

What Kind of Movement is Black Lives Matter? The View from Twitter

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Abstract:

Hundreds of grassroots protests have taken place across the United States under the banner of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement since 2013. This paper examines the public Twitter feeds of six social movement organizations (SMOs) affiliated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in order to ascertain the nature of the movement from the standpoint of theories of contentious politics. The main finding from the three content analysis studies presented in the paper is that the core activists of the BLM movement use Twitter primarily for expressive communication. Another key finding is that the SMOs examined in this study generated more tweets that framed the movement using the rights-based language of liberalims than frames about gender, racial, and LGBTQ identities. Finally, the SMOs rarely used Twitter to mobilize their followers to engage in contentious politics. Moreover, when they do seek to mobilize their adherents, they tend to do so with an eye toward stimulating participation in the extant political system.

Introduction

On July 13, 2013, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on the micro-blogging site Twitter. Cullors, Garza, and Tometi created the hashtag to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager. The hashtag gained traction on the Internet throughout the remainder of 2013, as advocates for police reform utilized it to express their complex emotions in response to several high-profile cases where unarmed African American men and women died at the hands of police officers (Garza 2014; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark, 2016; Hockin and Brunson 2016).

The phrase Black Lives Matter gained even greater currency in our society when it became the organizing principle and mantra of the protests that swept through the country in the wake of the shooting death of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Jackson and Welles 2015; Taylor 2016, 13-15). Since the summer of 2014, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has grown into an international network of grassroots organizations in more than 30 US cities and four countries outside of the United States (Ransby 2015; Rickford 2016). The visibility of large Black Lives Matter protests in American cities like New York City, Oakland, California, Chicago, Illinois between 2014 and 2016 garnered considerable attention from the US media and registered in the national consciousness on public opinion surveys (Horowitz and Livingston 2016; Neal 2017; Tillery 2017).

The BLM movement has already been the subject of several high-quality scholarly publications. Thus far, scholarly treatments tend to fall into three categories of analysis. Taylor (2016) and LeBron (2017) attempt to place the BLM movement in historical context within the

long tradition of the African American struggle for racial equality in the United States. For Le Bron, contextualizing the movement means demonstrating how the dilemmas at the forefront of the BLM movement are deeply rooted in our political culture and how “a select number of thinkers in the history of black intellectual life” have attempted to address them. For Taylor, placing the Black Lives Matter movement in context means centering it as part of a long trajectory of ideological conflicts within the African American community over social class and respectability politics. Writing from a neo-Marxist perspective, Taylor sees BLM as the ascendancy of working-class and low-income African Americans within the black counterpublic.

A second strand of scholarly work analyzes the movement’s tactics and attempts to classify it using ideological constructs and social movement theory (Harris 2015; Lindsey 2015; Rickford 2016). The consensus within this literature is that the BLM movement is best understood as a New Social Movement—focused more on making expressive claims about culture and gender, LGBTQ, and racial identities than achieving policy goals. In this formulation, the BLM movement is more akin to the New Left movements in Europe during the 1990s and the Occupy Wall Street movement than the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the defining features of New Social Movements is their utilization of social media to frame their causes and communicate with their adherents (Gerbaudo 2012; Papacharissi 2015; Theocharis et al., 2015). The final strand of research on BLM focuses on the role that social media plays within the movement (Cox 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016, 2016b; Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017). The extant studies of the social media dimension of the BLM movement have focused largely on the hashtags that drive conversations between BLM activists and their supporters and opponents on Twitter and Facebook. We have learned through these analyses that

hashtags raise the profile of the movement and spur action within the African American community (Cox 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Ince 2017) and that they encourage elites to take positions on the movement (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016b).

This paper seeks to contribute to the scholarly conversations in all three of these strands of research by analyzing tweets generated by six Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) affiliated with the BLM movement. Focusing on the content of the messages crafted by these organizations will sharpen our ability to situate the movement in terms of both ideology and historical context. Gaining a firmer sense of whether these organizations tweet primarily to make expressive claims about gender, LGBTQ, and racial identities or to mobilize adherents to act in the political realm or through contentious politics will allow us to make fine-grained distinctions based on the rubrics provided by social movement theory. Finally, examining the tweets of SMOs as inputs to the BLM movement instead of dialogically allows us to gain a deeper understanding of what the movement's core activists see as the frames most likely to mobilize their followers.

The paper examines 18,078 tweets produced by six SMOs affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement—Black Lives Matter (@Blklivesmatter); Black Lives Matter New York City (@BLMNYC), Black Lives Matter Los Angeles (@BLMLA), Black Lives Matter Chicago (@BLMChi), Black Lives Matter Washington, DC (@DMVBlackLives), and Ferguson Action (@FergusonAction). Together these six accounts have more than 350,000 followers on Twitter. Moreover, the organizations that maintain these accounts are responsible for some of the most visible protests associated with the BLM movement between 2013 and 2016.

The main research questions explored in this paper are: How do SMOs affiliated with BLM communicate on Twitter? Do their tweets facilitate our ability to classify them using one of

the main paradigms of social movement theory? Do their tweets reveal the BLM movement's ideological commitments? Do the BLM groups encourage their supporters to embrace certain ideologies and pursue some political behavior and repertoires of contention over others? Finally, do SMOs affiliated with BLM communicate with their followers through frames that focus on marginalized identities?

The analyses presented below confirm the view that the Black Lives Matter movement is best understood as a New Social Movement. Indeed, the majority of the tweets examined in this study are expressive in nature. Moreover, about one-third of the tweets generated by the SMOs communicated meanings through frames about gender, race, and LGBTQ identities. While the New Social Movement paradigm is the best theoretical lens for understanding how BLM organizations communicate on Twitter, the analyses presented below show that it is not the only window onto the on-line activism of these groups. This is so because all six of the SMOs examined in this study also generated tweets that aimed toward communicating strategic goals. The SMOs examined in this study tweeted more to urge their adherents to participate in the political system than they did urging them to pursue protest activities.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents a discussion of the theoretical context for the study. Section 3 describes the data and methods utilized to conduct the three content analysis studies that provide the empirical evidence presented in the paper. From there the paper presents the main findings from these content analyses. The conclusion describes the broader significance of the findings for our larger understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement and the literature on social movements.

Theoretical Context and Hypotheses

The recent spate of writings on the Black Lives Matter movement is following a well-established pattern in the social sciences. Whenever new movements emerge scholars raise questions about how its origins, tactics, and effects fit into existing theoretical paradigms and or demand new theories to account for them (Gusfield 1994; 59; Zald 1992). This pattern of debate began in the late nineteenth century when the first wave of professional sociologists developed the “collective behavior” or “mass society” approach to movements (McPhail 1989; McPhail 1991; Moscovici 1985). Since that time, there have been two major paradigm shifts in the field of social movements studies. To provide a sense of where the recent work on the Black Lives Matter movement fits into this broader theoretical context, this section provides a brief overview of this history. It also describes the main hypotheses that will be subjected to empirical tests in the next section of the paper.

European scholars working to understand the reordering of their societies in the last 50 years of the nineteenth century were the first to develop the collective behavior approach to social movements. The grievance-based strikes, demonstrations, and riots that took place in Europe’s urban centers during this period were a sharp break from the traditional behavioral norms in these societies (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). The first collective behavior theorists were motivated by a fundamental desire to understand why so many people joined these mass actions and why they frequently turned violent (Moscovici 1985).

The earliest writings in the European collective behavior tradition built on eugenics and tended to argue that only the mentally deficient and criminal elements in society—the “riff raff”—participated in mass protests (McPhail 1989, 402). In 1895, the French scholar, Gustave LeBon, elevated the collective behavior tradition into a full-blown scientific theory of mass action with the publication of his book *The Crowd*. The book charted a new course in collective

behavior research by arguing that the participants in mass demonstrations were normal people whose behavior would shift by virtue of joining others in crowds (McPhail 1989; Van Ginneken 1985). Eschewing the eugenic arguments of earlier works in the tradition, LeBon suggested that all humans have the “genotypic characteristics” that can lead them to lose their “conscious personalit[ies]” in “the collective mind” of a crowd (1895, 57). In LeBon’s final analysis, mass demonstrations were nothing more than the product of a loss of individual rationality. This view was the favored explanation of social movements until the middle of the twentieth century.

The collective behavior approach began to fall out of favor with academic researchers in the 1960s (Zald 1992, 329-331; Morris and Herring 1988). The 1960s was a decade when numerous social movements took center stage in American political life (Anderson 1995; O’Neill 1971). The fact that these movements tended to eschew violence as a tactic, were often well coordinated, and frequently made direct demands on the political and social systems prompted a major paradigm shift in social movement studies (Weller and Quarantelli 1973; Zald 1992). Most scholars of social movements responded to the cases they observed in the 1960s by adopting the three axioms of what Opp (2013) calls the “most general version of rational choice theory” (1051). The first axiom is that both the leaders of social movements and individual participants are rational, purposive actors (Oberschall 1973; Opp 1989, 2013; Schwartz 1976). Second, those who participate in social movements engage in cost-benefit analyses before they undertake an action (Klandermans 1984; 1997; Oberschall 1973, 1980; Opp 2013; Muller and Opp 1986). Finally, the rational choice perspective holds that movement participants are utility-maximizers who will “do what is best for them” (Opp 2013, 1051). The growing acceptance of these propositions among social movement scholars paved the way for the development of Resource Mobilization Theory in the 1970s (Mueller 1992; Ferree 1992; Zald 1992).

The proponents of Resource Mobilization Theory view “the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements” as the keys for understanding movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1213). Scholars working in this tradition are also very focused on identifying the key elements that they believe distinguish successful movements from ones that founder (McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Morris 1981; 2000; Tilly 1978; Zald 1992). Most proponents of Resource Mobilization Theory see the presence of robust SMOs as the most important attribute of successful social movements (Cress and Snow 1996; McCarthy and Zald 1973; 1977; McAdam 1982; Morris 1981; 1986). McCarthy and Zald (1977) define SMOs as “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” (1218). In other words, the proponents of Resource Mobilization Theory argue that SMOs provide structure to movements and guide their pursuit of “target goals” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1220). Moreover, they see the ability to mobilize resources—e.g., labor, money, communication networks, facilities—in support of these target goals as the main dividing line between successful and unsuccessful movements (Cress and Snow 1996; Gamson 1975; Morris 1981; Zald and McCarthy 1979).

Resource Mobilization Theory also stresses how important it is for the leaders of SMOs to be attentive to environmental factors and shifts in the political opportunity structure (Freeman 1975; Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1224-1226; Morris 1993; Tarrow 1989). Since the 1980s, there has been an efflorescence of studies demonstrating how the political opportunity structure shapes the ability of movements to mobilize resources and ultimately achieve their main goals; this offshoot of Resource Mobilization Theory is often

called the Political Process Theory of social movements (McAdam 1982; McAdam et al, 2001; Tilly and Tilly 1975). Together Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Process Theory have formed what Lakatos (1980) would call the “hard core” of the scientific paradigm on social movements over the past forty years. Despite the dominance of Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Process Theory in social movement studies, even the leading practitioners of these approaches acknowledge that they do not explain every kind of movement. Mayer Zald (1992), for example, has written that Resource Mobilization Theory “does not begin to have all of the answers or pose all the important problems” that scholars must address about social movements (342). Indeed, a second paradigm shift to give greater attention to language, culture and the rise of new technologies is currently underway in social movement studies.

Since the 1990s, a broad consensus has been developing within the field of social movement studies that necessary attention to the communicative and ideational aspects of movements was a key missing link in the literature (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al 1986; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). The literature on how movements generate collective action “frames” grew up to fill this gap. Snow and Benford (2000) describe the framing “perspective” as motivated by a desire to understand social movement actors as “signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (613). In short, building on the work of Hall (1982), scholars employing the framing approach see the “politics of signification” as a crucial determinant of the trajectory of social movements (Snow and Benford 2000, 613).

Social movement scholars see this signification that occurs through collective action frames as serving three ends for social movements. First, frames, which Snow and Benford (2000) define as “interpretive schemata,” simplify the world “by selectively punctuating and

encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (137). Second, collective action frames make both diagnostic and prognostic attributions (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1992, 137; Snow et al 1986; Snow and Machalek 1984). Finally, frame theorists argue that collective action frames "enable activists to articulate and align a vast array of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and meaningful fashion" (Snow and Benford 1992, 138). In the view of frame theorists, SMOs that successfully accomplish these three goals with their messaging have greater success mobilizing resources, taking advantage of positive shifts in the political opportunity structure, and generating desired political outcomes (Snow and Benford 1992, 151-152). The behavior of the activists associated with the New Social Movements that grew up in industrialized societies in the late 1980s also illustrated that for some social movements the politics of signification is an end unto itself (Dalton 1990; Johnston et al 1994; Offe 1985; Pichardo 1997; Touraine 1971).

These New Social Movements also, in the words of Johnston et al (1994), "stimulated a provocative and innovative reconceptualization of the meaning of social movements" (3). This is so for two reasons. First, the New Social Movements focus on making expressive claims about their identities and cultures (Boggs 1986; Melucci 1988; Offe 1985). Second, the demands expressed by New Social Movements "have moved away from the instrumental issues of industrialism to the quality of life issues of post-materialism" (Pichardo 1997, 412). In short, New Social Movements are less concerned with mobilizing resources to affect public policy debates or shift the trajectory of political institutions than they are with occupying and representing their distinctive identities within post-industrial cultures (Johnston et al., 1994; Melucci 1989). Indeed, as Johnston et al. (1994) observe, many New Social Movements

encourage their adherents to pursue their objectives through “individual actions rather than through or among mobilized groups” (7). This does not mean that New Social Movements have forsaken mass mobilization. On the contrary, these movements also frequently engage in direct actions with the aim of calling attention to their issues by disrupting societal norms (Johnston et al, 1994; Klandermans and Tarrow 1988).

The extant studies of the BLM movement run the gamut from interpretive case studies to quantitative examinations of the movement’s use of social media. While none of these works uses one of the theoretical perspectives discussed above to classify the BLM movement, the Resource Mobilization Theory and the New Social Movement paradigms are certainly pregnant in these treatments. Both Taylor (2016) and Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016b), for example, portray the BLM movement as goal-directed and concerned with resource mobilization. At the same time, several other studies have stressed how the BLM movement focuses on signification about gender, LGBTQ, and racial issues and utilizes disruptive repertoires of contention (Harris 2015; Lindsey 2015; Rickford 2016). “Black Lives Matter,” Harris (2015) writes, “is also being articulated less as a demand for specific civil or political rights and more as a broader claim for black humanity” (37). Rickford (2016) describes BLM activists as “determined to remain autonomous...from the American political establishment” (36).

This paper examines the public Twitter feeds of six SMOs affiliated with the BLM movement in order to gain theoretical traction on the nature of the movement. The analysis entails using content analysis to test the following three hypotheses:

- H1: Tweets generated by BLM organizations are mostly expressive in nature.
- H2: Tweets generated by BLM organizations tend to use frames that call attention to issues related to gender, racial and LGBTQ identities.

H3: Tweets generated by BLM organizations that seek to mobilize their adherents urge the use of disruptive repertoires of contention.

The following section explicates the data and design of the three content analysis studies developed to test these hypotheses.

Method, Data, and Study Designs

Content analysis has long been a tool employed by social scientists to understand political and cultural trends (Lasswell 1965; Holsti 1969; Weber 1990; Neuendorf 2002; Krippendorff 2004; Franzosi 2004). Over the past three decades, the method has gained wider currency among scholars of racial and ethnic politics (e.g., Caliendo and McIlwain 2006; Entman 1997; Lee 2002; Mendelberg 2001; Reeves 1997; Tillery 2011). Three content analysis studies of six BLM accounts—@BlackLivesMatter; BLM_Boston (Boston, MA); @BLMchi (Chicago, IL); @BLMNYC (New York, NY); @DMVBlackLives (Washington, DC); @FergusonAction (Ferguson, MO)—provide the empirical foundation for this paper.

The data were obtained by scraping Twitter's public feeds using the Python program between December 2015 and September 2016. This period was selected to coincide with the peak of the 2016 national elections in the United States. Two independent coders read the entire universe of 18,078 tweets that appeared on the public feeds of these accounts within that timeframe. The average intercoder reliability for the content analysis studies is 87%. A third coder was engaged to break ties in the 13% of cases where there were disagreements.

Study 1 sorted tweets into three categories based on the function—Expressive, Informational, and Organizational—of the message it conveyed to followers. Expressive tweets transmit emotional or ideological responses to events. Informational tweets share news about

events and incidents that are happening in the movement and the external environment. The last category is organizational tweets. These tweets provide information about the SMOs' activities and or encourage adherents to provide support to the SMO or broader BLM movement through protest actions, political actions or financial contributions. A finding that the majority of tweets from the six SMOs's Twitter feeds are expressive in nature would confirm H1.

Study 2 examines the extent to which the tweets contain frames about gender, racial, and LGBTQ identities. Tweets that relay distinct messages about African American racial identity are coded as "Racial Identity." Tweets that make statements about gender and or the status of African American women are coded as "Feminist." Similarly, tweets that convey the importance of LGBTQ issues are coded as "LGBTQ Rights." Finally, tweets that articulate the need for greater individual protections for African Americans in the United States are coded as "Liberal." Finding that the majority of tweets deploy gender, racial, and LGBTQ frames will confirm H2.

Study 3 examines all the tweets in the sample that urge the SMOs's followers to take action in the public sphere. The goal of this study is to test H3 by sorting this subset of tweets based on the repertoires of contention that the SMOs are encouraging their followers to pursue. Again, the literature on New Social Movements suggests that disruptive protest actions should be the modal request in this batch of tweets. Tweets that urge these actions are coded "Protest Action." The BLM movement has faced accusations of inciting violence against police officers by some law enforcement officials and right-wing pundits. Study 3 tests this claim by coding all tweets that urge violence as "Violent Action." Tweets that urge BLM adherents to pursue action through the political system are coded as "Systemic Action." This study will confirm H3 if the majority of tweets generated by the six BLM accounts urge disruptive protests and or violent actions.

Findings

The three content analysis studies yielded some very interesting results. Study 1, which examined the types of communication—expressive, informational, and organizational—that the six BLM organizations generated most frequently on their Twitter feeds. As Table 1 illustrates, 42% of the tweets generated by the SMOs are best characterized as expressive communications. These tweets contain messages that demonstrate sadness and or outrage with police shootings and other hardships faced by African Americans in the United States. Informational tweets, crafted to share stories about the movement and local and national news, were the second largest category of tweets (39%) generated by the SMOs. This finding is consistent with recent studies that have found that Twitter has become an important source of news for African Americans about the BLM movement and other issues (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Cox 2017; Jackson and Welles 2015; Rickford 2016). The remaining 3,492 tweets in the sample contained content aimed at mobilizing resources to strengthen the advocacy work of the SMOs. These organizational tweets constitute just 19% of the overall sample.

A one-way ANOVA was calculated to test for the independence of the three groups of tweets. The results of the ANOVA, $F(2,12) = 9.06$, $p = .003$, confirmed that there are statistically significant differences between the means of the three categories. The fact that the six SMOs affiliated with the BLM movement generated more than twice as many expressive tweets as ones aimed at organizational activities confirms H1 and strengthens the argument that BLM is best understood as a New Social Movement.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

The results of Study 2, which examined the social movement frames present in the Twitter data, are somewhat mixed in terms of the traction they provide to confirm H2. Building on the assumption that the BLM movement operates as a New Social Movement, the expectations were that there would be abundant frames in the sample and that the majority of these frames would make references to gender, racial, and LGBTQ identities. The first notable finding is that most of the tweets in the sample did not contain distinct identity frames. Indeed, only 4,403 of the tweets, a number that constitutes 24% of the overall sample, contain such frames. As Figure 1 shows, the second notable finding is that 67% of the ideological frames present in the sample take a liberal perspective. In other words, the modal tweet in this segment of the sample contains a liberal frame that highlights violations to the individual rights of African Americans and or makes demands based on the individual rights enshrined in the United States Constitution.

There are, as Figure 1 illustrates, very few tweets—just 3% of the overall sample—that framed the BLM movement as a cause grounded in a distinct racial ideology (e.g., Black Nationalism, Afro-pessimism, etc.). In some ways, the predominance of the liberal frame and the dearth of frames grounded in racial ideologies is consistent with Harris’s (2015) assessment that the movement is fundamentally about “asserting black humanity” (34). Moreover, perhaps the prevalence of hashtags with the names of African American victims of police violence and the ritual of marking tweets with #BlackLivesMatter obviates the need for distinctive frames based on racial identity.

The remaining findings in Study 2 provide some support for the view that BLM movement is a New Social Movement. The second largest category of tweets in the sample (13%) contain frames focused on cultural expression, where the SMOs comment on the

distinctive contributions of African Americans to sports, music, and visual culture in the United States. Feminist frames were present in 438 (or 10%) of the tweets. Finally, frames related to LGBTQ identities were present in 325 tweets, which represented just 7% of the overall sample. The independence of these categories within the sample was confirmed by a one-way ANOVA: $F(4,30) = 4.01, p = .010$.

The relatively low number of frames within the tweets about gender and LGBTQ identities is somewhat surprising. After all, the core activists of the BLM movement have frequently articulated that one of the movement's major goals is to "center" the lives and contributions of "Black Queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum" (Garza 2015). An important caveat to this finding is that the data are drawn from only one year in the four-year life span of the BLM movement. As a result of this fact, it is plausible that gender and LGBTQ frames are more prevalent when we observe the longer arc of the movement. Subsequent studies should explore this issue to get a firmer sense of how much SMOs affiliated with the BLM movement actually work to frame the movement in terms of these identities. For now, it is sufficient to say that, while less than the predicted value, it is not trivial that 33% of the tweets generated by these organizations deployed one of these identity frames.

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

Study 3 examined the tweets in the sample where the SMOs enjoined their adherents to undertake an action in the public sphere. Only 1,219 tweets, a figure that is equivalent to 6% of the overall sample, encourage direct actions. This finding is very consistent with the tenets of the

New Social Movement paradigm, which, as we have seen, stresses the fact that these movements generally pursue expressive communication over direct actions in the public sphere (Johnston et.al., 1994; Melucci 1985; 1989). It is also the true that when the six SMOs examined in the study do seek to mobilize their followers to pursue direct actions, they rarely encourage their followers to use disruptive repertoires of contention. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, only 12% of the tweets that the SMOs generated to stimulate action urge the pursuit of disruptive protest tactics. Moreover, contrary to the charges of some law enforcement officials and rightwing pundits (Bedard 2017; Russell 2017), there was not one tweet in the sample that advocated for violent actions against the police or anyone else for that matter. Figure 2 also shows that 88% of the SMOs' tweets urging action in the public sphere encourage their followers to pursue systemic political actions—registering to vote, contacting government officials, voting, etc. The results of a Student's t-test, $t(10) = 4.60$, $p = .001$, demonstrates that the means of these two samples are distinct.

[Insert Figure 2 About Here]

The rejection of H3 does not necessarily mean that the BLM movement fails to meet the criteria of a New Social Movement. Again, the very fact that there are so few tweets in the sample that urge action is in some ways a characteristic of a New Social Movement. Moreover, it is plausible that this result is a function of the fact that the data were collected from the six SMOs at the height of the 2016 primaries and general election cycles. As the BLM movement continues to build up its public profile on Twitter, we will be able to provide a more definitive answer to this question through comparative analyses of tweets over multiple election years.

These caveats notwithstanding, the finding that BLM groups are more likely to urge their followers to pursue systemic actions over disruptive repertoires of contention suggests that the activists who are crafting the messages and frames that drive the BLM movement have not completely given up on the US political system.

Conclusions

The Black Lives Matter movement was born on Twitter when Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter to express their grief and outrage over George Zimmerman's acquittal in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Over the past four years, the movement has morphed into a vital, multi-issue social movement in African American communities across the United States (Harris 2015; Rickford 2016; Taylor 2016). As previous researchers have demonstrated (Cox 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017), Twitter has been an indispensable tool for BLM activists as they work to build their movement. Most extant studies have highlighted the role that hashtags play in forming dialogues between core BLM activists and their adherents. These studies have led to considerable gains in our knowledge by demonstrating how these dialogues have boosted the movement's ability to disseminate information and mobilize supporters for protest actions (Cox 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Ince, Rojas, and Davis 2017).

Despite their profound contributions to theory building, the hashtag studies do not allow us to make distinctions between the communications originating from the BLM movement's core activists, who ostensibly have control over the movement's strategy and messaging, and rank-and-file protestors and bystanders. This means that it is impossible to analyze the behaviors of the core activists as they attempt to build the movement. This situation, in turn, leaves us in the

position of being unable to make firm judgments about the nature of the BLM movement under one of the main paradigms of social movement theory. This paper has advanced the position that focusing exclusively on the tweets generated by the SMOs resolves these dilemmas.

The results of the three content analysis studies presented in this paper leave us in a stronger position to understand the BLM movement. The findings from Study 1 that the vast majority of tweets generated by the six SMOs examined in this study are expressive in nature certainly lends credibility to the conventional wisdom that BLM is best understood as a New Social Movement. The results of Study 2, which examined the frames deployed by the SMOs, were not as definitive. While 33% of the frames used to talk about the movement made reference to gender, LGBTQ, and racial identities and or cultural issues, most tweets in the sample used a liberal frame focused on individual rights. This finding does not necessarily cut against the interpretation of BLM as New Social Movement, but it does illustrate that the movement's core activists take a broader approach to talking about their movement than just "centering" the identities of the most marginal segments of the African American community.

The results of Study 3 present the strongest challenge to the classification of BLM as a New Social Movement. Again, this study found that only 12% of the SMOs' tweets that urged action called on followers to engage in disruptive protest actions and that the majority of tweets in this subset of the sample (88%) urged the pursuit of actions through the existing political system. Together these findings present a very different narrative of the BLM movement than what is portrayed in academic writings, media accounts, and by the core activists themselves. Indeed, the results of this study suggest that BLM groups do value the political process and are willing to mobilize their followers to pursue outcomes within it.

While on first glance these findings suggest that BLM is something of a hybrid movement that sometimes resembles a New Social Movement and sometimes engages in traditional resource mobilization, we must be cautious not to overstate the meaning of these findings for two reasons. First, as we have seen, the number of tweets produced by the SMOs that exhort their followers to action is an incredibly small subset of the overall sample. Second, the fact that this data for this study were collected at the height of the 2016 primary and general elections in the United States may have encouraged the SMOs affiliated with the BLM movement to generate more tweets about mainstream politics than they would do in a non-election year. Subsequent studies will be required to truly get a handle on this issue. For now, it is sufficient to say that by judging all of this evidence in context, the SMOs examined in this study are building a movement that is focused much more on expressive communication than strategic communication aimed at actually changing the politics and policies that are making African Americans vulnerable to police brutality and other forms of predation.

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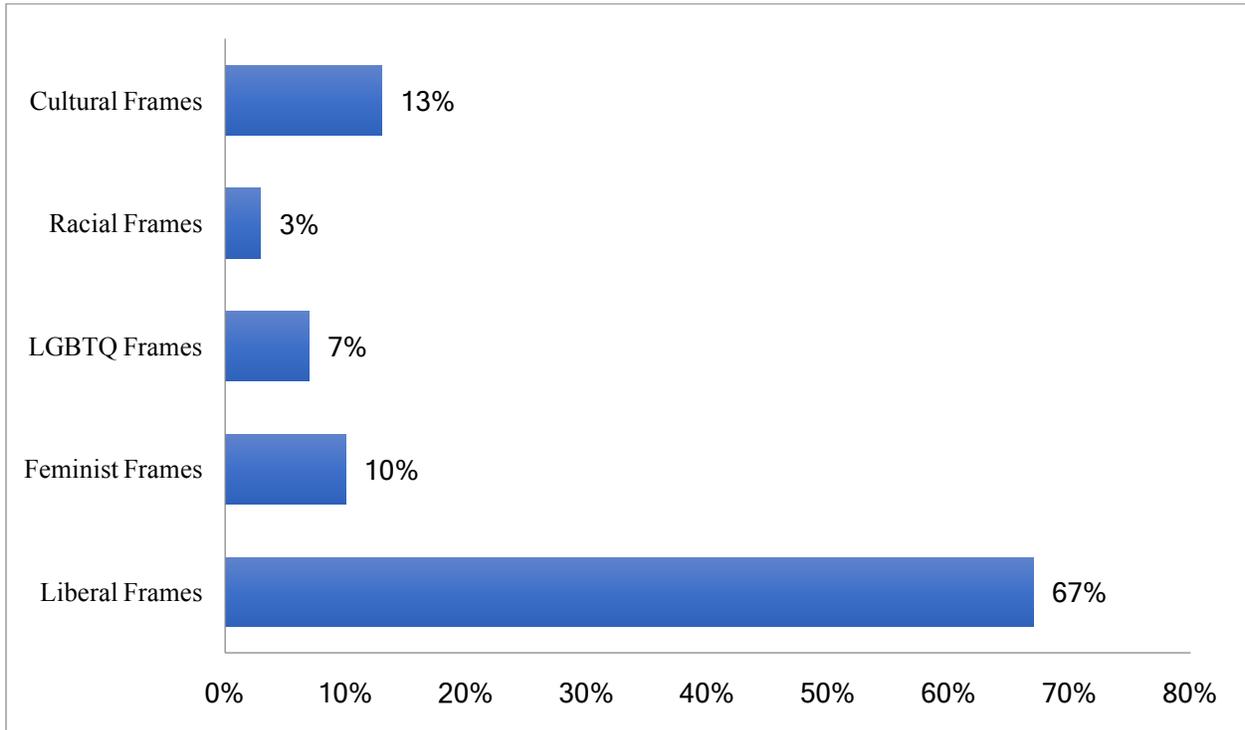
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Table 1: Tweets by Communicative Goal

SMO	EXPRESSIVE TWEETS	INFORMATIONAL TWEETS	ORGANIZATIONAL TWEETS
BLACK LIVES MATTER	1968	638	475
BLM_CHICAGO	948	1672	554
DMV_BLM	1490	944	720
BLM_LOS ANGELES	1145	1127	832
BLM_NYC	1262	1512	392
FERGUSON ACTION	712	1168	519
NUMBER OF TWEETS	7525	7061	3492
% OF SAMPLE	42%	39%	19%

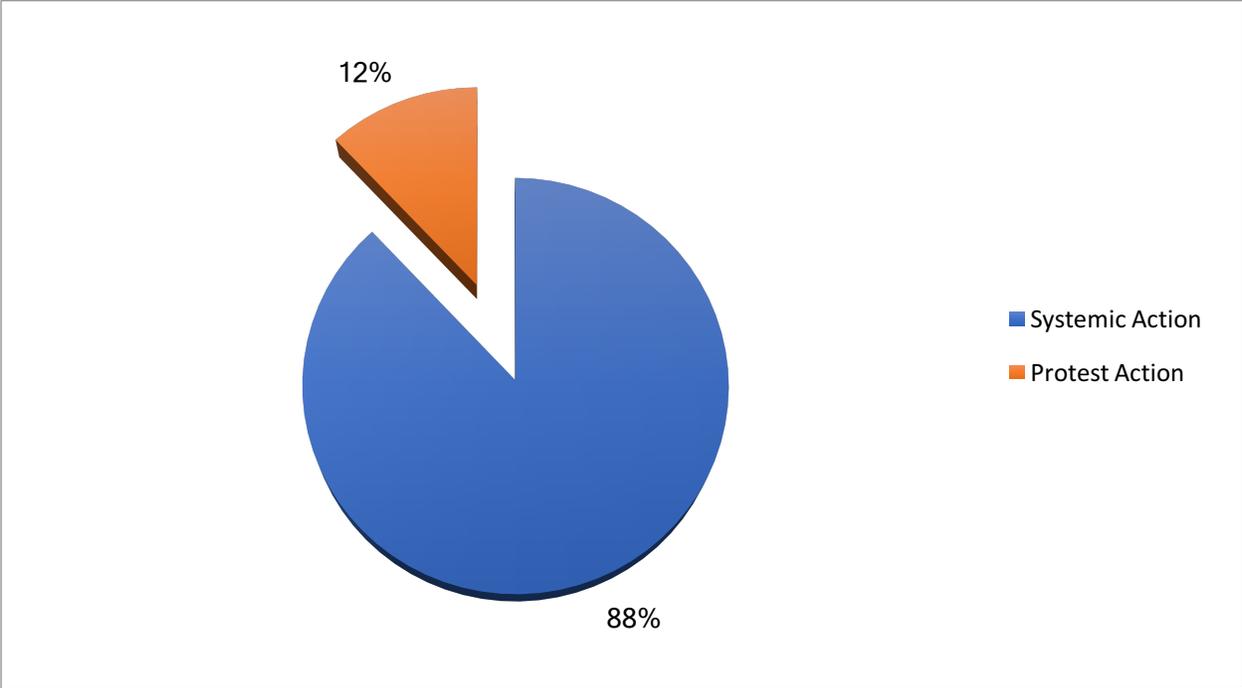
Source: Twitter

Figure 1: Social Movement Frames by Category



Source: Twitter

Figure 2: Tweets by Type of Actions Urged in the Public Sphere



Source: Twitter