

# Labeled by the Police: Examining Social Media Posts About People of Color

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## Introduction

Labeling is a sociocultural tool that places individuals in restrictive categories rather than explore the complexity of a person and the cultural aspects that have an effect on someone's personality and identity. This topic is a vital part of learning about society's dysfunctionality and an individual's role in it because of the way it affects how people treat others but also the way that a person treats themselves.

With the increase of police brutality cases, questioning why these things happen helps with understanding how race relates and what to do about it. Biases that result in discrimination are due to the stigmas communities of color were given years ago but that are still present today.

Stigma is a negative shameful quality given to a person. Communities of color are more likely to be stigmatized which affects the way that people of color begin to see themselves through the labels they are given and the way this affects their beliefs in who they are, what they are capable of, and ultimately, their identity. My research of people of color will specifically focused on African Americans, Hispanics, and Middle Eastern people.

This paper seeks to research the different labels given to people of color. This is a greater topic that will be pushed by and researched through the question of, what are the negative labels people of color are given by law enforcement?

## Literature Review

This project is a data driven research paper that focuses on how labels and stigmas affect the way that an individual sees themselves and their role in society. To be more specific, this project will focus on labels that law enforcements have given people of color, whether in their professional or personal lives. This relates to the way officers treat people of color and any bias or discrimination they might have that affects the way they do their job. In an article by Mora Reinka and Colin Leach, they state that, "In an analysis of public records and media, the Washington Post estimated that 60% of the 965 people shot and killed by police in 2015 were unarmed Blacks and Latinos. More specifically, unarmed Black men were seven times more likely to be killed by police than unarmed White men" (2017).

Labels affects the view of an individual's value and significance. This is another reason why this topic is extremely significant. Because of the way that these labels can place expectations on individuals that belong to a certain group. It also creates a barrier between different races and ethnicities. "From a public identity perspective, a key component of a stigmatizing label is language that separates 'us' and 'them'..." (Denver, D. Bushway and Pickett, 2017). Stigmas push people away and take away the idea that a person can be more than what we assume they are.

## Method

Through this recourse, I collected a sample of fifty-one Facebook posts and comments, made by police officers, that are considered racist and enforce derogatory labels. These samples were selected out of all the data based on racist remarks, comments, jokes and memes made by police officers who worked in a city.

The codes have been categorized by: group of people (race/ethnicity/people of color), profanity, desensitization of bias, and types of insults. According to Thomas, "These themes or categories are the essential building blocks of your analysis" (2017, p. 417).

## Results

The Facebook posts that were studied for the purpose of this research paper each showed various consistent themes that demonstrate the negative labels police officers have towards people of color. This data shows a clear bias with police officers that work in the major cities and as a result, come in contact with people of color through their work for a majority of their day.

The question of, what labels police officers give people of color, are explored through the themes of, groups of people found in the data, stereotypes of African Americans, Muslims, and Hispanics, labels in the form of racist jokes, and finally labels each group had in common as found through the data.

There were twenty-one (41%) direct posts and comments that ranged from calling these groups of people, "animals (6), savages(3), terrorists (6), killers (4)" and two (0.1%) comments that declared we should get rid of this group of people.

## Discussion

Being a woman of color, facing some sort of discrimination was always bound to happen at one point or another. Based on labels I have been given for being Hispanic and a woman. Coming to Messiah College, a predominantly white institution, my minority status stared me in the face. The issues of injustice I was beginning to learn about in my courses along with the injustices I was becoming aware of that were still happening today sparked an interest in learning more and becoming connected to people who are still hurting. This interest turned to a passion of social justice and activism. People like Bryan Stevenson and Michelle Alexander became inspirational models of how to lift our voices against the injustices people of color still face today.

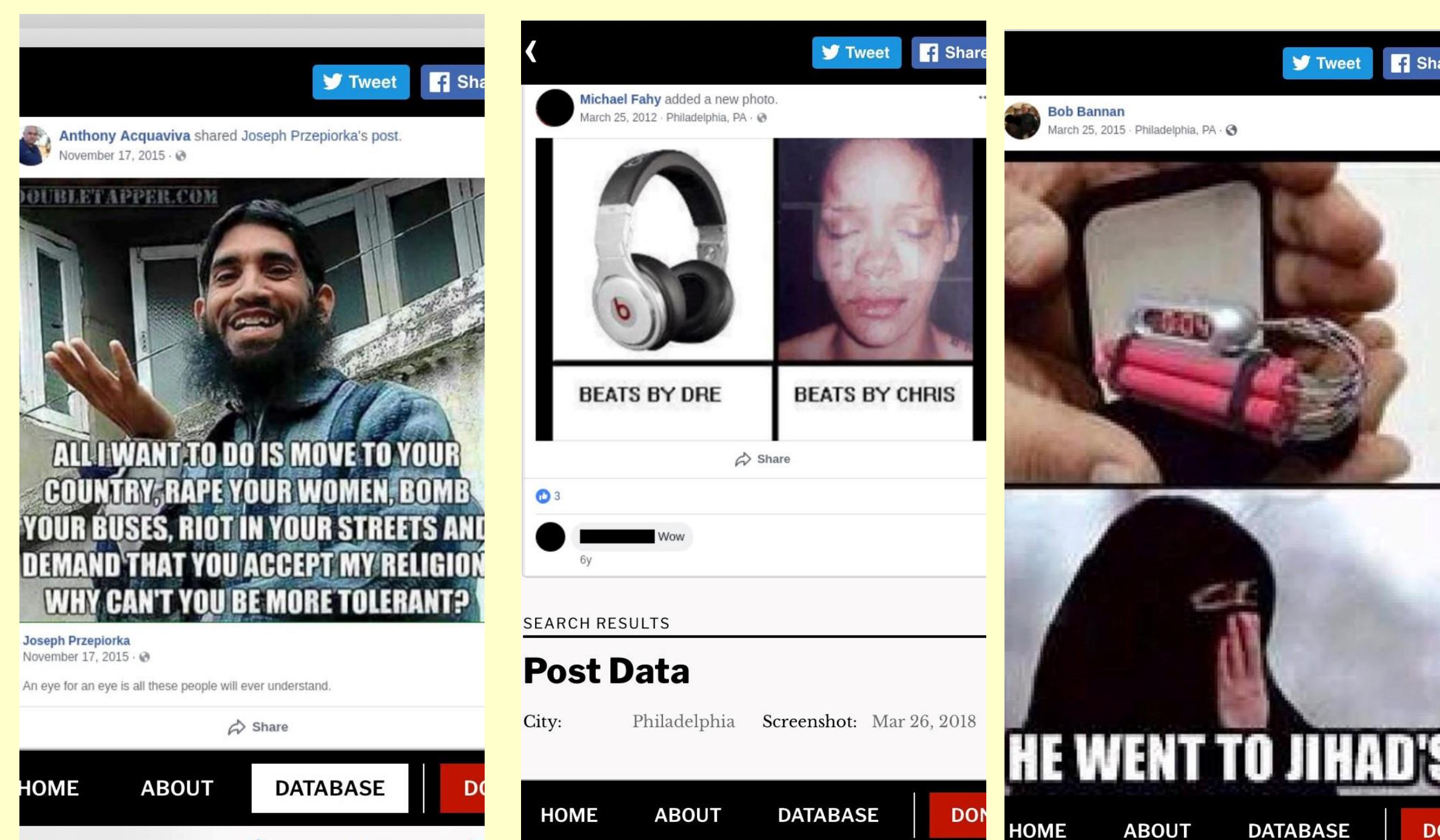
Negative labels have caused emotional, mental, and physical harm. It is what makes this a problem that every person should care to understand and change even if it takes time. In Letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King Jr., King Jr. says, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (1963). This quote is a call to recognize the impact any form of injustice has on society as a whole even if it does not appear to at first. The aftermath is something that will be a part of us all. The stigmas police officers have of people of color are extremely relevant to this call made by Dr. King Jr.

Recognizing stigmas in our police forces around the United States is an important factor to explore as a Christian Nation but also important for Messiah College to recognize and have a voice in as a Christian Institution. As James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

## Conclusion

These findings support the well-known belief that bias results in discrimination and brutality. This is shown through the insensitive and racist fifty-one Facebook posts and comments. The Plain View Project began because people of color in Philadelphia felt unsafe in their neighborhoods with police officers patrolling. The police were seen as untrustworthy and dangerous. In relation to this, the Mapping Police Violence group, claims that, "Nearly 1 in 3 black people killed by the police in 2015 were identified as unarmed, though the actual number is likely higher due to underreporting. Only 13 of the 104 cases in 2015 where an unarmed black person was killed by police resulted in officer(s) being charged with a crime." This is what causes fear of police officers. Hundreds of deaths but lack of conviction and "justice."

This project explored the labels police officers had toward people of color. I would hope that through this research and other research on this topic, police officers would be held more accountable for the way labels impact how they treat people of color.



## References

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