

#BlackLivesMatter:

How Twitter is Igniting the “New Civil Rights Movement”


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INTRODUCTION


Over the past couple of years, Twitter has become the main outlet for users all around the world to voice their opinions on several matters, ranging from personal anecdotes to views on political affairs. With the increased use of Twitter for social commentary, several different activist movements have arisen as a result. The common feature between each of these different activist movements is the use of a hashtag (#) in front of a word or short phrase to convey the entire meaning of the movement in a concise and quick manner. Several examples of these hashtag phrases popularized through Twitter are the #MeToo movement, which gave recognition to women who had been previously sexually harassed or assaulted, and #lovewins, which was popularized by the push towards same-sex marriage and marriage equalities. However, the most popular and prevalent hashtag as of recently has been ~~the~~ #blacklivesmatter (BLM), which ~~gives recognition to~~ African-Americans who were killed extrajudicially by white police officers (Gallagher et al, 2018). 

The #blacklivesmatter movement began as a response to African-American teenager Michael Brown was ~~shot~~  and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, which as a response led to the Ferguson Riots and nationwide unrest associated with the killing. The phrase “black lives matter” soon became the unofficial chant for the movements and has remained the chant during the following protests on the same subject.

As of recently, following the death of George Floyd and other cases of police brutality amongst the African-American community, #blacklivesmatter has regained its popularity through social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram. With more and more social media

users stating their opinions while using the hashtags, several organized protests across the United States (and some in Europe) have happened as a result. In addition, several celebrities and corporations, such as Nike, have used their platform to speak about the issue of systemic racism and #blacklivesmatter to help towards policy change. But although the hashtag #blacklivesmatter has been the popular choice by many users, many people have been against the use of this hashtag as it only applies to one group and have, as a result, used the hashtag #alllivesmatter as a counterprotest to the protest of #blacklivesmatter.

METHODOLOGY

To choose the certain hashtag to use for this research, I created a Twitter account to be able to view which type of hashtags were on the *Trending* section, a section that shows which hashtags on Twitter were being the most used in an hour, day, or week. On the *Trending* section, it showed that #Avatar, #DonaldTrump, #Jcole, #blacklivesmatter, #Pride, and #Russia ~~was the~~ Tweets that several thousand people were speaking about the most. From there, I broke down the criteria for each tweet, determining whether it would be controversial enough to research about, but not too wide-ranging to look into (Keib et al) . I chose not to use #Avatar and #Jcole as I felt that they did not have context that I could use from academic journals and papers that the other trending hashtags had possessed. I also se not to use #DonaldTrump and #Russia due to the fact that the two topics have so many details related to them that it would be difficult to connect tweets from Twitter together. Ultimately, I chose the #blacklivesmatter hashtag because I personally have more experience related to this topic from prior research and believe that it

would offer more perspectives from people who are pro-BLM and from those who are anti-BLM.

After I determined that I wanted to use the *#blacklivesmatter* hashtag, I then installed on my computer an application programming interface (API) called a Twitter Archiving Google Sheet (TAGS). Using TAGS, I entered the hashtag *#blacklivesmatter* into a search bar and then pressed “Run now!”, which after running compiled thousands of random tweets that recently used the hashtag *#blacklivesmatter*. For the efficacy of the research, I broke down the amount of tweets that were compiled by creating a filter in the Google Sheet that allowed me to remove tweets that used the letters “RT”, denoting that the tweet is a retweet from someone else. After the “RT” tweets were removed, I saved the tweets in row 1 to row 250 and deleted the remaining tweets in the sheet. This allowed me to go into more analysis of the randomized tweets for the study. In order to categorize the tweets into a sufficient manner for the study, I determined a couple of codes that I could use to show where each tweet, or the user of that tweet, falls under to show possible relationships between categories and activist influence. Ultimately, five categories were created in which the appeal, stance, political leaning, and rationale of the tweet were analyzed, with the category of whether the tweet mentions *#alllivesmatter*:

| Category | Definition |
|----------------------------|---|
| Appeal | Three different types of appeals: logos, where the user tweets with logic or reasoning get their point across. Pathos, where the user tweets with emotion to win someone over. Ethos, where the user may have authority and trust in the situation to make them credible. |
| Stance | Stance shows whether or not the user is for the movement of #blacklivesmatter. |
| Rationale | Rationale shows why the user is tweeting what they are tweeting and how they are tweeting it. This could show the motives of whether the user is trying to be an informant of the situation, if it is for political gain, or for an organization/charity. |
| Political Leaning | Using a combination of the tweet itself and the user's prior tweets on their profile, political leaning shows whether the user falls towards the left or right of the political spectrum. |
| Mention of #alllivesmatter | This category shows whether or not the tweet mentions the hashtag #alllivesmatter, or a certain aspect that relates to this hashtag. |

Figure A 

DATA ANALYSIS

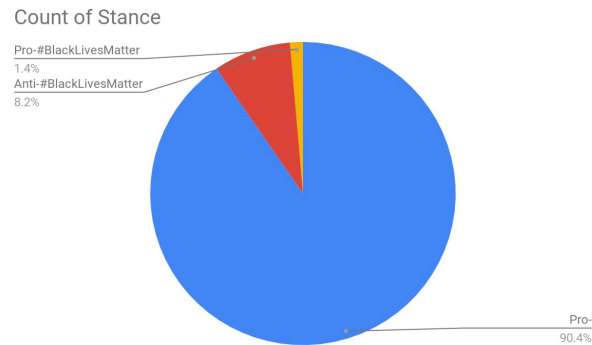


Figure B

As shown in *Figure B*, a pie chart was used to show the percentage of the tweets that were used that were pro-#blacklivesmatter and anti-#blacklivesmatter. According to the pie chart, about 91.8% of the tweets were pro-#blacklivesmatter whereas 8.2% of the tweets were against the #blacklivesmatter hashtag.

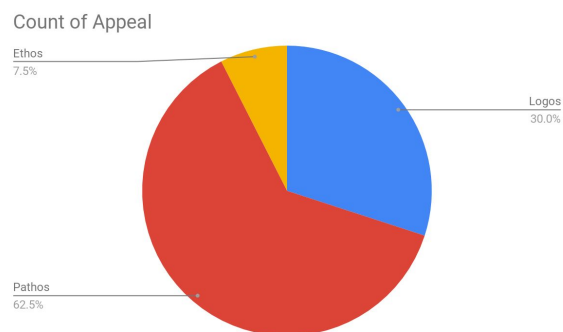


Figure C

In *Figure C*, a pie chart was again used to show the percentages of tweets that used the three different types of literary appeals. As seen in the pie chart, the appeal of Pathos was used

the most by Twitter users with 62.5% of the tweets representing strong emotions, whereas ethos was used the least prevalent with 7.5% of the tweets using this appeal.

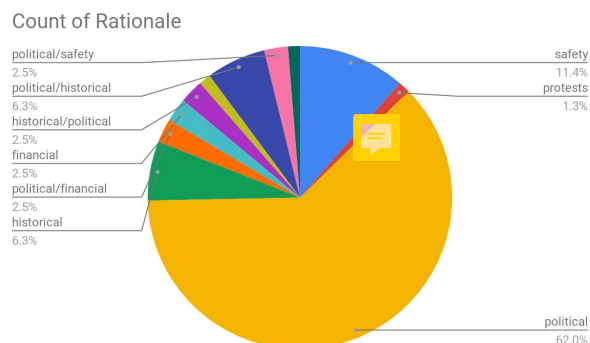


Figure D

In *Figure D*, this pie chart represented the data for the rationale behind the tweet. There were several different categories that were used to determine the rationale behind the tweet, but tweets with a political purpose had the highest proportion with a percentage of 62% being with a political purpose.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDIES

Following the data that was presented and the tweets that were analyzed, it was found that, based off of the amount of tweets in the study, the majority of Twitter users around the #blacklivesmatter hashtag tends to be in support of the movement. As many of the tweets seemed to be in a simple conversation tone, there were also many tweets that took the form of an informant, informing others about lesser known #blacklivesmatter facts or scheduled protests around larger cities. For instance, a tweet that was heavily retweeted was from Joshua Potash that said “I don’t know how #blacklivesmatter protests stopped showing up on TLs (timelines),

but there were protests in: NYC, ..., Aurora.” From this tweet, I noticed that several hundred Twitter users retweeted this message onto their account. As a result, I decided to view Joshua Potash’s account and his previous tweets and replies to find that he is a current civil rights activist with about 97,200 followers on Twitter. Most of his tweets are related to #blacklivesmatter in which he informs others about nearby protests around the country, criticizes Donald Trump, and stresses the importance of continuing the civil unrest to push for policy change. With the use of lesser known leaders such as Joshua Potash and celebrities using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, the message being conveyed can be quickly sent to important lawmakers in different cities around the United States, as they know they may have a personal gain by having the trust of these people.

However, the use of this hashtag does not only apply to the rich and the famous. Just recently on June 2nd, 2020, organizations dedicated to helping African-Americans and fixing the imbalanced judicial towards minorities created a social media event called #BlackoutTuesday in which social media users posts a black picture with the caption #BlackoutTuesday. As many people have not been able to actively protest due to health restrictions from Covid-19 or fear of violent outbreaks, millions of social media users used this hashtag, along with #BlackoutTuesday to defend the lives of the African-Americans Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, who had each died earlier in 2020. As the millions of people joined in to this event, bills soon began loom in Congress, as ideas of lesser police interaction from another movement of #defundthepolice also began to arise. With the use of Twitter, or other social media sites, users are able to speak freely and controversially about the topics that several other people are also speaking about. With these connected communities, the users could be moving forward in a

direction that reflects a positive change in society, or the opposite in which the thoughts they release divert from the important issues at hand, which could easily be supported by several other users of the same thought.

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