#BlackLivesMatter: How Twitter is Igniting the "New Civil Rights Movement"

Aaron Allen

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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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 social media aims to spread awareness for African-Americans who were killed extrajudicially by white police officers (Gallagher et al, 2018).

The #blacklivesmatter movement began as a response to the death of African-American teenager Michael Brown who was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. As a response, many people attended organized protests in the city of Ferguson, which soon 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* 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) . 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 the 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

When determining the appeal that the social media user is using in the tweet, the tweet is

analyzed by the specific word choice, grammar, and punctuation usage. For a tweet that uses

extreme word choice (i.e. vulgarity), emotional adjectives that describe a devastating event, or

speech that aims to bring the audience together, the tweet is more associated with being

considered Pathos (Mshvenieradze, 2013). When a tweet aims to win an audience over by using

specific facts, statistics, and a justified rationale behind the argument, the tweet is associated

with Logos. Least commonly in the case with #blacklivesmatter hashtag, when a tweet applies

more solely on the speaker of the tweet, for instance using persuasion due to the credibility of the writer, the tweet is more associated with the use of the Ethos appeal (Mshvenieradze, 2013).

To determine the specific stance that a Twitter user is on the subject of #blacklivesmatter, two criteria were created to judge this. Prior to the use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, based upon what the user is speaking about (police brutalities, protests, photos in the tweet), it can be determined whether the tweet is Pro-#blacklivesmatter or Anti-#blacklivesmatter. If the tweet gives an argument that promotes the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, such as tweeting about George Floyd's death and giving details about upcoming protests around the area, the tweet is associated with being Pro-#blacklivesmatter. However, if a tweet gives details of an argument in which the person gives reasonable evidence they may be against the movement, such as using the argument that "black on black crime rates are higher than police brutalities", the tweet is associated with being Anti-#blacklivesmatter. In this sense, the user is showing they are against the figurative movement of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter according to their argument in the tweet, not the literal meaning of "black lives matter", hitherto why I am labeling them as "Anti-black lives matter".

Lastly, the rationale behind a tweet combines everything stated by the user and relates it to one common theme of purpose. The purposes I have determined based off of a similar research study of this topic were political, historical, protests, and financial (Keib et al, 2018). If a tweet was made with the purpose of being political, the tweet includes details that may reference the president, the government, or the aim for policy change. Historical tweets tend to give reference to historical events in regards to misfortune events towards African-Americans

and aims at changing the past systems of the United States. Protest tweets tend to give details about upcoming protests or riots that broke out following peaceful protests. Financial tweets tend to give information about organizations trying to raise money to support the #blacklivesmatter movements and where to support these organizations by linking websites.
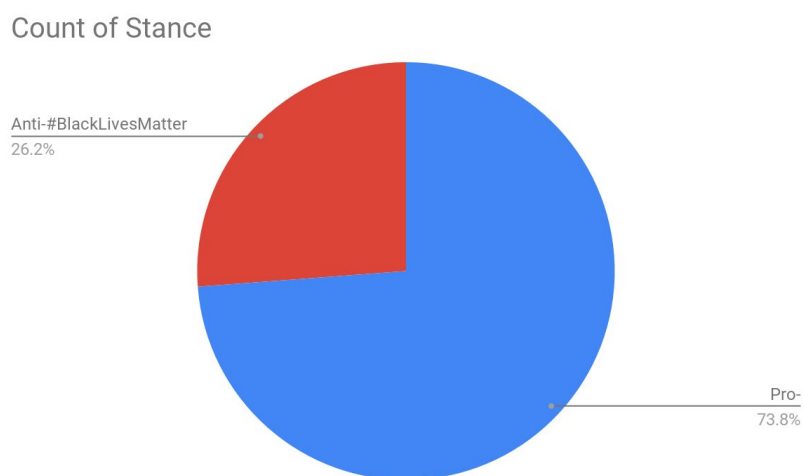
DATA ANALYSIS

Count of Stance

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 73.8% of the tweets were pro-#blacklivesmatter whereas 26.2% of the tweets were against the #blacklivesmatter hashtag. The wide discrepancy in these two statistics may be due to the fact that those who use the #blacklivesmatter hashtag tend to be in favor of the movement, whereas those who are not may use other alternative hashtags such as #alllivesmatter or

#MAGA. For those were considered Anti-#blacklivesmatter, the users tended to use the hashtag

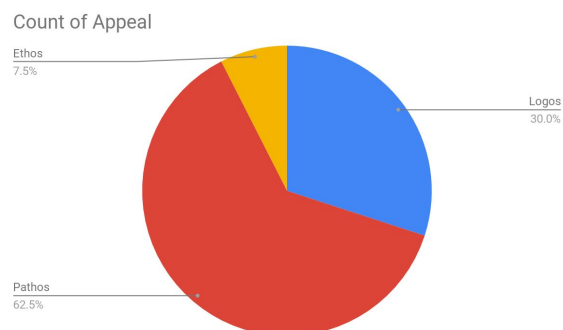for their argument and would occasionally add an "#Anti-" hashtag in front of #blacklivesmatter.

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. In this chart, it shows that

the majority of twitter users when arguing or commenting on the #blacklivesmatter hashtag uses

the Pathos appeal. Due to the fact that most people may not have credibility on this topic, such as

having a degree in this field of social sciences or may not be an organization like the NAACP,

most people depend on their real life experiences and draw emotional reactions from their reader.

Many Twitter users also used the Logos appeal several times as they often used statistics to back

their arguments or linked the tweet to a website that provides information on the movement.
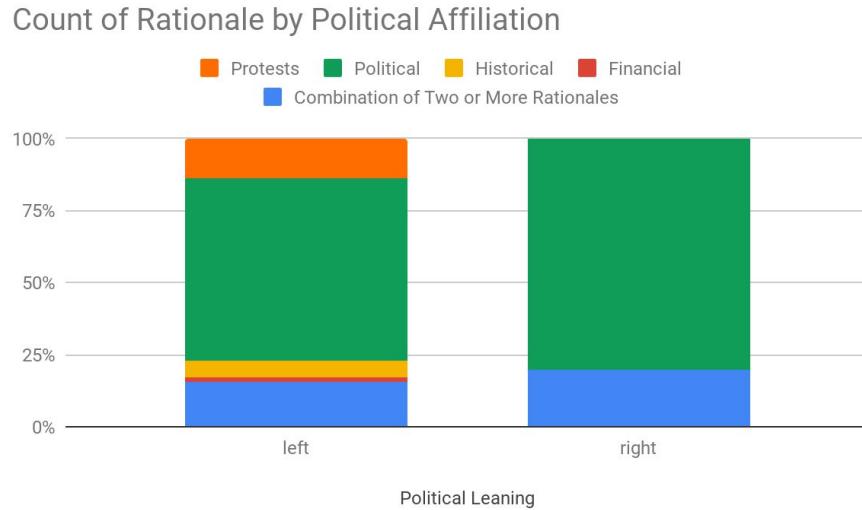
Count of Rationale by Political Affiliation

Figure D

In *Figure D*, this stacked column chart represents the rationale behind the tweet, separated by the two political leanings. Tweets with a political purpose had the highest proportion in both of the leanings with a percentage of 63% in the left and 80% in the right. . Although many of the users have a specific purpose they aim to fulfill in their tweet, many of the tweets tend to have a combination of two or more purposes with 15.4% of the tweets being this way in the left and 20% in the right. One prominent example of a tweet having a combination of two or more rationales was from @WorldYMCA in which the organization stated, "We stand in solidarity with everyone fighting #racism. Our Youth Voices event is the first in a series - don't miss it." In this statement, @WorldYMCA is showing that they are showing they are actively protesting for the #blacklivesmatter movement, using their organization to raise money for the movement, and are politically advising against racism with the hashtag #FutureWithoutRacism.

With this type of tweet, it shows that although the small amount of words, the entire meaning can have several purposes and target audiences towards the #blacklivesmatter movement.

CONCLUSION

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. With the use of a simple conversation tone, people use their social media platform to speak out about the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, however, without a compelling argument or with credibility, these voices may sometimes be overlooked in comparison to the twitter users who take the role of an informant.

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. In comparison to a tweet by a user, such as @TheRealShuban, who only has 647 followers and is arguing for the same

type of topics as Potash, these tweets begin to seem a little less meaningful in the community conversations.

However, the use of this hashtag does still plant a meaning with regards to less popular Twitter users. 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 these connected communities, the users around this hashtag are moving forward in a direction that reflects a positive change in society, in which the large #blacklivesmatter hashtag communities are aware of the same events and are all aiming towards creating policy changes that support the movement.

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