

A Mobile Phone Movement: Investigating #BlackLivesMatter Instagram Activity

Following the Death of George Floyd

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#BlackLivesMatter is a Twitter hashtag created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi following George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013 (Tillery, 2019). After its early popularity, the hashtag transformed into a national organization and movement for police reform and the humanization of black people in the United States (Tillery, 2019). The movement resurged after George Floyd was murdered by the police on May 25th, 2020, going from nine million Instagram posts using #BlackLivesMatter in April to 21 million merely two weeks after Floyd's murder (Tucker & Doettling, 2020). Because of the sheer number of people engaging with the BLM movement online, a deeper understanding of how social media mobilized people is valuable for researchers trying to characterize the BLM movement as well as content creators trying to spread awareness using Instagram. While many studies investigate the BLM movement on Facebook and Twitter because of their large user bases and text-based content, a review of the literature reveals that there is very little knowledge about Instagram as a BLM or general activism platform. Instagram is a photo-sharing social media platform that Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger created in October, 2010; it has over one billion users and includes elements such the ability to "follow" others, a timeline of posts, hashtags, and the ability to "like" or comment (Yurieff, 2019).

Literature Review

Virality of Social Media Content

In 2013, Onook Oh conducted a study in which he compared the effect of social media on online movements, such as Arab Spring in 2011, to the effect of printers on the Reformation in

the 15th century. His conclusion supported the sociomaterial perspective that people themselves are not revolutionary unless their ideas are connected through large-scale support, whether that is reprinting or reposting (Oh, 2013). By revealing the importance of the relationship between humans and technology throughout history for spreading information and sparking conversations, the study validated research examining the effects and strategies of online message distribution.

In order to identify techniques that maximize posts' audiences, researchers examined the features and messages commonly found in viral user-generated content. For example, in 2010, a group of researchers examined the most retweeted Twitter posts surrounding different events and found that many contained a call for action, collective identity-making, crowdsourcing, and/or information sharing (Nagarajan et al.). Additionally, around half of the most popular tweets contained hashtags and other media such as hyperlinks, videos, or photos (Nagarajan et al., 2010). Similarly, a 2013 study conducted by Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan analyzed how the expression of emotion and use of elements including website links and hashtags affected a post's popularity. Their findings noted that hashtag use and "follower" count had a strong correlation with a tweet's popularity and that higher emotionality tended to trigger more retweets (Stieglitz, & Dang-Xuan, 2013). More recently, a group of researchers analyzed Twitter behavior around the Boston Bombing to analyze what tweet features are important to their diffusion during times of crisis and concluded that fast timing and usage of hashtags are positively associated with more retweets (Lee et al., 2015). These studies demonstrated that hashtags, media, emotionality, and timing are critical to a post's virality.

Collective Action on Social Media

With rules for virality established, researchers became interested in how social media campaigns become successful and what causes people to participate. In 2016, Kyle Chapman performed case studies on major social media movements such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and #OccupyWallStreet, analyzing what made these movements successful and what eventually caused their downfalls. His findings suggest that while social media presents unprecedented potential for civic engagement and mass mobilization, its decentralized nature can make movements vulnerable to misrepresentation without leadership and clear rhetoric surrounding its goals (Chapman, 2016). Despite this, people and organizations continue to use their social media accounts for activism, thus researchers began to investigate why. Using a psychological lens, Aaron Noland's 2017 study focuses on why millennials engage in online activism on social media and how nonprofits can more effectively engage them. Using a structural equation model, Noland found that self efficacy, which he defines as "one's self-beliefs about their ability to succeed in a particular setting or engaging in a target behavior," is the largest driver of social media activism and should thus be incorporated into nonprofits' social media strategy (2017).

The Current Research: #BlackLivesMatter

A review of the existing literature reveals that as studies investigated online collective action, researchers began to concentrate on specific movements, how they diffuse their content, and how people continue to participate as internet culture changes. As the BLM movement made national headlines, it received criticism for being too violent and apolitical, causing researchers to study and characterize the BLM movement. For example, Fredrick Harris noted that rather than mimicking the charismatic leadership of the Civil Rights movement, social media provides BLM with a bottom-up, public access approach wherein leaders cannot be targeted or co-opted

(2016). Additionally, activists can direct actions, document and broadcast their perspective, and create a strong grassroots surge (Harris, 2016; Rickford, 2015). A 2018 multi-platform case study confirmed the notion that social media allows BLM to build a collective identity and create a coalition of smaller-sized grassroots organizations (Mundt et al.). In his analysis, Russell Rickford also mentions that the use of technology and the framing of BLM as a human rights issue as opposed to a civil rights issue allowed localized campaigns to mobilize people from various communities and backgrounds (2015).

Later, Alvin Tillery continued to characterize the BLM movement through a Twitter post content analysis (2019). Tillery discovered that the majority of BLM tweets were emotional responses to the movement and about the realities of police brutality for the Black community (2019). Additionally, he found that users tended to frame their tweets around individual rights rather than identities such as gender, race, or sexuality, aligning with Rickford's findings (Tillery, 2019). Lastly, Tillery's research revealed that BLM activists on Twitter encouraged non-violent, political behaviors more than any other methods of protest. While this differs from the apolitical BLM movement defined by Harris, this variation is likely a result of the movement morphing over time. As these studies demonstrated, social media allows BLM activists to share their own experiences and arguments, thus permitting the structure of the movement to change as the participants evolve. While this may seem beneficial, Nadine Barnett Cosby's 2018 dissertation, composed of a content analysis and interviews, illustrates the drawbacks of social media's open structure for the BLM and Take A Knee movements on Twitter and Facebook. Barnett Cosby found that social media discourse gives BLM activists the opportunity for organization, expression, and mobilization (2018). However, she also found that open dialogue on social

media can subvert a movement's narrative by giving unrelated people and their counter-narratives a voice, corroborating Chapman's more generalized 2016 findings (Barnett Cosby, 2018).

The Research Question

While conducting this research, it became apparent that little is known about how Instagram functions as a platform for BLM. As the field of knowledge around social media communication has evolved, Instagram activism has been skipped over, despite its prevalence. Though there are currently over 27 million Instagram posts that use #BlackLivesMatter, there has been little research on why that is or how people engage with BLM on Instagram; Mundt et al.'s study incorporates Instagram, but none singled it out. Still, the literature about viral content and collective action creates a basis for predicting Instagram activists' motivations and strategies. Additionally, more narrow BLM research informs the themes used in the movement's content and what features make it successful. However, because the identities and ideologies associated with the BLM movement can vary on Twitter, a single social media platform, research is needed to establish the amount of variation *across* platforms (Barnett Cosby, 2018; Tillery, 2019).

In order to conduct research on the effectiveness of BLM on Instagram, there must be a base understanding of how users employ the platform. Knowing how people on Instagram responded to Floyd's death will be a valuable introduction to activism on Instagram and will allow future researchers to investigate the reasoning behind similar posts in the future as well as whether or not they are effective mobilization methods. Additionally, the methods and themes

presented in BLM Instagram content can clarify the movement's ideology, especially when directly faced with a crisis. As result of the gap in knowledge about Instagram's use for the BLM movement, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

“What styles of Black Lives Matter Instagram content did users post in the weeks following the death of George Floyd? Which did viewers engage with the most?”

Methodology

Introduction to Methods

The variables of interest for each post are the type of post (image), its purpose, the action requested, the type of account, and the engagement rate (“likes”:“followers”). Based on these variables, the sub-questions include what are the different types of BLM posts on Instagram, what are the purposes of specific BLM posts, what actions do the posts request the viewers take, how does engagement vary between BLM posts shared on personal accounts as compared to business or hobby accounts, and what styles of post have the highest engagement rate.

This inquiry will employ a quantitative approach in order to identify frequently used styles of BLM Instagram content and analyze the relationship between a post's use of the aforementioned variables (type of post, purpose, and action requested) and its engagement. The primary question for the inquiry asks what styles of content are used to support BLM on Instagram and in order to answer this question, the researcher used a content analysis to identify the most frequently used themes and elements of BLM Instagram posts. Additionally, the other goal of this study is to discover which style of content users responded to the most, and because this is determining the relationship between two variables, that can only be done with quantitative data. Content analysis is designed to identify patterns and frequencies, which is

critical for recognizing the most common styles of BLM Instagram content that users would be exposed to. Especially because there is very little information about BLM content on Instagram, it was important that the styles identified were derived directly from real BLM Instagram content to create an accurate baseline. Additionally, content analysis is historically used in scholarly BLM and social media research (see e.g., Mundt et al., 2018; Tilley, 2019).

Process and Procedure

This study follows a two-round coding process argued by Wondwesen Tafesse and Anders Wien in “A Framework for Categorizing Social Media Posts”: a content analysis concentrated on Instagram. These two rounds of coding are deductive coding, wherein coding categories are established from relevant literature, and inductive coding, wherein a set of codes is derived from a small sample, allowing the researcher to add or adjust the coding categories based on the empirical data (Tafesse & Wien, 2017). Once the coding categories are finalized, they are then used on a larger sample for the quantitative results and analysis (Tafesse & Wien, 2017). The two-step process verifies the accuracy of coding categories because the codes are derived from both previous literature and Instagram; the coding categories also contribute an understanding of the variety of BLM content style to the field of knowledge.

In both rounds of sampling, the images were collected using a systematic random sampling method. In order to access #BlackLivesMatter posts, the researcher used the Internet Archive (for the link <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/blacklivesmatter/>) to access interactive screen captures from 11 timestamps between May 25th and June 8th; this time frame was selected because it saw the BLM movement’s initial resurgence after Floyd was murdered.

In the first round, every sixth Instagram post was selected, unless the image had been deleted, in which case it defaulted to the fifth and so on; this process gathered seven images per timestamp and 77 total. Each image was categorized for the following variables: “type of post,” “purpose of post,” and “actions requested” through the main messages communicated in the images, key phrases, suggestions, and characteristics, which were all noted in a coding manual. When messages of the post aligned with one of the deductive codes it was categorized as such, but if not, new categories were proposed. Once all 77 posts were compiled, the researcher re-reviewed the inductive code suggestions and finalized the most suitable ones. The “purpose” coding categories were derived from the results of studies performed by Dr. Barnett Cosby and Dr. Tillery, visible in Table 1 (2018; 2019).

Table 1

Progression of “Purpose” Coding Categories

Deductive Coding Categories	Inductive Coding Categories	Final Coding Categories	Characteristics
Information	-	Information	Post designed to teach or spread awareness, such as those promoting an event or product, sharing news, defining terms, or explaining important concepts for the movement, etc
Resource Mobilization	-	Resource Mobilization	Posts that intend to collect and organize resources including money, people, facilities, etc.; posts with urges for their audience to take direct action
Solidarity	-	Solidarity	Posts with any emotional

response to the movement or its events, including posts recognizing personal privilege, calling for the community to come together or seek justice, or non-specific support for the movement

Because there has been no prior research on BLM on Instagram, the coding categories for “types of posts” and “actions requested” were deduced from the researcher’s background knowledge and are listed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2

Progression of “Type of Post” Coding Categories

Deductive Coding Categories	Inductive Coding Categories	Final Coding Categories	Characteristics
Black Screen	-	Black Screen	Solid-black images
-	Graphics	BLM Inspired Art	Digital or traditional art containing BLM slogans, popular images such as the raised fist, figures associated with the movement, or larger themes like justice
-	Paintings		
-	Brand Post	Brand Post	Posts containing a business’ logo, products, and/or content
-	Personal Photo	Personal Photo	Image of the account owner or people related to them, unrelated to the movement
Protest Photos	-	Protest Photos	Any image from a Black

			Lives Matter Protest, including pictures of the police, signs, destruction, or large masses of people
Twitter Screenshots	-		Posts whose focal points are text, whether it be a quote, opinion, short phrase of support, definitions, etc.
News Headline	-	Text Post	
Event Details	-		
Infographic	-		
Like to Donate	-	-	-
Photos of a Victim	-	-	-

Table 3*Progression of “Actions Requested” Coding Categories*

Deductive Coding Categories	Inductive Coding Categories	Final Coding Categories	Characteristics
Contacting a Government Representative	-	Urging Others	Posts asking people to hold individuals, institutions, and government bodies accountable for their anti-Black actions and get even more people involved with BLM
Protesting	-		
Signing a Petition	-		
-	Speaking Up		
-	Voting		
-	Donating		
Supporting Black-Owned Businesses	-	Financial Contributions	Requests for people to monetarily support BLM organizations or Black owned businesses
None	-	None	Posts that made no request of their viewers.
Education	-	Self-Betterment	Posts that told audiences to educate themselves on BLM issues or reflect upon their own actions
Self-Reflection	-		
-	Listening		
-	General Action	General Action	Posts that tell audiences to act without giving

specific instructions or resources, including “be an ally” or “actions speak louder than words”

Image 1

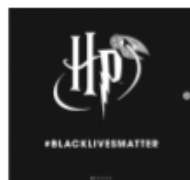
Examples of Each Type of Post



Ex. Black
Screen



Ex. BLM
Inspired Art



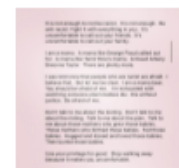
Ex. Brand
Post



Ex. Personal
Photo



Ex. Protest
Photo



Ex. Text
Post

In the second round, because the intended number of posts was 154, a similar systematic sampling method was used but every third image was selected rather than sixth; 14 images were selected from each of the 11 dates. The researcher categorized each post for the aforementioned variables while also recording the number of “likes” on each post as part of the engagement rate. To store these images and codes, the researcher used a Google Spreadsheet. When examining the type of account by looking at the entirety of the Instagram profile, the researcher also noted the number of “followers” for each account, then applied Google Sheets’ quotient formula in order to calculate the percentage of “followers” that “liked” each post as an estimate of the engagement rate. The researcher also took a screenshot of the cover image of each post accompanied by the caption and number of “likes;” these screenshots were each stored in a folder corresponding to the type of post.

Data Analysis

While the content analysis identified the styles of BLM content and their frequency, the next step of analysis was calculating the mean engagement rate for each coding category as well as each coding category according to type of account. With individual posts' engagement rates estimated using the process mentioned above, the data was then isolated by variable and the average formula was used to calculate the mean engagement rate for each coding category. This same process was duplicated but the data was isolated by variable *and* type of account, where the mean engagement rates were calculated for the overlap of these two categories. Once the means were all calculated, they were compared to see which styles of content tend to garner the most engagement and whether or not that is influenced by type of account.

Limitations

Because of the time differences between the posts being shared (May 25th-June 8th of 2020), and when the data was collected (January-March 2021), the methods and procedures have some limitations. Firstly, though the Internet Archive displays screen captures from the designated two week period, the posts themselves must be accessed through current Instagram. As a result, some of the images that would have been randomly selected from the screen capture were no longer available because the post had either been deleted or the account went private. While this limited the number of accessible images, pictures being deleted demonstrates the trendy nature of the BLM movement wherein as soon as the conversation seemed to die down online, people no longer felt the need to have BLM content on their profiles. Additionally, because the Instagram posts and profiles reflect current data, the total number of “likes” or

“followers” is not completely reliable because both of those numbers fluctuated, even within the six week data collection period. The “follower” count is not a completely verifiable measure of the posts’ total audience; however, it is the closest, most readily available gauge of a post’s viewers.

Results

The first question for this inquiry asked “what styles of Black Lives Matter Instagram content did users post in the weeks following the death of George Floyd;” this was primarily answered by the final coding categories visible in the “Methods” section, but will also be explored through the following frequency reports. The frequency reports summarize the overall counts of each coding category and also relay the number of items used in calculating the mean engagement rates, accounting for engagement rate outliers. In order to discover “what styles of content Instagram users engaged with the most,” based on the “like” and “follower” data gathered during the content analysis, the researcher then compared the mean engagement rates for the variables “type of post,” “purpose,” and “actions requested,” which are visible in the graphs below. These same variables were also investigated but accounting for the type of account (personal, business, or hobby).

Frequency

Table 4

Frequency in the general sample (- Outliers)

Type of Post		Purpose		Actions Requested	
Black Screen	12 (11)	Information	33 (28)	Financial Contributions	28
BLM Inspired Art	27 (26)	Resource Mobilization	67 (63)	General Action	37 (36)

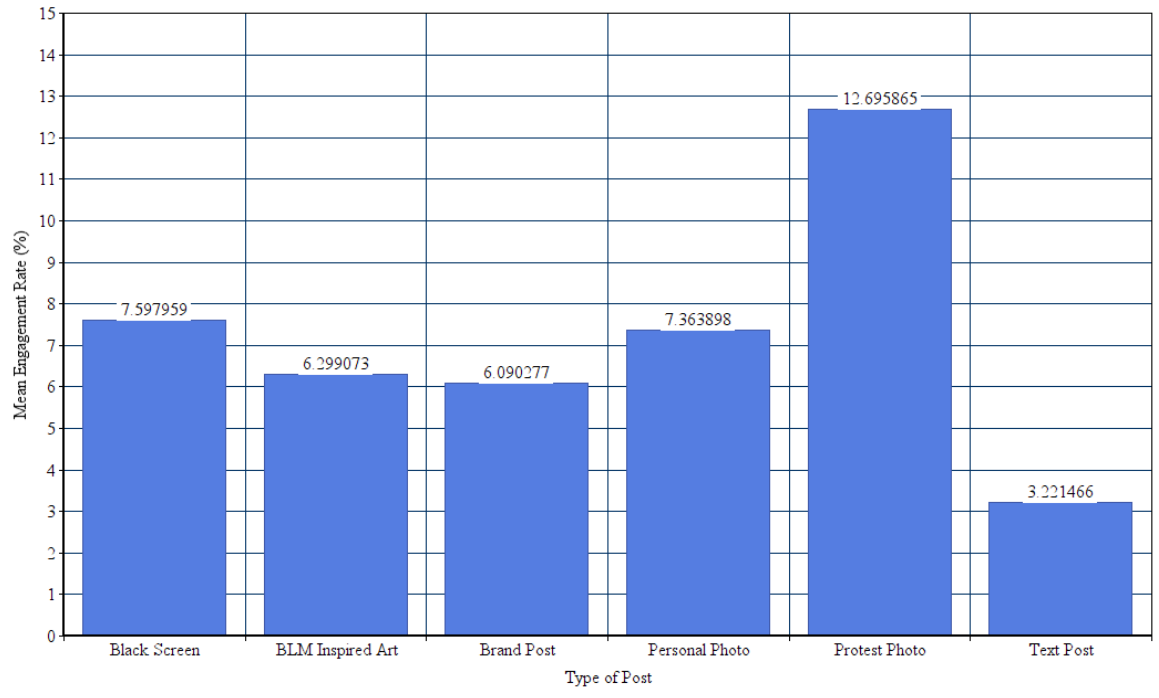
Brand Post	20	Solidarity	124 (117)	None	50 (46)
Personal Photo	22 (19)			Self-Betterment	47
Protest Photo	33			Urging Others	77 (75)
Text Post	40 (39)				

While there were 154 images sorted in the content analysis, many posts were identified as containing more than one purpose or action requested, which explains the larger frequencies in those two columns. The most frequent type of post found in the sample was text posts, with black screens, a much more narrow category, being the least frequent. “Solidarity” was the far most frequent purpose, with “resource mobilization” having a little more than half as many, and information having the least. Of the actions requested, “urging others” was the most frequent; “none” was the second without considering outliers.

Type of Post

Figure 1

“Type of Post” Mean Engagement Rates



For the data general sample, protest photos had by far the highest mean engagement rate with 12.69%, whereas text posts, the type with the lowest mean engagement rate, received less than a quarter of that (3.22%). While black screens had the second highest engagement rate, they still have 5.09% deficit behind protest photos, without accounting for type of account.

Type of Post According to Account Type

Table 5

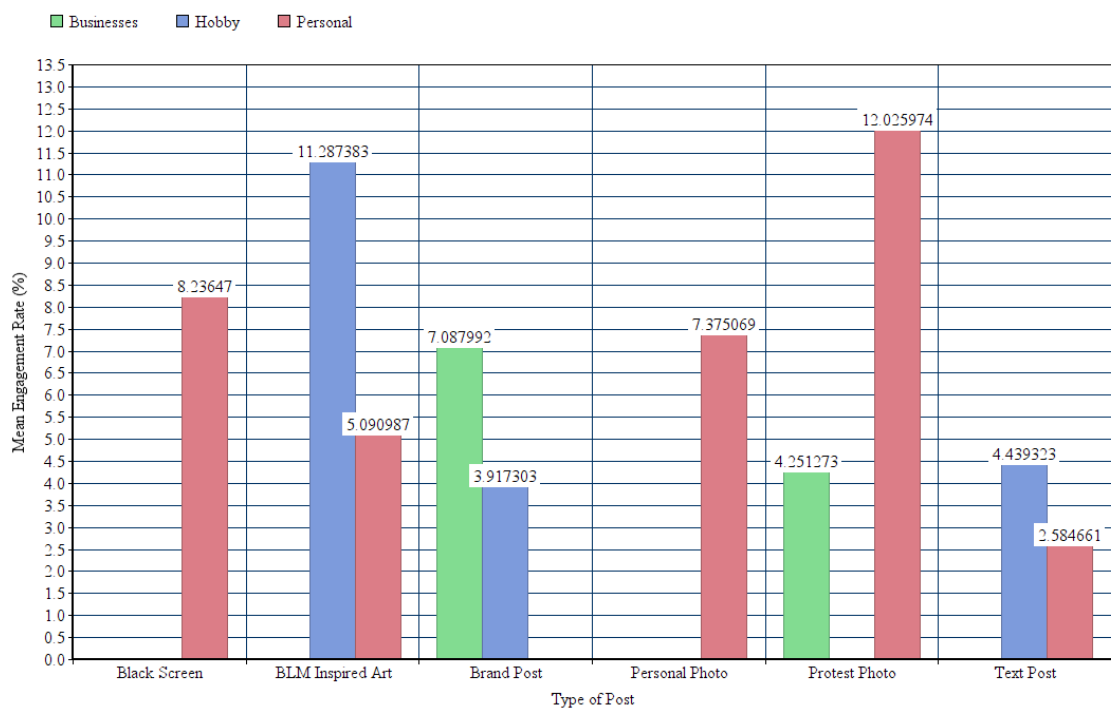
“Type of Post” Frequencies by Account Type (-Outliers)

	Business	Hobby	Personal
Black Screen	-	3	9
BLM Inspired Art	3	11	13
Brand Post	9	11 (10)	-
	Business	Hobby	Personal
Personal Photo	-	3	19
Protest Photo	6 (5)	4	23 (22)
Text Post	3	7	30 (28)

Firstly, for hobby accounts the most frequent categories were BLM inspired art and brand posts (before accounting for outliers). For personal accounts, text posts were the most frequently observed type of post. Additionally, there was an insignificant (<5) number of posts in many of the coding categories, but this most notably impacted business accounts, where only two significant coding categories were identified in the sample: brand posts--the most frequent--and protest photos. Similarly, there were only three significant coding categories identified for hobby accounts, but five for personal accounts, attributable to the fact that there were more personal photos represented in the sample.

Figure 2

“Type of Post” Mean Engagement Rates by Account Type

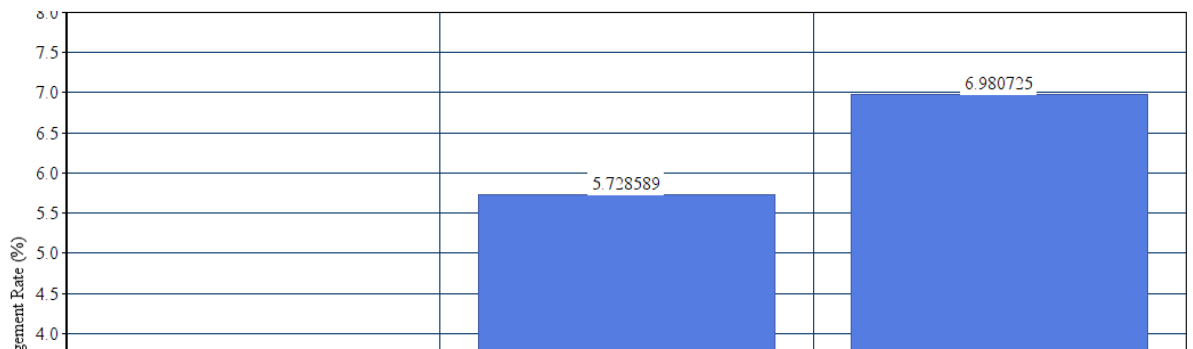


While protest photos had the highest mean engagement rate for the general data set, BLM inspired art had the highest mean engagement for hobby accounts, brand posts had the highest mean engagement for businesses, and protest photos continued to have the highest mean engagement for personal accounts. Among these three, personal protest photos had the highest mean engagement rate (12.06%), with hobby accounts’ BLM inspired art posts closely behind at 11.29%, and business brand posts at 7.09%.

Purpose

Figure 3

“Purpose” Mean Engagement Rates



When looking at the data set as a whole, “solidarity” had the highest engagement rate at 6.98%, with “resource mobilization” being only 1.24% lower, and “information” being the lowest at an average of 2.81% post engagement between “likes” and “followers.”

Purpose According to Account Type

Table 6

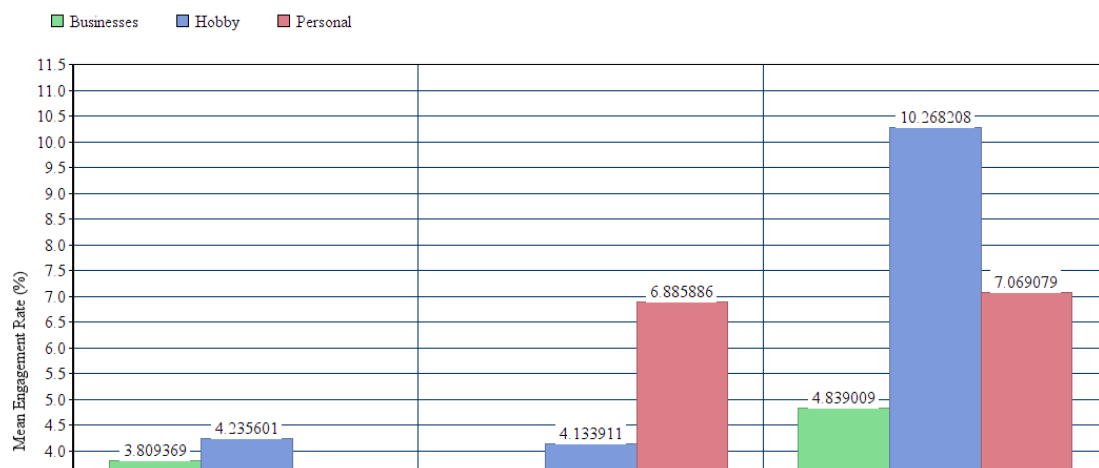
“Purpose” Frequencies by Account Type (- Outliers)

	Business	Hobby	Personal
Information	8 (7)	8 (7)	17 (14)
Resource Mobilization	8	12 (10)	47 (46)
Solidarity	15 (14)	29 (28)	80 (78)

For each of the three types of posts, “solidarity” was the most frequent purpose identified, and when including outliers, “information” was the least frequent of the three. However, without the outliers, “information” and “resource mobilization” had equal frequencies for business accounts. Each of these coding category intersections had a high enough frequency to be significant enough for statistical analysis.

Figure 4

“Purpose” Mean Engagement Rates by Account Type

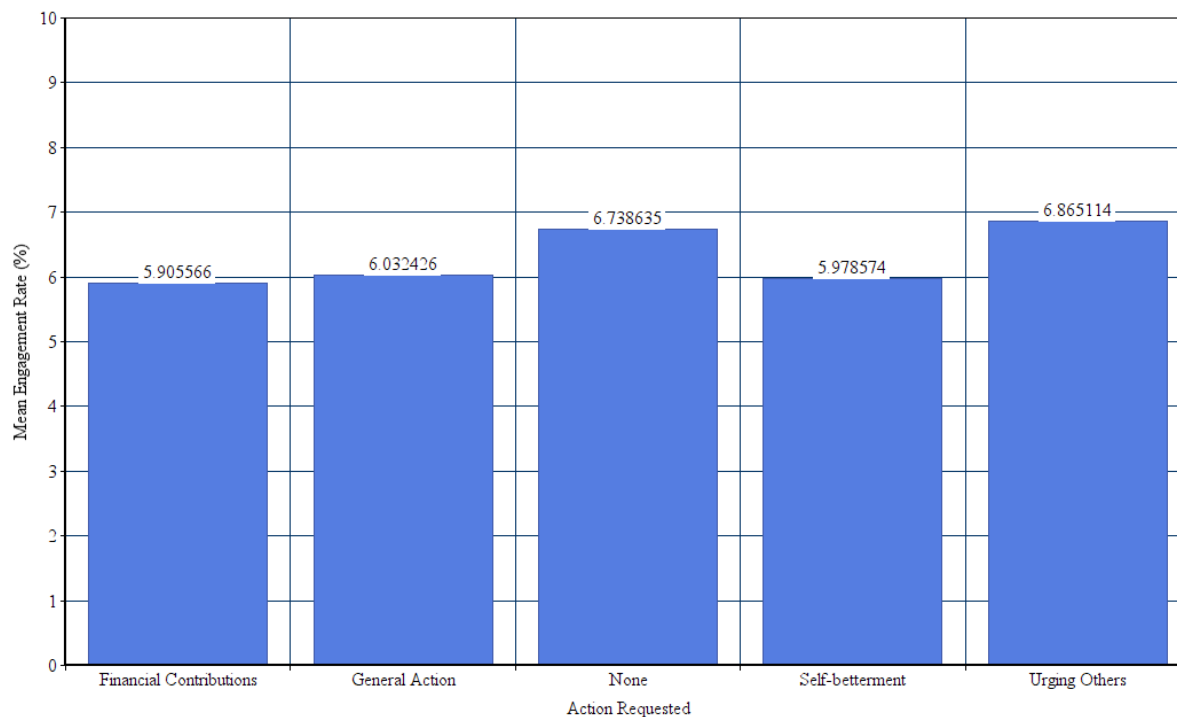


Aligning with the findings from the general “purpose” inquiry, the highest mean engagement rate for all three types of accounts was “solidarity”. Solidarity-based posts shared by hobby accounts for BLM averaged the highest mean engagement rate: 10.27%; this created a range of 6.13% for hobby accounts as a whole. Alternatively, the lowest of the nine engagement rates was for “information” posts on personal accounts (1.59%), creating a range of 5.48% for personal accounts. For both “information” and “solidarity,” BLM posts shared by hobby accounts had the highest mean engagement rates; however, for “resource mobilization,” BLM posts on personal accounts had the highest mean engagement rates.

Actions Requested

Figure 5

“Actions Requested” Mean Engagement Rates



For the general data set, there was very little variation in the engagement rates for the final five coding categories. “Urging others” averaged the highest engagement rate at 6.87%, with “none” narrowly behind at a mean engagement rate of 6.74%. The total range of the “actions requested” variable is only 0.96%; “financial contributions” had the lowest mean engagement rate of 5.91%.

Actions Requested According to Account Type

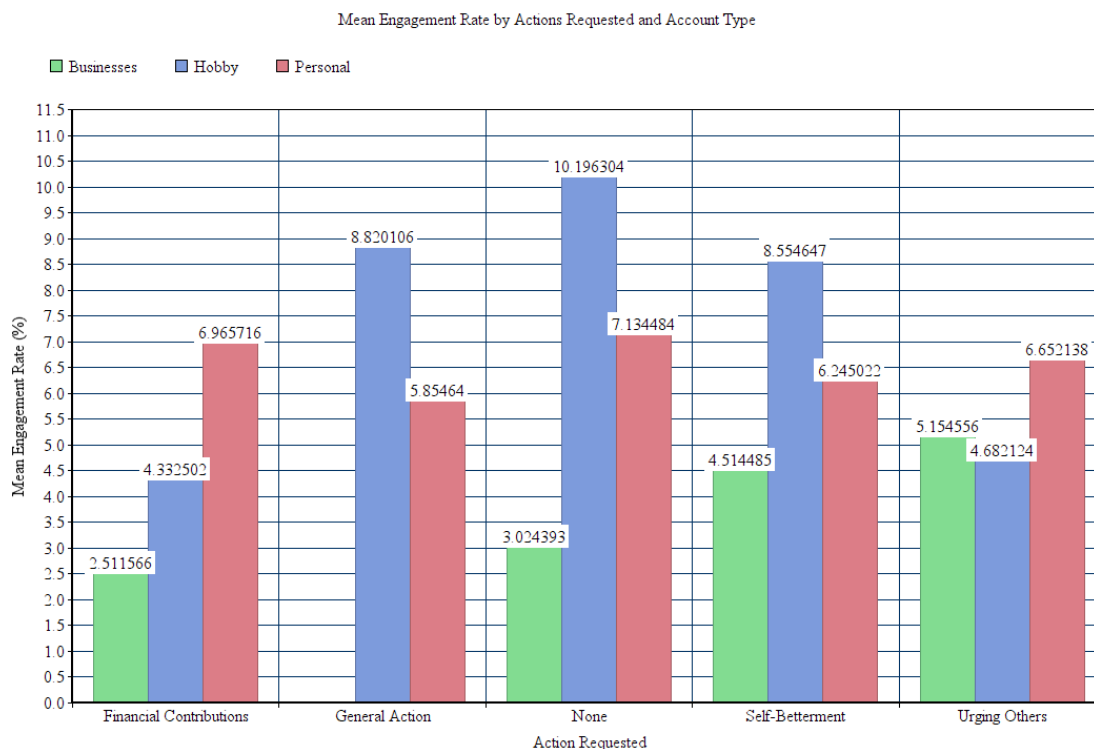
Table 7

“Actions Requested” Frequencies by Account Type (- Outliers)

	Business	Hobby	Personal
Financial Contributions	6 (5)	9	12
General Action	3	7	27
None	5	18 (17)	27 (26)
Self-Betterment	7	5	23

Urging Others	6 (5)	11	43 (42)
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While for business accounts, “self-betterment” was the most frequent action requested, for hobby accounts, “none” was the most frequent; “urging others” was the most frequent action requested for personal accounts. Business and “general action” was the only coding category with an insignificant frequency in the sample. While not insignificant, the least-requested action in the sample for hobby accounts was “self-betterment” and for personal accounts it was “financial contributions.”

Figure 6*“Actions Requested” Mean Engagement Rates by Account Type*

Firstly, business accounts saw the highest mean engagement for posts urging others to get involved; however, the highest mean engagement rate for both hobby accounts and personal accounts was for posts that did not make any requests of their viewers (“none”). Despite “urging others” having the highest mean engagement rate overall, it was only the most successful for one of the three account types. While the range of the mean engagement rates for personal accounts was only 1.28%, the range for business accounts was 6.13% and 5.86% for hobby accounts, indicating a wider dependence on actions requested for engagement on those two account types.

Summary of Findings

For both “type of account” and “actions requested,” the highest engagement rate for the entire data set did not apply to each type of account when broken down. While generally protest photos had the highest engagement rate, this was only true for personal accounts, whereas BLM inspired art had the highest mean engagement for hobby accounts and brand posts had the highest mean engagement for businesses. Similarly, though “urging others” had the highest mean engagement overall, it only had the highest mean engagement rate for business accounts. Instead, hobby and personal accounts saw the most engagement on BLM posts that did not make any requests of their viewers. For these two variables, the style of content users engaged with the most varied by the type of account that posted it. However, “solidarity,” in both the generalized investigation and the inquiry that accounted for account type, remained the purpose that accumulated the highest mean engagement rate.

Discussion

The inquiry’s secondary question about which styles of BLM content Instagram users respond to the most can be answered with relative ease based on the results. Overall, protest photos, solidarity-intended posts, and posts calling on people to urge others saw the highest mean engagement rate. However, when considering the type of account and analyzing the differences in each of the data sets, the results become much more complicated and much more telling about how Instagram functions as a platform for BLM and what users engage with the most.

Emotional Responses to BLM

Firstly, the results suggest that Instagram is used to build community and share emotional responses to the BLM movement more than to educate others or get more people involved.

“Solidarity” averaged the highest engagement rate for the general sample and each account type

and was the most frequent purpose identified. This implies that both content creators and users turn to Instagram to share and view personal experiences and testimonies or empathy for victims, rather than using it for mass mobilization or education efforts, which helps to characterize the movement as a community-building effort beyond direct activism. In his 2019 study, Tillery noted a similar trend on Twitter: a majority of BLM tweets were emotional responses to the movement. In 2013, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan discovered that higher emotionality tended to trigger more retweets, likely because, on both platforms, rather than being overwhelmed by instructions or information, people are exposed to personal experiences relating to the movement or feel supported by the sentiments of the solidarity posts. The “solidarity” results imply that the BLM movement uses Instagram primarily to connect with each other and share emotional responses to anti-Black actions in the US and thus that is the content users engage with most.

Furthermore, trends discovered based on type of post suggest that Instagram users respond the most to BLM posts that align with an accounts’ typical content. Brand posts and BLM inspired art had the highest engagement rate for businesses and hobby accounts respectively. With non-personal accounts, people “follow” the account because they’re interested in what that account’s focus is, whether it be a business or a hobby. For example, many of the hobby accounts identified in the sample were dedicated to art, thus the “followers” were more likely to respond to BLM inspired art than the other types of posts identified. For content creators who are trying to get more of the “followers” they already have to engage with BLM, these results suggest that they should continue with the format of their typical content and modify it to relate to BLM. Based on the high engagement rates for business brand posts and

hobby account BLM inspired art, viewers engage the most with BLM content that mirrors the format of an account's archetypal content.

Additionally, using the designated image space productively is extremely important for its engagement; the results suggest it should not be used for more text. Text posts, despite their high frequency, had by far the lowest mean engagement rate for the general sample at only 3.22%. Instagram is the only social media platform that requires an image to be attached to the post, and the low engagement with posts featuring text suggests that users want to see something being done with the space, whether that is to draw visual interest or reinforce the meaning of the caption. This new discovery may add to the current understanding of BLM on social media, because while Naragrajan et al.'s 2010 Twitter study found that a majority of the most popular tweets contained media other than text, this study's findings suggest that on Instagram, going beyond text and using a specific image type is critical for a post's success. As a result of text posts' low engagement rate, the study indicates that viewers engage the most with BLM posts that use the image space for more than text.

Preferred Actions on BLM Instagram

BLM on Instagram relies on a culture of accountability from both content creators and viewers, the results would suggest. "Urging others" was the most frequent action requested and had the highest mean engagement rate for the general sample, which indicates that people on both side of BLM wanted to see people and institutions held accountable for Floyd's murder. The success of protest photos, which had the highest mean engagement rate overall, also adds to this because protesting was one of the actions included in "urging others." Thus, the high engagement with protest photos is a sign of approval for seeing people take direct, protest action,

which encourages others to get more involved with BLM. In response to the contradicting opinions between Harris and Tillery about whether BLM is typically violent and apolitical or non-violent and political respectively, the success of “urging others” and protest photos on Instagram aligns with Tillery’s more recent findings that BLM has become less violent and uses much more traditional protest methods (2016; 2019). “Urging others” being the most frequent action requested and having the highest mean engagement rate for the general sample as well as protest photos having the highest mean engagement rate suggest that users encourage a culture of accountability on both sides of BLM Instagram content.

Lastly, while posts not making any requests of their viewers having high engagement rates could be a sign of performative activism, it likely correlates with Instagram primarily serving as a platform for emotional responses to George Floyd’s death. Performative activism is a common criticism of digital movements; it is defined as when the “intention of media participation is to present yourself to others as an activist” (Tucker & Doettling, 2020). While “none” had the highest mean engagement rate for personal and hobby accounts and narrowly had the second highest mean engagement rate for the general data set, this is probably because of one of the study’s other findings that Instagram is primarily used as a platform to build community and share experiences with others. Because the results indicate that Instagram is not as heavily focused on resource mobilization, the posts that people engaged with the most likely shared personal testimonies and thus did not focus on making requests of their “followers.” The high engagement rates for posts not calling for any action further the evidence that BLM uses Instagram less for mobilizing viewers and more for creating an emotional support network.

Limitations

The largest limitation of the application of these findings is the restricted time frame from which the posts were sampled. While the trends observed in the sample have strong implications about BLM posts between May 25th and June 8th of 2020, without posts outside of this period, the broader application of these findings is indeterminate and thus restricts the full comparison between BLM on Instagram and BLM on other platforms. Additionally, in order to limit statistical variability, any coding category that contained less than five posts was excluded from the mean engagement rate calculations, though the frequencies are still included in the “Results” section. While this did not limit the understanding of what kinds of BLM content are posted on Instagram, it did limit the categories available for the statistical analysis and thus the understanding of the styles of content Instagram users engaged with the most. Lastly, because this is an observational study and not an experiment, none of the trends or results prove that the characteristics directly caused the higher engagement. Instead, they begin to determine relationships that future studies could conduct experiments around.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study identified a diverse set of types of posts, purposes, and actions requested for #blacklivesmatter Instagram content. Combined with the frequency and engagement rate findings, the study suggests that BLM solidarity posts, posts aligned with an account’s typical content, images other than text, and posts encouraging other people to be involved in BLM perform the best on Instagram. While these findings are only generalizable to the identified two week period, they begin to establish similarities between BLM on Instagram and other platforms, such as the emotional support and importance of additional media established in previous Twitter and Facebook studies (Tillery, 2019; Nagarajan et al., 2010). For

researchers conducting social media activism research, the “solidarity” characteristic of BLM posts on Instagram and the culture of accountability are noteworthy for understanding the BLM movement’s identity. The practical implications of the results also impact BLM content creators, giving them an understanding of what kinds of posts worked best between May 25th to June 8th to model their own content after. Moving forward, because of the critical label “performative activism,” future studies should investigate how likely users are to take an action after seeing an Instagram post and, based on the action requests identified, whether or not that varies by the type of action being requested. Future studies should also use this framework on a sample focused on one account type, especially business or hobby accounts, to gain a better understanding of the kinds of content that works best for them and look at BLM posts over a larger period of time to get more generalizable results.

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