

Research Article

#Social Movement: The Effect of the Hashtag on the Social Media Movement: #BlackLivesMatter

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Abstract: Eric Garner, Stephon Clark, and George Floyd were all victims of either police brutality or racist attacks by civilians in the last decade. Each of these attacks led to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, an uprising comprising protests and petitions. However, the BLM movement received wider success only after the involvement of social media. This study focuses on the strategies of the movement and attempts to delineate how these strategies were altered to accommodate the use of social media. The study utilized secondary data in the form of graphs depicting the use of hashtags in relation to the movement and other online patterns, including those of US Congress members. Analyses revealed that the expansion of the BLM movement was accelerated through the use of social media. Specifically, the use of hashtags played a significant role in the organization of online protests. Specifically, by taking protests online, physical restrictions could be avoided, ensuring a wider, global outreach. Ultimately, the BLM movement reached various politicians, affording it a higher level of success. These findings reveal the potential power of the hashtag in facilitating social movements. To create a more comprehensive understanding of the use of social media in this context, future studies should utilize large-scale primary quantitative data. Additionally, such studies could use qualitative data to examine individual experiences related to the use of social media to achieve social change.

Keywords: Social movement, social media, hashtag, Black Lives Matter.

Introduction

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick made a fateful decision that would change the trajectory of his career. During a preseason game with the 49ers, Kaepernick chose to remain seated during the US national anthem. He stated at the time that he chose to sit because he believed that the American society “*oppresses black people and people of color*” (Wyche, 2016).

In making this decision, Kaepernick was responding to a series of high-profile cases in which unarmed black men had been shot by police officers or security guards. By making a gesture of protest against what he believed were issues of inequality in the society, Kaepernick was ultimately seeking to show his support for the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement.

According to the “BlackLivesMatter” organization’s official webpage, the movement was originally created by three African-American women who sought a way to express their frustration after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for murdering the African-American teen, Trayvon Martin. While the BlackLivesMatter hashtag was first posted in 2013, its use has been growing consistently, transforming it from a mere social media tag into a nationwide movement characterized by protests against police brutality and violence (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Since its creation, the BLM movement continued to gain momentum owing to the impetus of social media (Linscott, 2017). Linscott specified that “*global digital interconnection foster greater awareness of the foreclosure of*

black life and provides opportunities for the rapid mobilization of protests and direct action” (Linscott, 2017).

Evidently, the use of social media helped change and amplify the potential of the movement by paving way for a new strategic direction. Ultimately, with the help of Social Media, *“the hashtag leapt from social media ‘into the streets’”* (Rickford, 2016).

Literature review

According to Prier (2017), social media and its effects on identity are no longer singular because it not only affects our understanding of ourselves but also pressures us into believing what we read on social media. Suggesting that social media has power over our actions, Prier (2017) added, *“commanding the trend represents a relatively novel and increasingly dangerous means of persuasion within social media ... access regular streams of online information via social media to influence networked groups within the United States”* (p. X). This is partly evidenced by modern cyberattacks. According to Prier (2017), as compared to traditional cyberattacks, modern versions using social media essentially target individuals by *“influencing their beliefs as well as behaviors, and diminishing trust in the government”* (p. X).

A specific tool that is widely used in social media is the *hashtag*. The use of hashtags allows individual users (as well as groups) to spread their message with the help of the social media algorithm. This provides acceleration to movements, as the spread of a hashtag allows for exponential growth. Though the use of hashtags differs slightly across social media platforms, its primary purpose is to organize all similar posts (i.e., all posts including a specific hashtag) such that they can be easily accessed by users. This way, users can quickly find similar content and simultaneously reach out to other individuals with similar interests (Jones, 2020).

According to Prier (2017), the use of hashtags can influence and change people’s minds by *“using existing online networks in conjunction with automatic ‘bot’ accounts ... can insert propaganda into a social media platform, create a trend, and rapidly disseminate a message faster and cheaper than through any other medium”* (p. 2). Edwards-Underwood (2015) emphasized that the use of the hashtag on social media has become a common strategy in a revolution. A recent content analysis of 2.67 million tweets found that celebrity tweets were more often used to promote issues related to Black identity as compared to marketing/self-promotion (Harlow and Benbrook, 2019). The researchers added that celebrities, such as hip-hop icons hold the power to further influence such movements by endorsing the cause.

The BLM movement is an example of a social struggle that spread considerably through the use of the hashtag. Arnold (2017) acknowledged that the BLM movement represents a new paradigm in civil rights movements in the US, leading to the resurgence of discourse on racism and sexism. According to Harlow (2019) it created a social community of the black people (and anti-racism supporters) off and online. This movement brought back respect and value to the black identity which had been viewed as something negative and “shameful.” Celebrities further helped lift the status of the black identity by being a part of the movement. Emphasizing the role of the hashtag in this movement, Prier (2017) noted the importance of using co-opted hashtags, which *“directed users to other hashtags in what was ultimately a successful attempt to generate worldwide trends of other [...] related themes”* (p. X).

Considering the current literature on the role of social media, and more specifically, of the hashtag in social movements, the present study sought to identify the role of this tool in the BLM movement. Specifically, it aimed to delineate the extent to which the hashtag (and social media in general) influenced the direction of the BLM movement. In doing so, the present study attempted to address the following research question:

In what way has the use of social media, specifically the hashtag, affected the BLM-movement's strategies and outreach?

Methods

To answer the research question, the researcher utilized secondary data from recent studies conducted by the PEW Research Center. Specifically, four graphs were selected from studies on social media and the BLM movement. These studies were selected to ensure access to widespread data as well as transparency and credibility of the data.

Additionally, these studies offered access to statistics and analytics of BLM-related posts on the most-commonly used platforms of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Considering their popularity, these three platforms were expected to best represent the online trends and success-rate of the movement.

The researcher also intended to identify changes in trends in hashtags and posts related to the BLM movement, by examining graphs representing the total number of posts and online activity referring to the BLM movement.

Data and Analysis

The data comprised four graphs published by PEW Research Center (Figure 1). These graphs were chosen because they presented numerical evidence that facilitated the identification of trends and changes in the use of social media and the BLM hashtag (refer to the original articles by Anderson *et al.*, (2018), Perrin (2020), and Shah and Widjaya (2020) to know more about the original studies).

Figure 1(A) was published by PEW Research Center in 2018 (Anderson *et al.*, 2018). The data depict the number of times the *#BlackLivesMatter* hashtag was used on Twitter from 2013 to 2018 in response to related racist events that occurred during the same period.

Figure 1(B) was published in 2020, as a part of an article that reported findings of a US survey conducted between July 13–19, 2020 (Perrin, 2020). The graph depicts the percentage of people who changed their personal stance on a given political or social issue as a direct result of something they read/viewed on social media.

Figure 1(C) was derived from a 2020 PEW study conducted by Shah and Widjaya (2020). The graph shows the number of members of the 116th US Congress who used the phrase “Black Lives Matter” or hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* when posting content on Facebook and Twitter from Jan 1, 2015 to June 14, 2020. It also contrasts the number of posts mentioned before and after the notorious killing of African-American citizen George Floyd, which is considered a turning point in the resurfacing of the BLM movement. The top part of the graph depicts the use of the phrase by all Congress members, while the bottom graph differentiates them based on their political affiliation.

Figure 1(D) was retrieved from the same article (Shah and Widjaya, 2020). It presents the differences in American politicians’ (Democrats and Republicans) language on social media after the killing of George Floyd by depicting and comparing the top 10 keywords used by each group from May 25 to June 14, 2020.

The present study re-examined and interpreted the four graphs to identify the role of social media and the hashtag in the BLM movement.

Results

As evident from Figure 1(A), several events triggered the rapid online spread of the BLM movement. November 24, 2014 showed the first peak in online content after a police officer was not indicted after shooting and killing Michael Brown. Specifically, hashtagged posts increased from near zero to

200,000 on this date. After this event, the average number of hashtags decreased in comparison to this sudden surge; however, the number of posts continued to remain higher than those posted before the Michael Brown incident. The subsequent sharpest increase and peak in the use of BLM hashtags was observed on July 7, 2016, when the number of posts crossed 1.3 million. This was the day when a massive protest was to be organized in Dallas, which was ultimately stopped by police officers in the area.

The sharp increase in the use of the BLM hashtag on the day of this event suggests that the protestors used online platforms to express their dissent as police do not have the same direct jurisdiction on these platforms, and ultimately, cannot interfere. Furthermore, by using social media to post about the protest, the movement could reach a much wider scope of people, which is evidenced by the increase in the use of the hashtag. Additionally, the frequent use of the hashtag may have led to a simultaneous increase in the number of views of similar posts, which exponentially increased the momentum of the BLM movement as a whole.

Figure 1(B) presents important findings that unearth the related power of the hashtag. This graph presents the percentage of people who changed their stance on the BLM-movement based on social media posts. The social media algorithm allows the organization of posts using hashtags. Therefore, by simply using and/or searching for a specific hashtag, users can easily find the entire online discourse on the topic. As evident from the graph, almost 12% of the participants reported to have changed their minds about the BLM movement as a direct result of social media coverage, indicating that the use of social media was helpful in spreading the cause.

As an additional representation of trends in hashtag or social media usage related to an issue that has received substantial public furor, the graph presented in Figure 1(C) shows the changes in politicians' social media posts pertaining to the BLM movement, especially following the killing of George Floyd. Evidently, around 45% of the 530 members of Congress had mentioned the BLM movement in social media posts since 2015, but about half of them did so only since George Floyd's death. Further, majority of these Congress members were Democrats (212 vs. merely 24 Republicans who posted). This graph evidences the success of the BLM movement, as it highlights the fact that politicians, who, like celebrities, have the capacity to influence masses. Their mention of the movement in their social media posts would thus inevitably draw attention to the issues. With an increase in BLM-related posts since George Floyd's death, the data also indicates a change in the political stance of members comprising a large part of the government, signifying the power of social media. However, with reference to the political affiliation of the Congress members who made posts related to the BLM movement, the need for larger social change is evident. This also reveals the subtle undercurrents and co-existing socio-political issues related to racism.

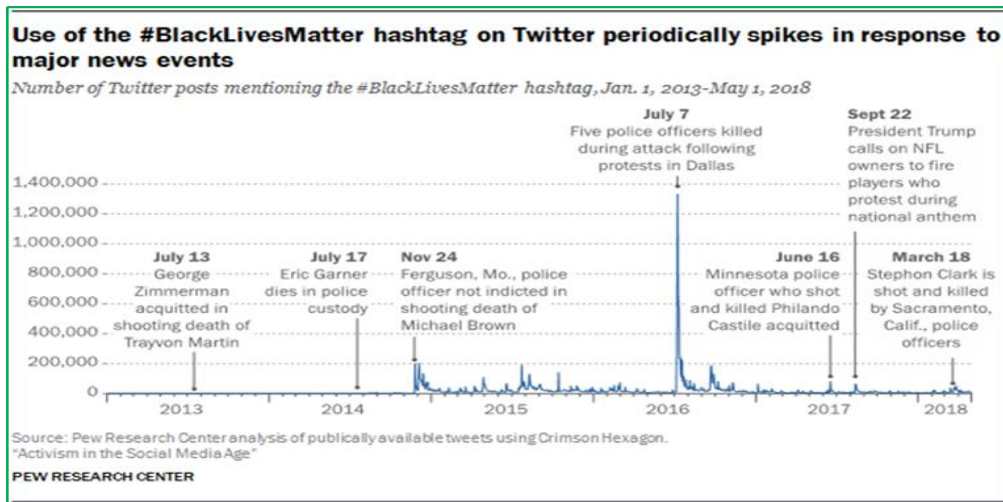
Supporting evidence is also presented in the graph provided in Figure 1(D), which revealed the 10 top keywords used by politicians from the two political parties. These data indicate a significant change in Democrats' use of keywords such as "civil rights," "black life," "racial injustice," and "police brutality," suggesting the intent to use these events as a major cause for social reform. While the Democrats seem more likely to use keywords that are directly or indirectly connected with the movement, a small percentage of Republicans is also observed to use similar keywords. Though we cannot know for certain in what context these keywords were used, the data suggest a conversation and interest in the matter. Ultimately, it points to a possible development in the political focus on race-related issues, which fundamentally indicates the success of the BLM movement.

Figure 1. Graphs used as secondary data sources in this study from

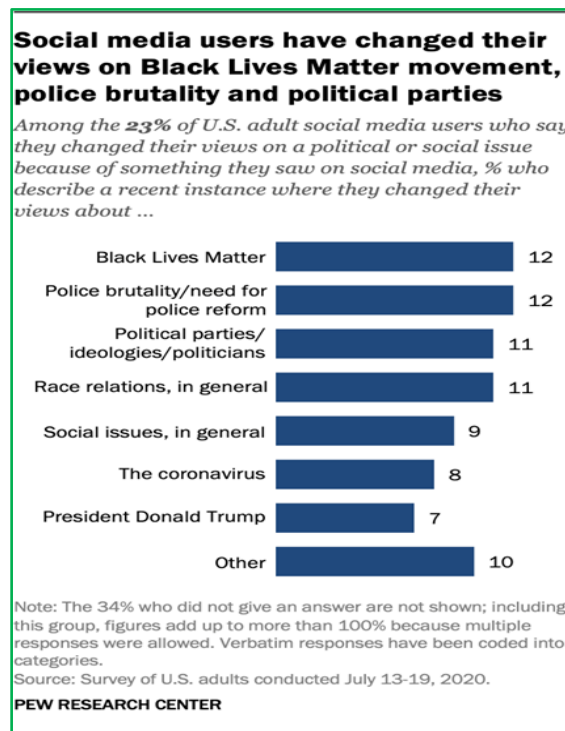
(A) Anderson *et al.*, (2018),

(B) Perrin (2020),

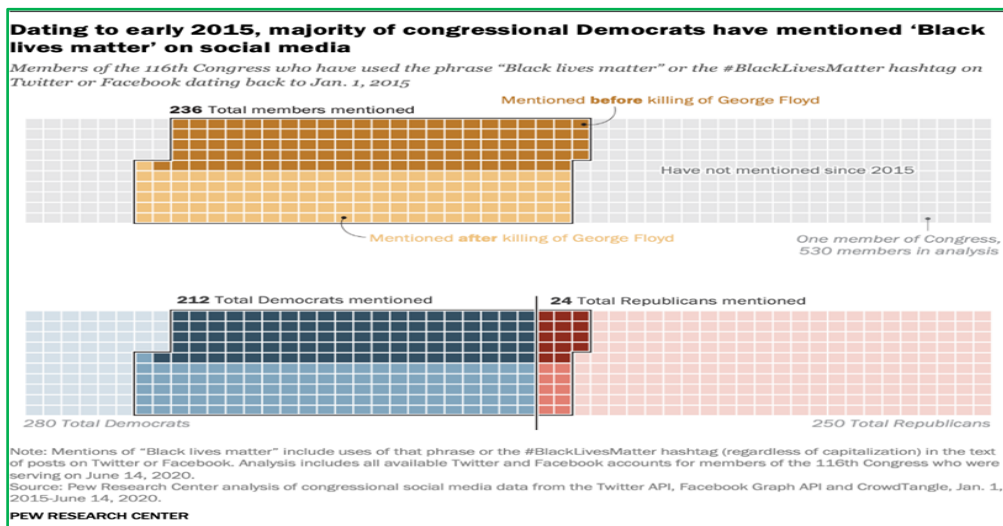
(C) & (D) Shah & Widjaya (2020).



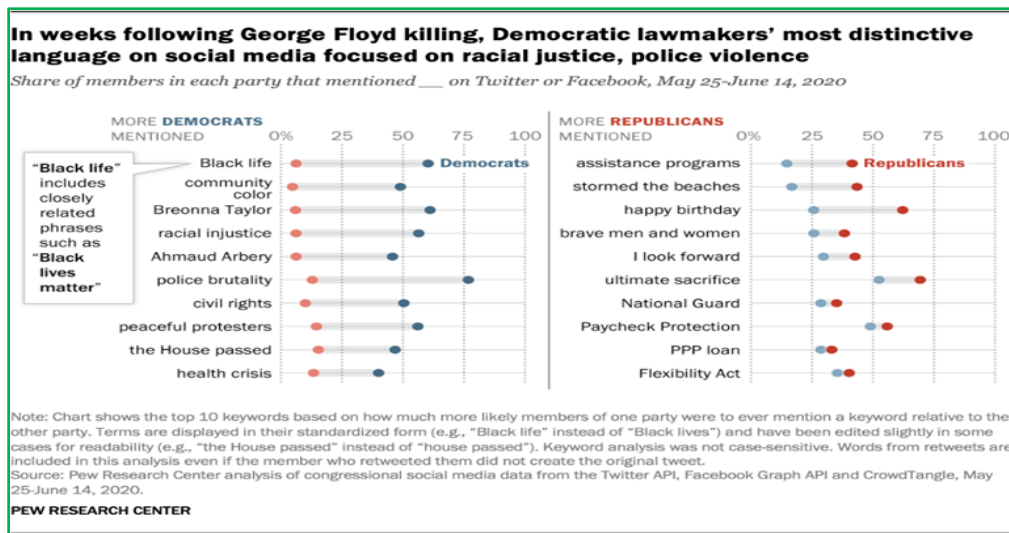
(A) Graph used from Anderson *et al.*, (2018).



(B) Graph used from Perrin (2020).



(C) Graph used from Shah and Widjaya (2020).



(D) Graph used from Shah and Widjaya (2020).

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the role of social media, especially the hashtag, in the spread and success of the BLM movement. As evident from the above re-examination of four graphs from recent studies conducted by the PEW Research Center, the BLM hashtag seems to have boosted the outreach of the BLM movement. Specifically, in light of the restrictions and police brutality in thwarting physical protests, social media (and hashtags) became an important context for continuing protests in the online space, which was outside the police department's jurisdiction. Protestors could boldly post messages on social media because they did not have the fear of losing anything or being harmed in the fight as the police could not touch them anyway. Furthermore, the online medium helped protestors muster support from like-minded individuals worldwide, thus transcending the boundaries of geographical location, community, language, and race. This ability to connect with others in a matter of seconds provided additional momentum to the BLM movement, thus contributing to its success.

Social media posts also emerged as an important tool for social change, as evidenced by its role in changing people's opinion about social issues (in this case, the BLM movement). In addition, the increase in politicians' use of BLM-related posts and hashtags could have further boosted the spread of the BLM movement. Evidently, these politicians may have considered social media as the ideal platform to advocate for the issue and to express their support for the movement.

Overall, the present re-examination of graphs from recent studies on social media and the BLM movement confirms the power of the hashtag (and social media as a whole) in bringing about social change. Despite its value, the present study was based on secondary data in the form of graphs. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies further examine the effects of the hashtag by using primary quantitative data. Furthermore, qualitative methods could be used to examine individual experiences with social media and the BLM-movement.

Conflicts of interest: There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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