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### Tweeting a Social Movement: Black Lives Matter and its use of Twitter to Share Information, Build Community, and Promote Action

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#### Abstract

Public relations research has gradually incorporated the study of advocacy organizations. However, little research has focused on social movements in particular. Through a content analysis of all public tweets sent by Black Lives Matter (BLM) over a four-year period, this study examined the message strategies used on Twitter by the social movement as a means to share information, build community, and promote action. Consistent with research on other types of organizations, informational messages proved to be the most common. The study also analyzed the influence that these strategies had on audience engagement in terms of replies and retweets. Findings suggest that community building messages garner the most retweets but no significant differences were found in terms of replies.

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## Introduction

Technology has changed the way individuals and organizations connect with one another. Since the advent and advancements of the Internet, messages can be shared both instantly and internationally. More than ever, people are forming new relationships and connections due to the elimination of temporal and spatial boundaries. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow strangers to follow one another based on similar interests and widely share their opinions with the world. According to Auger (2013), “The rise of social media has affected more than just communication practices—it has provided a substantial new platform

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for the democratization of interests and ideas by dramatically expanding the opportunity for the expression of competing and controversial ideas in society” (p. 369). Taking full advantage of these new platforms, three social organizers decided to rally their networked troops for a fight against racial and ethnic injustice.

One year following the 2012 shooting death of unarmed African-American teenager Trayvon Martin, his attacker, George Zimmerman, was acquitted of all charges. Outraged by the court’s decision, many people in the United States went to social media to express their frustrations. One in particular, Alicia Garza, wrote a grief-stricken letter to her friends on Facebook. In closing, she signed the letter by stating *our lives matter*. Her friend and now co-founder Patrisse Cullors commented on Garza’s letter and amended it with *black lives matter*. With the support of their third co-founder Opal Tometi, a hashtag was added and #BlackLivesMatter became a social movement in the making.

It was not until the shooting of another African-American teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, MO, during the summer of 2014, that the movement gained momentum on both social media and on the ground. Carney (2016) wrote, “Michael Brown’s death reignited support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and prompted many to use social media to debate the role of policing and the state of race relations in the United States” (p. 2). During this time, many people used Twitter to tweet and retweet images of Brown’s body, to report commentary live from the scene, and to express their concerns for the welfare of Black America. In the years that followed, several other unarmed African Americans were killed at the hands of law enforcement: Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile, to name a few examples.

Journalist Elizabeth Day of *The Guardian* wrote, “The new movement is powerful yet diffuse, linked not by physical closeness or even necessarily by political consensus, but by the mobilising force of social media” (Day, 2015, para. 19). Since 2014, the BLM movement has capitalized on this force of social media, more specifically Twitter, to create a call for action in the fight against racial and ethnic inequality and to mobilize participants of the movement on the ground. Social media became the avenue in which graphic photographs, live videos, and commentary from those live on the scene of these murders were shared. News of these events circulated exponentially faster due to the affordances of these social networking sites.

Although prior research has examined public relations and social media use by advocacy organizations, limited research has explored the intersection of social movements and the types of public relations messages used to influence online engagement. Because social movements have unique attributes compared to formal organizations, their messages and the functions they serve warrant further research. The informal nature, decentralization, structure, and evolution of the BLM movement suggest differences between this movement in particular and advocacy organizations examined in prior research. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine the communicative functions of tweets by BLM as a means to share information, build community, and promote action. Through a content analysis of all posts by BLM over a four-year period, we analyzed the influence that these functions had on audience engagement and how

the communicative functions changed over time. This paper also serves to help integrate social movement and public relations literature.

## Literature review

### Social movements

Many who study social movements tend to categorize phenomena such as interest groups and protest events similarly as social movements. To understand and study social movements, it is first important to define social movements. In *The Concept of Social Movements*, Diani (1992) argued that the concept of a social movement is “sharp enough to differentiate social movements from related concepts such as interest groups, political parties, protest events, and coalitions, and to identify a specific area of investigation and theorizing for social movement research” (p. 1). Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2012) provided six criteria that phenomena must meet to be classified as a social movement. These criteria suggest that a phenomenon must be “organized, uninstitutionalized, large in scope, promotes or opposes changes in societal norms and values, encounters opposition in moral struggle, and relies primarily on persuasion to bring about or resist change” to be classified as a social movement (p. 23). To take this delineation between social movements and related phenomena further, Tilly and Wood (2013) suggested that social movements are born from three elements. These elements include the following:

a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities; employment of combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering; and participants’ concerted public representations of WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies. (p. 23)

Many scholars have highlighted the informal or loosely organized nature of social movements. For instance, Diani (1992) defined a social movement as “consisting in networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organizations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (p. 3). Similarly, social movements also have been defined as “organized conflicts, or as conflicts between organized actors over the social use of common cultural values” (Touraine, 2002, p. 90), or a “loosely organized but sustained campaign in support of a social goal, typically either the implementation or the prevention of a change in society’s structure or values” (Smelser, Killian, & Turner, n.d.). Another definition, cited by University of California at Santa Barbara (n.d.), states that “in democratic societies, social movements are one of the principal social forms through which collectivities give voice to concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of themselves and others by engaging in different forms of collective action and public protest” (para. 1). In *Coming to Terms with Movement Studies*, rhetorical scholar Lucas (1980) declared,

“Social movements arise out of and are shaped by forces such as objective material conditions, rhetorical discourse, and the perceptions, attitudes, and values of the consciousness held by the members” (p. 263). Lastly, Horn (2013) defined social movements as “forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands” (p. 1). From the definitions above, we can conclude that social movements entail organization and collective voices to gain a specific outcome.

Stewart et al. (2012) argued that “persuasion is the primary agency through which social movements attempt to perform critical functions that enable them to come into existence, satisfy requirements, grow in size and influence, meet opposition from within and without, and effectively bring about or resist change” (p. 84). Additionally, they suggested that language used in a social movement is “the agent for social integration, the means of cultural socialization, the vehicle for social interaction, the channel for the transmission of values, and the glue that bonds people, ideas, and society” (p. 139). It is because of this that we seek to understand how BLM uses Twitter to share information, build community, and promote action.

#### Social movements and new technology

As far back as the printing press, technology has played an integral role in social movements and social movement organizations. Scholars interested in social movements and social movement organizations have taken note of the affordances new technologies provide and have attempted to understand how they work. DeLuca and Brunner (2017) suggested that “new media has become an essential tool to organize protests for groups and individuals” (p. 228). In addition to DeLuca and Brunner (2017), Rheingold (1999) posited that the Internet is more democratic than previous channels of communication because it is open to anyone rather than only media elites speaking to mass audiences. “The power to persuade and educate—to influence people’s beliefs and perceptions—is radically decentralized when people can communicate in this way: control is spread throughout the network” (para. 13). Agreeing with social movement scholars that new technology changes the course of social movements, sociologist Carty (2015) stated, “New media platforms are changing the social movement terrain even more radically than previous technologies. Though communication and information systems have historically been fundamental sources of power and counterpower, and of domination and social change, this effect has been exacerbated by the explosion of digital technologies” (p. 9). Carty added, “New media technologies allow users to become not merely receivers of the message but also *creators* and *distributors* of messages” (p. 9). Although traditional movements relied more on well-known leaders and experts, Carty (2015) suggested that “collective behavior manifests itself through a more horizontal infrastructure of connectivity” (p. 10). In citing Castells (2015) idea of an electronic grassroots of civil society, Carty (2015) continued to expand on this new infrastructure of connectivity by noting that because of these networks, the public sphere is broader “as citizens can now share grievances and express their opinions through peer-to-peer

networks” (p. 12). The organizers of the BLM movement took full advantage of the newfound connectivity that was made available through these infrastructures of connectivity.

## Black Lives Matter

In the summer of 2013, George Zimmerman, a white neighborhood watchman accused of killing unarmed, African-American teenager Trayvon Martin, was acquitted on second-degree murder charges. What started as a simple Facebook post highlighting the frustrations of Alicia Garza, BLM took on a life of its own. Frustrated by the outcome of the trial, “Garza logged onto Facebook and wrote, ‘Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.’ Garza’s friend Patrisse Cullors wrote back, closing her post with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter” (as cited in Wortham, 2016, para. 1). Moving from Facebook as a platform, Garza, Cullors, and another friend Tomeli decided to migrate to Twitter and created an official Twitter page for BLM in July 2013.

#BlackLivesMatter became a way for people to voice their frustrations after the Martin case. This hashtag unintentionally was propelled into a social movement in 2014 after the shooting and killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO. Because Twitter is the first and only social media platform that incorporated the hashtag (#) into its interface by employing the “Trending Topic” category, the migration to this platform proved to be strategic. Using the accessibility of the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter became visible to many within as well as outside the networks of the three friends. Due to technological advancements, temporal and spatial boundaries had been eliminated. People locally, nationally, and globally were able to view the very graphic image of the slain teen’s body lying in the street in Ferguson as well as the discourse that circulated with it. In disbelief, outraged, and feeling helpless, people from culturally diverse backgrounds began to flood Twitter with their feelings followed by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. People who had otherwise been naïve about the social injustices faced by African Americans were able to witness and join the conversation.

After the non-indictment of the officer who killed Brown, attention shifted to Ferguson and the BLM movement was placed in the national spotlight. Hamilton (2016) stated, “These collective incidents made people begin to realize that there truly was a problem that needed to be addressed in the United States” (p. 16). Protesters began to cry out in cities all over the nation. Peaceful protests sometimes turned violent. Riots took over the streets of Ferguson and people began to notice not only the movement, but also the injustices that African American people had been experiencing for decades. Deetz (2015) stated, “I think America is starting to wake up. Alarms of racial violence and unjust verdicts have saturated the social media. These things are not new, but they have finally become news and worthy of note” (p. 30).

In a chapter of the book, *Are All The Women Still White?: Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminism*, Garza cited what sparked the conversation:

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black

folks' contributions to the society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. We were humbled when cultural workers, artists, designers, and techies offered their labor and love to expand #BlackLivesMatter beyond a social media hashtag. Opal, Patrisse, and I created the infrastructure for this movement project—moving the hashtag from social media to the streets. (2016, p. 23)

#BlackLivesMatter seemed to quickly move beyond social media. Over the course of a few months, more killings of African Americans by white law enforcement officers flooded the media. After the enormous response from other activists, Garza and her two friends decided to organize the idea of #BlackLivesMatter into an official organization. With the creation of an official website, #BlackLivesMatter transformed into the BLM movement. The official organization branched out and created 38 chapters segmented by the East and West Coast, the South, the Mid-West, and international.

### Public relations, advocacy, and activism

Social movements, such as BLM, advocacy, and activism go hand in hand. Advocacy is defined as “the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading audiences to look favorably on—or accept the point of view of—the individual, the organization, or the idea” (Edgett, 2002, p. 1). Activism encompasses this concept but is typically defined by the behavioral commitment to organizations or causes (Lee, 1997). Examples of these actions are protests, boycotts, and demonstrations.

Public relations intersects with advocacy and activism in several different ways (Edgett, 2002). In their review of public relations scholarship, Lamme and Russell (2010) found “that the public relations function emerged when a person or organization sought to secure profit, recruitment, legitimacy, or to participate in the marketplace of ideas through agitation and advocacy” (p. 335). Public relations practitioners may work for organizations that must interact with or respond to advocacy or activist groups (L.A. Grunig, 1992). For example, animal rights groups are likely activist publics that zoos must consider and to which they must respond. Public relations and advocacy also can intersect at the individual level when practitioners function as advocates in their organization to give a voice to marginalized publics (Holtzhausen, 2012). These publics could be internal or external to the organization.

Finally, there is the public relations function within advocacy organizations, activist groups, or social movements (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000). Even without a formalized structure or official position, relationship building and communication are essential elements of any movement or cause. Public relations within these entities helps support the cause and helps maintain the organization or movement (Smith & Ferguson, 2001). To bridge the gap between activism and public relations, Ciszek (2015) reviewed literature that suggests “many of the tactics used by activists are public relations tactics, and their motives can be viewed as public relations strategies” (p. 447). She expanded on this point by further declaring “activists work to produce both material and symbolic products, employing public relations, planning, designing, and disseminating content, to shape the discourse around issues and causes” (p. 452).



One of the major controversies or conflicts within the literature about public relations and advocacy is how advocacy relates to other areas of research such as dialogic communication and the excellence theory because of its inherent goal of persuasion. For decades, public relations scholarship and practice have emphasized the obligation for practitioners to balance the needs and desires of an organization with those of its publics (Toledano, 2016). In fact, Reber (2013) stated, “Advocacy is persuasion and persuasion is asymmetrical communication and inherently unethical” (p. 14). However, as noted by Taylor (2010), scholarship has generally evolved to embrace advocacy as a way to push organizations toward excellence. To this end, Ciszek (2015) argued, “Activism and public relations are not in separate camps but occupy a fluid environment informed by cultural-economic forces” (p. 453). Advocacy can allow public relations practitioners to serve as the ethical conscience of powerful organizations by giving voice to those less powerful and not forcing consensus (Holtzhausen, 2012). Scholars (e.g., Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Smith & Ferguson, 2001) also have highlighted the need to examine public relations within activist groups and how their needs may differ from other types of organizations.

#### Advocacy on social media

Within the public relations and advocacy literature, social media advocacy has become a significant focus of research. For instance, research has examined how advocacy groups use social media platforms to foster dialogue and engagement with publics. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found that environmental advocacy groups tended to use Facebook for one-way message dissemination rather than dialogue. When examining the antecedents of social media use by advocacy groups, scholars have found an organization’s capital to be a significant predictor of social media use (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). Studies also have looked at practitioner perspectives of social media use and what it accomplishes. Primary uses of social media that were reported include educating, mobilizing (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012), promoting the organization’s image, and fundraising (Seo et al., 2009). Smith (2010) declared that social media have made public relations more socially distributed. Because of this, “public relations-related messages expand through the ease of sharing (functional interactivity) and the relevance of the message to an issue community (contingent interactivity)” (Smith, 2010, p. 333). With Twitter in particular, Smith (2010) stated, “Social media users may participate in public relations activities, as public content reflects on organizational reputation” (p. 330).

More specifically, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) examined the key communicative functions of posts by nonprofits on Twitter. They developed three primary categories of social media posts: *Information*, *Community*, and *Action*. This typology helps describe and explain how an organization is using social media. *Information* covers all posts about organization news or any other news or information that is shared. *Community* is the function that includes posts that facilitate or build community in other ways such as recognizing individuals. Finally, *Action* posts include some sort of behavioral component such as an appeal for donations, promoting an event, or sharing a petition. This typology has been used in several subsequent studies. For instance,

research has assessed the communicative functions of posts by nonprofit advocacy groups on Facebook (Auger, 2013; Huang, Lin, & Saxton, 2016; Saxton & Waters, 2014), Twitter (Auger, 2013; Guo & Saxton, 2014), and YouTube (Auger, 2013). Previous research suggests that the post function impacts social media engagement. Specifically, *Information* posts have been found to generate more sharing behaviors by users (Huang, Lin, & Saxton, 2016; Saxton & Waters, 2014). For commenting behaviors, results have been inconsistent with *Information* (Huang, Lin, & Saxton, 2016) and *Community* (Saxton & Waters, 2014) posts generating more comments in different contexts. Thus, additional research is needed to understand the relationship between communicative function and social media engagement.

In an analysis of the Justice for Trayvon Campaign, Hon (2015) proposed that digital social advocacy changes public relations activism. She highlighted power shifts as a feature of digital media by writing, “Another feature of digital media is that power can be shifted from the owners of the means of production—that is, organizations that design and control messages such as publishing houses and newspaper publishers, as well as advertising and public relations departments and agencies—to the masses” (p. 300). Additionally, she asserted that the need for centralized leadership is reduced or sometimes completely removed by digital technologies (Hon, 2015). These same technologies allow for the rapid and low cost mobilization of participants (Hon, 2015). These changing dynamics lead us to BLM. BLM offers the opportunity to examine the communicative functions of posts by a decentralized social movement that grew and evolved over time. Unlike the advocacy nonprofits examined in previous research (e.g., Auger 2013; Guo & Saxton, 2014), BLM emerged from a hashtag and grew as a social movement in response to current events. Thus, the current analysis seeks to address the following questions:

*RQ1:* What are the most common communicative functions used by BLM on Twitter?

*RQ2:* Did the communicative functions change over time as the movement developed?

*RQ3:* Which communicative functions generated the most behavioral outcomes in terms of retweets and replies?

## Method

In order to answer these research questions, a content analysis of the primary BLM Twitter account was conducted.



## Sample

Tweets were collected using the social media monitoring platform Crimson Hexagon, which allows subscribers to collect all public posts from a given account. For this analysis, all tweets sent by the @BlkLivesMatter Twitter handle between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2017, were collected. The initial sample included 16,203 posts. However, to assess the communicative functions used by BLM, posts that were sent directly to an individual were excluded. Retweets of other accounts without commentary also were deleted. This resulted in a final sample of 2,225 tweets.

## Coding categories

Individual tweets served as the level of analysis. Two of the major variables of interest were retweets and replies, which are behavioral outcomes on Twitter. These metrics were automatically included in the dataset provided through Crimson Hexagon. To examine the relationship between communicative functions and behavioral outcomes, all 2,225 tweets were coded using a categorization scheme adapted from Lovejoy and Saxton (2012). The coding scheme, which has been used in several other studies (e.g., Auger, 2013; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Thackeray, Neiger, Burton, & Thackeray, 2013), classifies messages into three broad categories: *Information*, *Community*, and *Action*. These were divided into 15 subcategories. Most subcategories also were developed by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), but additional categories were added to suit this study's context. See Table 1 for each subcategory and example tweets.

## Procedures and intercoder reliability

The two authors of this manuscript served as coders. Once the codebook was developed, four rounds of practice coding were developed. Tweets from outside the sample timeframe or from individual BLM chapters were used for the training. After each round, coders met to assess intercoder reliability, discuss discrepancies, and refine the codebook. Once intercoder reliability was met during training, the full sample was split equally between the two coders for independent coding with a 10% overlap to compute the final intercoder reliability. Reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha and the coding for message category was found to be highly reliable ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## Results

RQ1 asked which communicative function BLM used most often. Descriptive statistics were consulted to address this question. When looking at the three main categories of function, frequencies indicated 1,316 (59.9%) were *Information* focused, 384 (17.5%) were *Community* focused, and 498 (22.7%) were *Action* focused. Some tweets ( $n = 27$ , 1.2%) did not fit into any category because they did not contain enough context or were completely irrelevant. These were removed from subsequent analyses. When looking at the subcategories, *sharing news related to the cause* was the most common type of message ( $n = 1,212$ , 54.5%). This subcategory falls under the *Information* function. Other common subcategories were *giving recognition or thanks* ( $n = 146$ , 6.6%) and *acknowledgement of holidays or commemorative dates* ( $n = 135$ , 6.1%), which are part of the *Community* function. Tweets for *promoting an event* ( $n = 148$ , 6.7%) or *lobbying and advocacy* ( $n = 125$ , 5.6%) were common subcategories of the *Action* function. Frequencies for all 15 subcategories can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Communicative functions and frequencies.

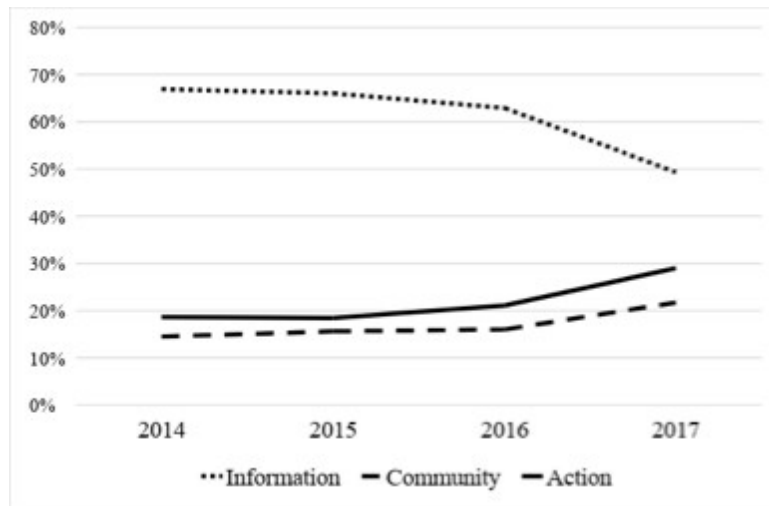
Category	Example	Frequency
<b>Information</b>		
<i>Facts or statistics</i>	29% of Black trans people who went to jail or prison reported being physically assaulted while in custody #BlackTransLivesMatter	25 (1.1%)
<i>News</i>	#BiancaRoberson was murdered in cold blood after white killer "wasn't happy" that she switched lanes. @CNN <a href="https://t.co/TXJFbTJeO0">https://t.co/TXJFbTJeO0</a>	1,212 (54.5%)
<i>Organization Announcements</i>	Read our statement of support for #Charlottesville: <a href="https://t.co/X4S41bh0DC">https://t.co/X4S41bh0DC</a>	79 (3.6%)
<b>Community</b>		
<i>Recognition or thanks</i>	Gratitude to @JamilahLemieux for her engaging questions and informative journalism. #FergusonOctober	146 (6.6%)
<i>Current or local events</i>	#BlackLivesMatter West Oakland BART is now shut down. #Ferguson is everywhere <a href="http://t.co/zhz79AVBSu">http://t.co/zhz79AVBSu</a>	44 (2.0%)
<i>Holidays or anniversaries</i>	Trayvon Martin's brutal murder 5 years ago today sparked a global movement and changed us all. #TrayvonTaughtMe #BlackLivesMatter <a href="https://t.co/szqd1GiyJb">https://t.co/szqd1GiyJb</a>	135 (6.1%)
<i>Response solicitation</i>	We wanna know what you think--what does it mean when we say Black Lives Matter?	59 (2.7%)

**Action**

<i>Event promotion</i>	#BlackoutFestival Next Saturday! See The Exciting Lineup of Film, Art, Music & Panels: <a href="http://t.co/mYZA6D1rrT">http://t.co/mYZA6D1rrT</a> & RT! <a href="http://t.co/4TTPJk2AyY">http://t.co/4TTPJk2AyY</a>	148 (6.7%)
<i>Donation appeal</i>	Emergency fund: Donate to help a #trans #femme parent pay rent, find housing for a trans woman, etc. <a href="https://t.co/JyC1mD9dtN">https://t.co/JyC1mD9dtN</a>	77 (3.5%)
<i>Selling a product</i>	One day left to get your #blacklivesmatter tee - <a href="http://t.co/wJbM1KG0l0">http://t.co/wJbM1KG0l0</a>	13 (.6%)
<i>Volunteers/ employees</i>	Paid summer apprenticeship: Visit <a href="https://t.co/ppkRh8Lfww">https://t.co/ppkRh8Lfww</a> to apply to the @ctwo_c2 summer organizing program!	6 (.3%)
<i>Lobbying and advocacy</i>	Sign the petition telling @LaborSec to #SetTheStandard for diversity in the workplace: <a href="https://t.co/DRyY5bFxxU">https://t.co/DRyY5bFxxU</a>	125 (5.6%)
<i>Appeal to join another site</i>	A few of the amazing photos posted for #BLM247. Follow @Blklivesmatter on IG & visit <a href="http://t.co/3YX25ds05i">http://t.co/3YX25ds05i</a> for info. <a href="http://t.co/akki98FznV">http://t.co/akki98FznV</a>	87 (3.9%)
<i>Learn how to help</i>	Want to support #Charlottesville? Organizers let you know exactly what to do. So read closely and pay attention. <a href="https://t.co/G3zmf5mIq">https://t.co/G3zmf5mIq</a>	35 (1.6%)
<i>Call to share information</i>	Hey family, if you can, please share this bail fund link for Freedom Inc. #FreedomNow <a href="https://t.co/xaBdzVltGU">https://t.co/xaBdzVltGU</a>	7 (.3%)

For RQ2 the differences over time were observed. To do this, a Chi-square Test of Association was conducted examining the relationship between year of posting and message category. Each year (2014-2017) was recoded as 1-4 to serve as a categorical independent variable. The test revealed that there was a significant relationship,  $X^2(6) = 54.59, p < .001$ . As seen in Figure 1, there were changes in the frequency of all three message types over time, with the most notable changes occurring in 2017. *Information* messages decreased over time. The 49.3% ( $n = 369$ ) in 2017 was significantly less than 2014 ( $n = 355, 66.9\%$ ), 2015 ( $n = 297, 66.0\%$ ), or 2016 ( $n = 295, 62.9\%$ ). *Community* messages increased over time, accounting for 14.5% ( $n = 77$ ) in 2014, 15.6% ( $n = 70$ ) in 2015, 16.0% ( $n = 75$ ) in 2016, and 21.7% ( $n = 162$ ) in 2017. The only significant difference was between 2014 and 2017. There was also an increase in *Action* messages. This category accounted for 29.0% ( $n = 217$ ) of tweets in 2017, which was significantly more than 2014 ( $n = 99, 18.6\%$ ), 2015 ( $n = 83, 18.4\%$ ), and 2016 ( $n = 99, 21.1\%$ ).

Figure 1. Change in message types over time.



RQ3 asked which communicative function resulted in the most behavioral outcomes. To test this, we compared the number of retweets and replies across tweet functions. Because the data did not have a normal distribution and violated the assumption of equality of variances, each dependent variable was examined using the Brown-Forsythe test. Results revealed that message type had a significant effect on the number of retweets,  $F(2, 596.47) = 5.03, p = .007$ . To assess which message types were significantly different from one another, results of a Games Howell post-hoc multiple comparisons test were consulted. This test is recommended when equal variances are not assumed (Field, 2013). The test indicated that posts with *Action* messages ( $M = 57.14, SD = 96.01$ ) received significantly fewer retweets than those with *Community* messages ( $M = 120.07, SD = 412.04, p = .01$ ) or *Information* messages ( $M = 77.35, SD = 268.19, p = .048$ ). For replies, there was no significant differences based on the function of the tweet,  $F(2, 1857.59) = .92, p = .40$ .

## Discussion

Overall, findings help illuminate how a social movement organization uses Twitter for advocacy. Sharing *Information* was by far the most common function used by BLM, but different types of *Community* and *Action* messages were also common. This is consistent with prior research on other types of accounts. Nonprofit organizations have been found to share *Information* messages more often than *Community* or *Action* messages (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Public health departments are also more likely to share *Information* than *Action* messages (Neiger, Thackeray, Burton, Thackeray, & Reese, 2013). This suggests that organizations and social movements like BLM still often use social media for information dissemination rather than functions that are arguably more social like the *Community* or *Action* functions.

As evidenced by the results from Research Question 2, the communicative functions of BLM's tweets changed over time. Although *Information* posts remained the most common, they decreased over time relative to the other types of posts. This could suggest that sharing information and explaining the movement were particularly important in BLM's early years but as people became more aware of it, maintaining a community and continuing to encourage action became more important.

Findings from Research Question 3 provided evidence of which types of posts are most effective. *Community* and *Information* posts were retweeted more than *Action* posts, but there were no significant differences in terms of the number of replies. These findings are slightly different from previous research that found posts serving the *Information* function are shared most often (Huang et al., 2016; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Although the difference was not significant, *Community* messages were reposted more than *Information* messages in the current study. This may be due to the individual context or differences between Facebook and Twitter. The current results suggest that BLM or other social movements might want to consider posting more messages with a *Community* function if their goal is amplification. This makes sense within the context of a social movement, which is defined by a collective identity (Diani, 1992).

Some prior research on commenting behaviors on Facebook had found that *Information* messages garnered the most comments (Huang, Lin, & Saxton, 2016), whereas other research found that *Community* messages earned more comments (Saxton & Waters, 2014). The lack of differences in terms of replies may indicate that context is particularly important when it comes to commenting or replying to a message and that no one communicative function will consistently result in this behavioral outcome.

Looking at the most retweeted posts gives some insight into why posts serving the *Community* function might have received the most retweets. Looking at the top 10 most retweeted posts, which had between 1,968 and 6,717 retweets, six of them fell into the *Recognition or Thanks* or *Holidays or Anniversaries* categories. Examples of these included:

“Sandra Bland. We miss you. We love you. Happy Birthday. #SayHerName”

“Happy birthday, Trayvon. We will always remember you. #BlackLivesMatter”

“We stand with every "me, too" said aloud or silently. #MeToo. Thank you

@TaranaBurke for pioneering #MeToo 10 years ago.”

Past research on retweeting behavior suggests that posts that are emotionally evocative are more likely to be shared than those that are not (So et al., 2016). Altruism also has been found to play a role in the decision to retweet a message (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2015). These motivations could explain why these particular posts, which are commemorative and show support for others, were shared so much.

Although there were no statistical differences between communicative functions in terms of replies, looking at the posts with the most replies offers some insight into the type of content that received the most engagement. Seven of the 10 posts with the most replies shared news about the cause or organization. The post with the most response was, “The #BlackLivesMatter Network advocates for Dignity, Justice, and Respect: <https://t.co/ZKEAyQlmw3>,” which received 2,246

replies. The post with the second most replies only received about a quarter of that at 585 replies. However, the content was similar. That post read, “#BlackLivesMatter advocates dignity, justice and freedom. Not murder.” Only one of the 10 posts with the most replies specifically requested feedback. That post received 329 replies and said, “Today, #BlackLivesMatter turns 3. Tell us ...In a world where Black Lives Matter, what do you imagine? <https://t.co/1FFfAbwpjT>.”

## Limitations and future research

Findings and limitations of the current study suggest directions for future research. This study focused on tweets sent by the primary BLM Twitter account. Future research should examine how BLM or leaders from other social movements interact within a network, whether they reply to comments and questions, and how regional chapters or individual leaders may differ in their message strategies. There are also opportunities to examine how message strategies may differ based on platform. Although Twitter has been a central channel for numerous social movements (Castells, 2015), it does not exist in a bubble. Social movements also rely on other digital media platforms, traditional media coverage, and in-person events. Finally, *Community* posts were found to garner the most retweets but that is only one of many outcomes that could be examined. Future research should focus on the various effects of different communicative functions used by advocacy organizations and social movements. Other outcomes could include taking action, link clicks, and cognitive or affective outcomes.

## Conclusion

With the advent of new technologies, such as social networking sites, people are able to connect and organize around common beliefs and causes despite geographic and time restrictions. Using the affordances of these new technologies to their advantage, three activists (Garza, Cullors, and Tometi) organized the BLM movement via social media. This study analyzed the organization’s public tweets over a four-year period to examine the message strategies that were used.

The findings show that *Information* was the most common type of communicative function, which is consistent with literature on other organization types. Despite the informal and decentralized structure of the social movement, its social media practices reflected those used by traditional nonprofit organizations (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). There was a decrease in informational messages over time, but sharing information was still the most used message strategy each year. However, the change in messages over time does indicate a move toward more community building, which may prove to be an effective transition for BLM. Compared to other message types, *Community* messages received the most retweets.



Other social movements and organizations looking to grow and spread their messages can learn from the case of BLM. Although it is important to share information and calls to action, these findings suggest that using social media to build community is more likely to grow a community through sharing.

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