possibility that university students are familiar with the BLM movement and racial inequalities. The study used convenience sampling to recruit eight participants. In this type of sampling, participants are selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study (Golzar, Noor, & Tajik, 2022). For this study, classmates and friends were chosen due to their availability for interviews. The eight participants received informed consent forms that explained the purpose of the study. It also explained that participation was voluntary, the session would be recorded, and data would be used for this study only. The interview followed an outline that started with welcoming the participants and explaining the purpose of this study. The middle section contained nine open-ended questions related to the topic. The final part of the interview thanked the participants for their contribution to the study.

The interviews occurred via Zoom and lasted an average of 30 minutes. Zoom was convenient than face-to-face meetings since some participants lived far from the university. Others were only available at night after classes and work. Zoom overcame this challenge by allowing the interviews to be conducted at night. As each interview was recorded on Zoom, it was also transcribed on Otter AI for easy data analysis. The study used thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data captured during the interviews. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in the dataset (Lochmiller, 2021). Data was coded using NVivo software to extract and organize themes from the interview responses.

#### 4. Results

**Table 1.** Themes from the Interviews

Theme	Explanation
Unification power	<p>“the murals united the people to fight against police brutality.”</p> <p>“Although I am not Black, it was hard to ignore the protest since there were murals of BLM everywhere.”</p> <p>“Images of actual people killed by police become a powerful force that compelled me to support the movement.”</p>
Enlightenment	<p>“everywhere we went, there was a mural of George Floyd or another victim. We could not ignore them and had to learn about racial injustices against.”</p>
Need for police reforms	<p>“When I saw the images of young people killed by police and the violent protests, I felt the unfairness Black people had endured for a long time.”</p> <p>“The murals became a constant reminder that Black people have suffered for so long due to police brutality.”</p>
Unresolved injustices	<p>“I saw city employees and shop owners removing some of the BLM murals. I think they might disappear and the fight for justice will be lost.”</p> <p>“Most murals have disappeared from the public space, yet police reforms and racial justice remain elusive.”</p> <p>“People can still see the BLM murals in museums, but I think they are less effective.”</p>

Four themes emerged from the interviews as summarized in Table 1. The first theme was the unifying power of street murals. Participants stated that images of victims of police brutality made them sympathize with the cause. The online and offline visibility of the BLM street murals united the public behind the push for police reforms and an end to racial injustices. The murals led to unprecedented multiracial mass rallies because they unified the public. The second theme was enlightenment, since activists used murals to highlight persistent racial injustices. Participants explained that the murals forced them to learn about racial injustice and police brutality. Murals painted on the streets challenged the public to support BLM protests and learn about the historical injustices that caused the protests. The third theme was the urgent need for police reforms. Participants explained that images of people who had died highlighted the need for urgent changes to law enforcement policies to protect Black people from police brutality. The fourth theme was the delayed resolution of racial injustices. Participants expressed concern over the slow progress in structures of racial discrimination since the BLM protests have subsided, and some of the murals

were removed. Participants added that their removal was erasing the progress made during the protests. However, one participant called for their removal since most had fallen into disrepair, turning them into an eyesore in the public space.

BLM protests led to positive policy changes that improve policing. For example, no-knock warrants were banned following the death of Breonna Taylor (Ray, 2022). Officers are also expected to wear body cameras to record their interactions with citizens. Further, successful BLM protests inspired the use of art to stop anti-Asian violence. In New York, paintings of Asian people were erected to communicate that Asians are part of the American community (Wang, 2021). BLM protests also shifted public opinion since 54% of white people now perceive police brutality as a sign of broader racial problems (Ray, 2022). The shift in opinion increased support for BLM, which will inspire more policy changes to promote racial equality. The effective use of public art and the change in public perception indicate that more people in America are willing to confront racial discrimination to push the country toward racial equality. As more people acknowledge problems caused by the racial division, support for policies that promote equality will increase.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the importance of street murals in the fight for social justice. According to Hall's theory of representation, symbols reflect an objective reality (Hall, 2020). The murals painted across America became symbols of unconscionable deaths perpetrated by law enforcement officers. Murals of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other victims became representations of thousands of people who had died due to police brutality in the country. They also represented the elusive fight for racial equality in the country. Decades of protests since the Civil Rights Movement had failed to create a society that accorded Black people the same rights and protections as White people. The murals unified multiracial groups in America and across the world. People from different groups outside America protested in solidarity with the BLM activists to increase support for reforms, which would end police brutality. The murals had a strong impact because they transformed streets into canvases of protest and exposed the faces of victims of police brutality to the public (Tait, 2023). Since these murals were plastered all over major cities, they reached an extensive audience (Rodriguez & Tuschling, 2021). People across the world could see the actual faces of victims, which motivated them to support the protests. These images sparked outrage by reminding the public about the inequities in policing (Bastos & Blandy, 2024). People could identify with the people who had died due to police brutality, which motivated them to join the protests. Since the murals were impossible to ignore, large sections of the public across the 50 states learned about the movement, and many supported it.

BLM murals also increase enlightenment on racial injustices and police brutality in America. Public art gives the audience a new perspective to analyse ideas and construct knowledge (Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). In America, racial protests were not a new phenomenon, but the widespread street murals were a new tactic. For example, activists in Washington painted a 35-foot-tall yellow mural along 16th Street NW (Associated Press, 2025). The giant mural became a constant reminder of racial injustice in the country. In other cities, murals on streets and walls drew attention to the inequality that had affected Black people for many centuries.

Murals are powerful forms of protest because they unite the people behind a common cause. Participants stated that murals united activists, supporters, and communities to campaign against police brutality. Activists create visual art in public spaces to reach an extensive audience and expose them to political and social injustices (Rodriguez & Tuschling, 2021). Murals are effective because they are non-violent and reach many people passing near the artwork. Although the meaning might not be apparent to everyone, they unite people behind a common cause and draw the public's attention to social injustices. For example, a mural of George Floyd elicits outrage against police brutality and racial injustice. The sight of "Black Lives Matter" painted on a major street urged communities to unite to support Black people who have suffered at the hands of violent police officers.

Murals of victims and police officers in riot gear heightened the push for police reforms. Images of victims of police brutality sparked outrage by reminding the public about the inequality in policing (Bastos & Blandy, 2024). Activists called for urgent reforms or the disbandment of police departments to end the injustices. The murals used images and words to create action against oppressive police departments that had contributed to the deaths of thousands of African Americans across the country. The constant reminder ensured that the public and political leaders were constantly reminded of the need for police reforms. The powerful push led to police reforms and political promises that improved relations between law enforcement and the public.

Despite the powerful protests, participants expressed concern that removing BLM murals would delay the achievement. Initially, some cities financed the installation of murals, this support was more of an attempt to subdue the protest rather than address the racial injustices. According to Lennon (2022), cities funded murals as a buffer against the protests rather than a bridge to structural changes that would end police brutality. City governments removed some murals to end dissent and protests without implementing viable solutions to the policing problem (Samayeen, Wong, & McCarthy, 2022). Although some murals still exist, most have disappeared over time, leading to the concern that racial justice will remain elusive. The removal of the symbols of the BLM movement will delay the implementation of long-lasting solutions to resolve the racial injustices.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has indicated that murals are powerful forms of public art that activists use to fight for social justice. The BLM movement used street murals to rally the public to protest police brutality after several African Americans died due to police action. Murals united the public and created unprecedented multiracial support for the protests and a rallying call for police reforms. The unity among protestors across the world indicates the power of public art in the fight for social justice. Murals also draw attention to the cause and educate the public about their meaning. In the BLM protests, murals enlightened the public about police brutality and racial injustices in the country. The success attained through BLM street murals supports the conclusion that public art is a powerful tool that unites people behind a common cause.

Although the study achieved its objectives, there are still some limitations. First, the interviews required significant effort for scheduling and data collection. Second, the process was time-consuming. Third, a small sample size was used, which lowered generalizability. Future research should address these limitations by employing mixed methods research that combines qualitative and quantitative data to increase generalizability. Researchers should also recruit a larger sample size and conduct longer interviews.

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