

Black Struggles in *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R.: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The death of George Floyd's in May 2020 has raised the popularity of the phrase "I can't breathe" as a statement against racism. This phrase inspired musician H.E.R., to write a song called *I Can't Breathe*, which raises the issue of not only police brutality but also racism against black people in general. The objective of this study is to analyze the ideological structures and visual components in the song and examine how these aspects contribute to the Black Lives Matter movement. The lyrics and music video will be analyzed using multimodal discourse analysis. The findings of the lyrics and video analysis indicate that white superiority and violence towards black people are the root cause of the continuing protests against black racism. By using multimodal discourse analysis, this study establishes a strong connection between *I Can't Breathe* and Black Lives Matter. The song serves as a protest aligning with the Black Lives Matter movement. The context behind the racial issues and the values of the movement in tackling the issues are conveyed clearly through the ideological structures and visual components of the song.

Keywords: black racism; Black Lives Matter; I Can't Breathe; song analysis; multimodal discourse analysis

ABSTRAK

Perjuangan Kulit Hitam dalam Lagu *I Can't Breathe* karya H.E.R.: Analisis Wacana Multimodal. Kematian George Floyd pada bulan Mei 2020 menimbulkan popularitas atas frasa "*I can't breathe*" sebagai pertentangan rasisme. Frasa ini menginspirasi H.E.R., seorang musisi, untuk menulis lagu berjudul *I Can't Breathe*, yang tidak hanya berbicara tentang isu kekerasan polisi, tetapi juga rasisme terhadap kulit hitam secara keseluruhan. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis struktur ideologi dan komponen visual dalam lagu tersebut, dan mengamati apakah gerakan *Black Lives Matter* didukung oleh aspek-aspek tersebut. Lirik dan video klip lagu ini akan dianalisis menggunakan analisis wacana multimodal. Berdasarkan analisis lirik dan video, ditemukan adanya indikasi bahwa dominasi dan kekerasan yang dilakukan orang kulit putih terhadap kulit hitam adalah masalah utama dari protes sosial yang ada. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana multimodal, penelitian ini mendefinisikan hubungan yang kuat antara lagu *I Can't Breathe* dengan gerakan *Black Lives Matter*. Lagu ini berperan sebagai sebuah protes yang mendukung *Black Lives Matter*. Konteks dari isu rasisme dan juga nilai-nilai sosial dari gerakan *Black Lives Matter* disampaikan dengan jelas melalui struktur ideologi dan komponen visual lagu tersebut.

Kata kunci: rasisme; Black Lives Matter; I Can't Breathe; analisis lagu; analisis wacana multimodal

Introduction

African-American rights are still being fought for until this day. In fact, "I can't breathe" is a sentence that represents discriminations and violence towards black people. On May 25th, 2020, a 46-year-old black man, George Floyd, was killed by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, in Minnesota, America. The weapon which Chauvin used to kill Floyd is nothing but his own body part. He pinned down Floyd's neck with his leg to the ground, ignoring the fact that he said he could not breathe for the umpteenth time. "I can't breathe" eventually became Floyd's last word before he died on the ground, which sparked a mass protest from citizens all around the world. The line "Black Lives Matter" once again was used frequently on social media and field protests. Not only on social media and public places, but the protest was also being expressed through arts. The song *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R. is one example of this phenomenon. Titled by the last word from Floyd, the song was released on June 19th, 2020, along with a music video released a week after. Unfortunately, not many people knew this song until it won a Grammy Award for being the "Best Song of the Year" in 2021. Although the song is named after a recent tragedy, the content of the song covers a whole history of racism towards the African-Americans. Therefore, it is interesting to study how H.E.R. managed to fit a whole story of black racism in a four-minute song.

There have been some studies that specifically discuss how song addresses the issue of racism towards black people. Mathew (2018) studied how a remarkable old song *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday conveyed the trauma that black people have due to slavery. Another study by Williams (2020) analyzed several songs by Prince and found that the song *Baltimore* specifically discusses black racism because Prince himself is a victim of discriminations. The study also mentioned that *Baltimore* stands with the Black Lives Matter movement, but further explanation about the stance is fairly missing. Moreover, some studies do not only analyze song lyrics, but also its music

videos. One example is a study by Rastas & Seye (2019), which put interest in African musician's songs in the context of Finland. The study found that black artists need to put a lot of effort to speak up about racism, but their music videos depict the normal, daily lives of black people in Finland, with the hope that white people can see that black people are no different than them. In addition, Acosta (2018) and Margaretha & Panjaitan (2020) studied a more recent song *This is America* by Childish Gambino using multimodal discourse analysis. Acosta (2018) argued that *This is America* focuses on the issue of gun control and African-American stereotypes by using Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to analyze the song lyrics and Machin's visual semiotics to analyze the music video. On the other hand, Margaretha & Panjaitan (2020), using Manchin's adaptation of critical discourse analysis and Kress & Leeuwen's visual grammar analysis approach, argued that the song brings up the issue of black commodification.

Among the previous studies by Mathew (2018), Williams (2020), Rastas & Seye (2019), Margaretha & Panjaitan (2020), and Acosta (2018), only one study by Williams (2020), related to the issue of black racism in a song to the Black Lives Matter movement. However, there is still a lack of explanation on to what extent the song relates to the movement. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze the ideological structures and visual components in *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R. and examine how the Black Lives Matter is related to these aspects. By using sociocognitive discourse analysis by Van Dijk (2015) and visual semiotic analysis by Machin (2010), this study contributes to the field of multimodal discourse studies, which pays attention to textual and visual aspects used to create meaning in a discourse. In doing so, this research attempts to answer two questions. First, how do the ideological structures of the song *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R. (2020) depict racism towards black people? Second, how do the visual components in the music video support the Black Lives Matter movement? In order to unpack these questions, some concepts related to the research will first be described in the next subsections.

Literature Review

Police brutality in the United States

One of the main reasons behind police violence towards African-Americans is white supremacy. According to Fanon and Mills (as cited in Tolliver et al., 2016), white supremacy is a political system which exploits a certain group of people for the benefit of white people. This system of exploitation is justified by the mindset that the white race is superior and the black race is inferior. Aymer (2016) stated that racial profiling is one result of white supremacy. Racial profiling refers to any action done by the police with the basis of race, ethnicity, or national origin rather than a behavior or information of criminality (Ramirez et al., 2000, as cited in Aymer, 2016). Hence, police brutality towards African-Americans can be considered as racial profiling, since the violence is done based on the look of a certain race and not necessarily their criminality. Adedoyin et al. (2019) noted that police brutality has been happening since the era of slavery. Back then, "Slave Patrols and Night Watchers" were hurting, lynching, mutilating, and castrating slaves in order to get them to work or to punish them for certain mistakes. Although this brutality happened a long time ago, the political systems of slavery seems to be maintained until the present time, resulted in police brutality (Tolliver et al., 2016). *I can't breathe* has become an expression linked to this issue. Eric Garner and George Floyd are two men who died of suffocation by a police officer. Apata (2020) described air as "the embodiment of freedom". Thus, when someone takes away air from other people, he or she is taking away the rights and freedom of those people. Air itself is invisible, which makes racism become invisible as well when it is done through suffocation. Eventually, Apata concluded that the expression *I can't breathe* enables us to perceive suffocation as an invisible weapon of racism.

Black Lives Matter Movement

In response to police brutality, Black Lives Matter was born as a collective protest. Hicks (2020)

defined Black Lives Matter as a contemporary movement evolving from a social media hashtag to an international activist movement. It puts emphasis on the fact that black citizens have been more likely to die at the hands of police officers rather than white citizens. Not that the movement is asserting that black lives matter more than white lives, but it highlights the fact that black lives have not necessarily mattered and have been devalued in American history (Hicks, 2020). Black Lives Matter also rings a bell to the Civil Rights Movement back in the 1960s. Hicks argued that both movements are fighting for the same matter, which is civil rights for marginalized and discriminated people. Shor (2015) also stated that Black Lives Matter is an adaptation of past social movements, particularly the Civil Rights Movement. However, Black Lives Matter has new strategies that emphasize intersectionality or the inclusion of race, gender, and class in current-day's context. Hicks agreed to this as well, stating that the roles of women are more significant in Black Lives Matter, as it is led and influenced by women and black queers.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Paltridge (2012, 170) explains that multimodal discourse analysis is a concept that acknowledges language as one among a range of semiotic resources, such as gesture, image, and music, used to make meaning in human communications. Thus, multimodal discourse analysis considers how modalities, such as gesture or image, are combined with words to make meaning. This paper considers the same thing in analyzing *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R.. Before looking at the music video, critical discourse analysis of the lyrics will be conducted in order to see power relations without yet any visualization. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a research approach primarily focused on examining how written and spoken discourse within the socio-political context represent, reproduce, and challenge social power abuse, dominance, and inequality (Van Dijk, 2015). Van Dijk also uses the term critical discourse studies (CDS) to refer to the critical point of view in the area of discourse studies.

Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach in CDS looks at three components of discourse, which are cognitive component, social component, and discourse component. This study will focus on the discourse component of the song *I Can't Breathe*, particularly its ideological structures, because a discourse component explains how discourse can play a role in constructing power abuse or resistance in society. Among the discourse components, the ideological structures enlighten the underlying attitudes and ideologies in a discourse. Additionally, to analyze the music video of *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R., this research will use visual semiotic analysis. Machin (2010) draws on the semiotic theory of Barthes (1973, 1977) to see how images denote and connote meanings. Some important connotators of meaning from this theory are poses, gaze, social distance, objects, settings, salience, and modality. These visual elements are considered because they tell the 'attitude' of the artists and how they try to communicate meanings to the audience.

Research Method

The analysis of H.E.R.'s song *I Can't Breathe* is done through several steps. The first step is to analyze the song lyrics without yet looking at the music video. The lyrics will be analyzed using Van Dijk's (2015) sociocognitive approach of critical discourse studies. Because this study focuses on the issue of racism, this part of analysis mainly focuses on the ideological structures of the lyrics. Ideological structures according to Van Dijk (2015) include polarization, pronouns, identification, emphasis of self-descriptions, activities, norms and values, and interests. The second step is to analyze the music video based on Machin's (2010) visual semiotic analysis. Machin (2010) believes that artists' visualization, whether from their album cover or music video, conveys certain meanings to the audience. The visual components that are considered in this study are poses, gaze, social distance, objects, settings, salience, and modality. The study also analyzes how these visual components of the song relate to the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, a conclusion is drawn based on the results and discussion.

Finding and Discussion

Lyrics analysis

Polarization

Van Dijk (2015, p.73) highlights that there is a polarization of underlying ideologies, in which the ingroup is depicted positively while the outgroup is portrayed negatively. In the lyrics of *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R., the ingroup is represented by black people, whereas the outgroup is represented by white people. The lyrics that represent the black community as the ingroup are:

Be thankful we are God-fearing / Because we do not seek revenge / We seek justice

Meanwhile, these are the lyrics that represent the white community as the outgroup:

Starting a war, screaming "Peace" at the same time / All the corruption, injustice, the same crimes / You're taking my life from me / You are desensitized to pulling triggers on innocent lives / But disparage a man based on the color of his skin

It can be seen from the lyrics that black people are represented positively from their spirituality and humanity aspects, in which they do not seek revenge for racism. On the other hand, white people are represented as violent, corrupt, murderers, insensitive, and racist. These findings show that the negative representation of white people outnumbers the positive representation of black people, meaning that polarization in the song leads to the emphasis of negative other-descriptions and less emphasis on negative self-descriptions if there is any.

Pronouns

The ingroup showing their ideologies usually uses the pronoun *we/us/our*, and the outgroup is referred to as *they/them/their*. In the song lyrics, black people as the ingroup do not only refer to themselves, i.e., *we/us*, but also *I/me* and *her*. However, *we* is also used to refer to both black and white people collectively. Moreover, the ingroup mostly refers to the outgroup (white people) as *you/your*, not *they/them/their*. The use of pronouns for black people found in the lyrics are:

*Always a problem if **we** do or don't fight / And **we** die, **we** don't have the same right / What's it gonna take for someone to defend **her**? / I can't breathe / You're taking my life from **me** / The structure was made to make **us** the enemy / Be thankful **we** are God-fearing / Because **we** do not seek revenge / **We** seek justice, **we** are past fear / **We** are fed up eating your sh*t*

Pronouns for white people:

*You're taking my life from me / All of the names **you** refuse to remember / **You** are desensitized to pulling triggers on innocent lives / These wounds sink deeper than the bullet **your** entitled hands could ever reach / generations of supremacy resulting in **your** ignorant, privileged eyes*

Pronouns for both black and white people:

*If **we** all agree that **we**'re equal as people, then why can't **we** see what is evil? / How do **we** cope when **we** don't love each other? / **We** breathe the same and **we** bleed the same but still, **we** don't see the same*

H.E.R mostly uses the pronoun we to refer to black people, especially when talking about rights, struggles, and justice, while us is used to highlight white supremacy which has been rooted in American society and adopted to discriminate against black people. Her is also used to refer to a black person who is marginalized, seeking for defense. Additionally, I and me are used to show that the singer herself, representing the black community, is being mistreated and threatened. On the other hand, the pronouns referring to white people are you and your. The lyrics found in the song depict their wrongdoings, such as murders, forgetting the names of the murdered, and being ignorant. The people being called out for murders are most likely police officers, since the song title itself refers to recent police killing tragedy and not everyone is in possession of guns, as the lyrics pointed out to "pulling triggers" and "the bullet". Lastly, H.E.R. also refers to both black and white people collectively using the pronoun we. The lyrics found in this part are calls for sympathy and humanity directed to white people.

Identification

Identity is another prominent aspect showing ideology. Members of ideological groups tend to explicitly identify themselves as part of their group. For instance, a feminist tends to express "As a feminist, I..." in certain discourses. Surprisingly, in the case of *I Can't Breathe*, there is a lack of self-identification from black people as the ingroup. There is only one finding of identification as the "people of color", which comes from these lyrics:

Do not say you do not see color / When you see us, see us

The identification found is not as direct as expected, as the word color is not following the terms "I am ..." or "we are ...". However, H.E.R also does not blatantly mention the race of the outgroup. Thus, it is possible that she wants the audience to infer themselves regarding the races being involved in the song lyrics.

Activities

Ideological groups are usually self-identified by their activities, such as what they 'do' or 'must do'. Some examples of the activities can be protecting the in-group and attacking the other group. In *I Can't Breathe*, black people's activities are defending themselves and seeking justice. Activities are found in these lyrics:

Always a problem if we do or don't fight / Will anyone fight for me? / We seek justice

Fight is a significant word found as a part of the activities. The lyrics imply that black people have the option to either fight or not when facing injustice, and they are also asking other people to fight along for or with them. The reason behind this might be because it is not only black people's responsibility to tackle racism, but also other races'. If other races do not feel superior than black and white race, then they are in position to fight along for equality too.

Norms and Values

Ideologies are built upon norms and values. In the song, black people are opposing the white supremacy ideology because they value equality and justice. Some key lyrics found are:

*If we all agree that we're equal as people,
then why can't we see what is evil? / How do
we judge off the color? / Equality is walking
without intuition / We seek justice*

With a form of questions in the lyrics, H.E.R. is questioning humanity by using the keywords *equal*, *evil*, and *judge off*. The lyrics signify that black people are not normalizing racism even though it has been present in America for generations after generations. Therefore, justice is perceived as valuable in this matter.

Interests

In ideological discourse, it is common to find references of interests. It can be basic resources like food, shelter, and health, or symbolic resources such as knowledge and status. In *I Can't Breathe*, the interests are mostly drawn to symbolic resources, specifically status. As the main issue in the song is racism against the black race, H.E.R. representing the black race is in great desire of equal status. Interest of status is particularly noticeable in accordance to media representations, as found in these lyrics:

*The revolution is not televised / Media per-
ception is forced down the throats of closed
minds / So it's lies in the headlines*

The lyrics refer to the problems of media manipulation, particularly when protests are not being represented in the media and when the media do not present the truth in order to stay aligned with the white supremacy ideology. Hence, it makes sense if black people demand for equal media representations, as they want the truth about racism and protests to be represented as it is in the media.

In short, the structures of polarization, pronouns, identification, activities, norms and values, and interests describe the kinds of discriminations against black people and their responses towards them. Van Dijk (2015, p.73) suggests that the discourse structures mentioned above often reflect the underlying attitudes and ideologies of dominant social groups. Polarization and pronouns in the lyrics of *I Can't Breathe* suggest that white supremacy is the ideology that

underlies discriminations against black people. The two aspects indicate that there is a gap in social status between the white race and the black race, in which one is dominant and the other is marginalized. Although the identification regarding the races is indirect, it can be implied that the song speaks from the perspective of black people, since the singer herself is African-American, and she uses the pronouns *I* and *we* in the lyrics. It is found that the white group is depicted as being ignorant about the acts of violence, corruptions, and murders that their people have done. On the other hand, the black group is described to be constantly struggling to fight against this racism through the aspect of activities. Their interests and values regarding equality and justice are also shown in the structures. One of the noticeable interests of equality is regarding media representations because their protests against racism are not yet represented fairly in the media.

Visual Analysis

Pose

Postures must say something about the band or the artist. In other words, how they appear on images or videos communicate certain meanings to the audience. Interestingly, H.E.R. does not appear at all on the music video of *I Can't Breathe*. The first two and a half minutes of the video show people protesting around the streets. The rest of the video only shows the names of black people who have been killed by police officers, with George Floyd's name being the center of attention. However, after the video credits, the album cover of *I Can't Breathe* shows up for three seconds on the screen. The cover itself is an animated version of H.E.R. holding a sign that says "I Can't Breathe", all in capital letters. This posture indicates that H.E.R. is on a protest, supported by the sunglasses and the urban buildings in the background.

Gaze

Gaze is another important aspect that communicates meaning to the audience. When the artist is looking directly at the audience, it means that the audience is acknowledged, and some kind of a response is demanded (Machin, 2010, p. 40).

However, when the gaze is towards somewhere else, the audience is invited to observe the scene around the artist. In the album cover (Figure 1), H.E.R is looking directly at the audience, although her eyes are covered under the sunglasses. Nonetheless, her facial expression can be seen from the eyebrows and the tears falling down the cheeks. This vulnerability is shown to indicate that she is asking for sympathy from the audience. On the other hand, the people protesting in the music video generally do not look at the audience, indicating that they are focused on the activity they are doing instead of the viewers. Few of the protesters notice the camera, hence looking at the audience, but they continue on protesting instead of trying to communicate with the audience.

Social Distance

Social distance refers to how close the image is with the audience, which can further be described by close shot, medium shot, and long shot. All three shots appear in the video of *I Can't Breathe*. First, a long shot shows streets being crowded by protesters. Some of the scenes are even recorded by a drone in the sky, making the audience feel like a bystander observing the massive protest. Second, a medium shot brings the audience closer to the protesters, as the audience can see the protesters marching forward and shouting words even though the footage is muted. Lastly, a close shot mostly



Figure 1. *I Can't Breathe* album cover (H.E.R., 2020)

shows the signs that the protesters are holding. The audience can see the wordings of the signs clearly, and many of them say “Black Lives Matter”. Additionally, a close shot also highlighted drawings of George Floyd displayed on the streets. With three different kinds of shots, the audience is able to observe everything from the protest, from a wide distance to very close details.



Figure 2. Long shot (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 3. Medium shot (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 4. Close shot (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 5. Close shot (H.E.R., 2020)

Objects

The most significant objects found in the video are protest signs. The words written on the signs vary, but the ones being highlighted in the video are written “Black Lives Matter”. Figure 4 is one example. Other objects spotted are some sunglasses, hats, and umbrellas. Sunglasses can be seen in the album cover (Figure 1) and a hat and umbrella in Figure 6 from the music video. These objects provide protection from sunlight as well as rain, indicating that the protesters are prepared for any weather conditions at the time when the protest takes place. Moreover, a paging horn speaker and microphone are plainly visible in the video (Figure 7 and Figure 8), indicating that the protesters want their voices to be loud and clear. In addition, flowers (Figure 9) are also significant because they indicate condolences towards George Floyd and other victims of police brutality.

Settings

Settings in a discourse can be used to communicate general ideas, values, identities, and actions. The setting of time of the music video is the present time, particularly in 2020, after George Floyd’s death. This is inferred based on the drawings and news of George Floyd shown in the video.



Figure 6. Umbrella and hat (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 7. Horn speaker (H.E.R., 2020)

As for the setting of place, there are many cities and countries involved, namely Syria, Belgium, New York (US), Auckland (NZ), and London (UK). Regardless of the cities and countries, all the protests take place on the streets, particularly in the urban areas. This indicates that people all around the world are taking actions to seek justice for George Floyd and for black lives in general.

Saliency

Saliency refers to the enhancement of specific features within visual compositions to draw the audience’s attention. Various elements can demonstrate saliency, such as cultural symbols, focus, color, tone, size, foregrounding, and overlapping. The features showing saliency in the *I Can't Breathe* music video are cultural symbols, color, focus, and foregrounding.

Cultural symbols are symbols that have certain meanings to a group of people. In the music video, a cultural symbol found is the black fist, which refers to a clenched and raised fist. The black fist as a cultural symbol represents power, resistance, and the Black Lives Matter movement itself.

The meaning behind the Black Lives Matter movement is further depicted by colors, particularly red and yellow. The music video entirely uses a



Figure 8. Microphone (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 9. Flowers (H.E.R., 2020)

black-and-white effect. However, in minute 2:23, George Floyd's name is colored muted-red among the other names colored white, and it turns into a bold red in minute 3:44. During the outro, there are also some sentences written in yellow, which are: *we can't breathe*, *silence is violence*, and *black lives matter*.

Since the music video is using a black-and-white color scheme from the beginning, the appearance of two other colors gives meaning to a specific name and sentences. From minute 2:23 until 4:08, the names of the victims of police brutality are presented on the screen. Among approximately 179 names colored in white, George Floyd's name is colored red. This may signify that the song and video of *I Can't Breathe* is heavily based on George Floyd's case, but the composers also want to acknowledge other black people who are also victims of police brutality. These victims are the reason why the Black Lives Matter movement is established in the first place, and their names deserve to be seen the way George Floyd's case has taken the public's attention. Following this matter, there are three sentences colored yellow, which are *we can't breathe*, *silence is violence*, and *black lives matter*. "*We can't breathe*" as the first sentence appearing after the victims' names further

indicate that the names presented are people who had suffered due to police brutality, but not everyone gained the recognition like George Floyd did. Thus, came the second sentence, "*Silence is violence*", which indicates that ignoring the issue is also a form of violence. Consequently, the sentence "*Black lives matter*" shows up quite literally as a statement that the victims' lives, as well as all black lives, matter. The victims died due to awful treatments and misjudgment from police officers, when they could have been treated fairly if those police officers had valued their lives.

Moreover, the variety of camera focus adds another meaning to the Black Lives Matter protests. With wide focus (see Figure 2), the camera captured a large area of the streets being filled with so many protesters. The settings also take place in different cities and countries, as mentioned in the settings analysis of the video. This shows that the Black Lives Matter movement has a massive, international support. As the camera focus goes deeper to specific objects like drawings of Floyd (see Figure 5), this also shows the reason behind the protests, bringing about the issue of police brutality all over again. The foregrounding element further emphasizes the issue; a man being foregrounded in front of the Capitol building symbolizes resistance towards the flawed system in America. In short, these salient features describe the meanings of the Black Lives Matter movement by emphasizing its culturally shared symbols, the reasons behind the protests, and that the movement is widely supported across the country and abroad.



Figure 10. Black fist (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 11. Red color (H.E.R., 2020)



Figure 12. Yellow color (H.E.R., 2020)

Modality

Modality refers to how realistic a representation is throughout the images. The music video is indeed realistic since the footage is taken from the real protests occurring in different cities and countries. Furthermore, some digital effects are added to enhance the modality. The most noticeable effect is the black-and-white color scheme. It is possible that the effect is added so that the skin colors of the people would be indistinguishable, creating an imaginative world in which all people are equal. Another effect added is slow-motion for some footage, which makes the video easier to be processed by the audience because they can see more objects that are present in the protests. Lastly, the original audio from all footage is muted and replaced by the song itself. Instead of lowering the modality, the audio replacement adds more context and value to the Black Lives Matter protests.

In order to know the real audio from the footage, a trace to some of the original footage is conducted, particularly those which came from VICE News' Youtube channel. The footage from Figure 7 is taken from a video titled "*Anti-Police Brutality Protests Are Going National Even in a Pandemic*", around minute 1:32 to 1:35. The sound from this original video is a man chanting "I can't breathe" three times through a horn speaker. Meanwhile, Figure 8 referred to another video titled "*George Floyd Protests Around the World Are Calling for Racial Justice*", around minute 1:51 to 1:58. The man with a microphone was chanting "Black lives matter" three times, followed by the crowds around him for three times as well. Thus, "I can't breathe" and "Black lives matter" are chanted both in the two news coverage and in H.E.R.'s song. However, H.E.R adds more depth into it by expressing her concerns about police brutality and black discriminations that have been going on for centuries. As can be taken from the lyrics analysis, H.E.R.'s voice represents the black community in fighting against racial injustice. Through the ideological structures, the lyrics brings about the racial divisions between whites and blacks, as well as the norms, values, and interests of the black community regarding this racial issue. Hence, muting the audio from the original footage may

be H.E.R.'s way in delivering more background behind the slogans "I can't breathe" and "Black lives matter", while still using the footage to illustrate her voice as a protest against racial injustice.

To put it briefly, the visual components of the music video support the Black Lives Matter movement by giving it a fair representation in the media, showing the context and reasoning behind the movement. The aspect of pose and gaze enable the audience to observe the scene and ambience of the Black Lives Matter protests back in middle 2020. The audience can also see how major the protests are through the footage's social distance and settings. Moreover, objects in the video, such as clothing attributes and a microphone, indicate that people around the world are prepared to take racial issues seriously through protests. The context of the protests, which was George Floyd's death due to police brutality, is also visible through the appearance of his pictures and drawings on the streets. Further explanations on the protests are conveyed through the features of salience and modality. Salient features, particularly colors, highlighted the names of police brutality victims as the main reason behind the Black Lives Matter movement, and digital effects such as audio replacement adds more context and reasoning behind the slogans "I Can't Breathe" and "Black Lives Matter".

All in all, it can be summarized from the song lyrics analysis that *I Can't Breathe* describes white people as violent and ignorant by highlighting the issue of police brutality. H.E.R. is representing black people's voice to fight against this issue because they value justice and equality. However, some lyrics from Verse 3 are left unanalyzed because they cannot be classified into any of Van Dijk's ideological structures categories. For example, the lyrics that put black people as the receiver of racist actions, such as: "*Stripped of bloodlines, whipped and confined*" and "*Generations and generations of fear, pain, and anxiety*", are not analyzed because the representation of the ingroup is not positive (polarization), and no pronouns are present. Meanwhile, the seven aspects of Machin's visual semiotic theory found in the music video unveil the essence of the Black Lives Matter movement as the consequence

of a prolonged racial injustice. The aspects allow the audience to understand the issues that trigger the Black Lives Matter movement, its purposes, and how it gets supported around the world.

Conclusion

In the United States of America, white supremacy remains a dominant belief, which causes racism against people of color, particularly the black community as articulated in the song *I Can't Breathe* by H.E.R.. The results demonstrated that *I Can't Breathe* is an anti-racist discourse that challenges racist people in non-violent ways. In line with previous studies by Acosta (2018), Rastas & Seye (2019), and Margaretha & Panjaitan (2020), this study found that the song speaks up about the issue of racism from the perspective of black people. The ideological structures of the song depict racism towards black people by defining the social gap between the two races; the white race as the dominant group is represented as violent and ignorant, while the black race is the victim that has to fight against this issue through social movements. The song lyrics mostly emphasize the negative representations of white people as the dominating group through the use of polarization and pronouns, while the responses from black people are visible in the aspect of activities, norms and values, and interests. From these three aspects, it is inferred that black people's responses are to fight against racism, towards justice and equality.

While acts of racism are emphasized in the lyrics, the music video focuses on visualizing the responses towards it. Contrary to the previous studies which found that music videos support or add layers to the issues found in the song lyrics, this study found that the video of *I Can't Breathe* acts as the continuity of the lyrics, resulting in a cause-and-effect relationship between the lyrics and the video. That is, racist actions will result in social protests. The music video specifically portrays the Black Lives Matter protests which follows the death of George Floyd in May 2020. Through its visual components, the music video lends support to the Black Lives Matter movement by demonstrating the motivations and objectives of the movement

and giving it a meaningful representation in the media. With the absence of the singer herself in the video, the focus of the video is put on protesters marching around the streets in different areas of the world. Close shots in the video also allowed the audience to see significant objects in the protests, such as sign protests with "Black Lives Matter" written on them and drawings of George Floyd displayed on the streets. Other objects such as a hat, umbrella, microphone, and horn speaker also indicate that people were prepared to protest against racial issues. In addition, salient elements highlighted the message of the Black Lives Matter protests itself, which is resistance towards racism, supported by people from all over the world. The use of digital effects only makes the message stronger; through slow-motion, the audience can see objects and actions in the protests more clearly. The song, as a replacement to the original audio of the protests, adds more context and meanings into the Black Lives Matter movement.

All in all, multimodal discourse analysis provides a way in examining racial issues in popular music. By using this method, the correlation between the song *I Can't Breathe* and the Black Lives Matter movement can be made through examining certain aspects of the song lyrics and the music video. The song itself is a form of protest against racism towards African-Americans. The singer expresses the black community's position as a victim of racism, especially police brutality, through a structured songwriting. She further carries this protest in the music video by using footage of the Black Lives Matter movements along with digital elements that contribute to deliver the messages she wants to convey. The messages are: racism towards the African-Americans is based on the belief of white supremacy, and it should not be normalized; hence, the Black Lives Matter acts as a contemporary movement of resistance towards this issue, and it is massively supported by citizens worldwide until the black lives truly matter in the eyes of police officers and white citizens who have been discriminating them. Multimodal discourse analysis helps this study in examining that message because it provides theories that can look deeper into the underlying ideologies in the song lyrics and

the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement in the music video. However, it is important to note that some parts of the discourse might not be covered in the analysis depending on the theories used. This study unintentionally leaves out some parts of the song lyrics that do not fall into Van Dijk's ideological structures categories. Therefore, it might be a good option for future research to experiment with other discourse analysis theories outside of the sociocognitive approach.

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