

8-2019

Black Lives Matter: Understanding Social Media and the Changing Landscape of Social Trust

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Black Lives Matter:
Understanding Social Media and the Changing Landscape of Social Trust

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

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August 2019
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Abstract

This study aims to understand how social media is changing the landscape of social capital. Current research indicates a paradox between the growing use of mediated sources that are building social capital and low levels of social trust found in social media. People are skeptical of whether social media is trustworthy because there is no mechanism for fact checking or verifying the information posted online. Since traces of social capital postulate social trust, it is needed to promote communal change. To understand this paradox, the Black Lives Matter movement is examined as an online platform that brings people together who have been historically excluded from political voice and action. #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) is the quintessential example of social media encouraging political involvement, engaging average citizens, and promoting activism. Through open-ended interviews this study showed how social media connects people with shared beliefs and experiences and why individuals trust it *more* than traditional news sources. Controlling images created by dominant groups have shifted people's trust and pushed them to find different avenues to share their stories. The findings demonstrated that social media provides all the components needed to produce social capital and establish trust in such a way that propels civic activism.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee, Dr. Morimoto, Dr. Bustamante, and Dr. Harris. Dr. Morimoto, thank you for teaching me to think and write as a sociologist and for guiding me through this process. Thank you, Dr. Bustamante, for always being available to answer my questions and for instructing me during my time as a graduate student. Finally, thank you Dr. Harris for your time and for helping me see from a different perspective. The support and guidance of my committee has made all the difference in these past two years.

I also want to thank my family because even though they are far away, they have consistently been there for me. Lastly, I would not have made it without the support of my community here in Fayetteville, who have been like a family to me.

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Introduction

#BlackLivesMatter (BLM) is the quintessential example of social media mobilizing political involvement, engaging average citizens, and promoting activism. It began in 2013 in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin and became a rallying cry for the Black community, demanding justice, highlighting police brutality, and protesting systematic racism against African Americans in the United States and globally. Moving beyond a virtual space, BLM has led to protests, rallies and political activism both online and in the public space. Online, according to Pew Research, from July 2013 through May 2018, the BLM hashtag was used an average of 17,002 times per day. Furthermore, BLM has spurred other hashtags related to events or political issues that have emerged throughout time, including #MeToo and #Resist, which have led to conversations about the effectiveness and viability of social media for political engagement and social activism. The hashtag has moved from simply being a hashtag to be an avenue that captures the attention of politicians and creates sustained political movements, “Some 64% of Americans feel that the statement “social media helps give a voice to underrepresented groups” describes these sites very or somewhat well” (Anderson et al. 2018).

Alongside the rapid and significant growth of online activism led by BLM, Pew Research shows that levels of generalized social trust are decreasing, people trust each other less now than they did 40 years ago. This affects social capital and vital components in a society such as collective action, the economy, and the culture of a country (Pew Research Center 2017; Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2018). Social capital is composed of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust. Social trust, specifically, is a vital element of social capital because strong social bonds and collective action are built upon high levels of trust (Putnam 1995; Sztompka 1999). Yet, while trust in individuals and institutions is decreasing, research shows that the use

of social media is rapidly and consistently increasing. According to Grieco (2017), people trust social media as an avenue to share and gather information and as a platform with the potential to encourage social movements and promote social change.

Nevertheless, people are skeptical of whether social media is trustworthy because there is no mechanism for fact checking or verifying the information posted online and it is easy to attribute information as stemming from individuals or organizations accountable for information (Anderson et al. 2018). With the most glaring example being the current and on-going investigation of Russian interference with the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, online platforms can promote and promulgate falsehoods. Therefore, this paper examines Black Lives Matter to understand how social capital is built online, given that social trust is a cornerstone of social capital that is necessary for effective social movement. I argue that because social media connects people with shared beliefs and experiences, individuals trust it *more* than traditional news sources. This research compares how social trust is built online with Erving Goffman's analysis of how trust is built in everyday interactions through theatrical framework. Findings show that social media provides all the components needed to produce social capital and establish trust in such a way that propels civic activism.

This study contributes to academic literature by showing how groups that have been historically excluded from political voice and action find social media to be trustworthy and effective for disseminating facts, opinions, and judgments as well as planning and implementing activism. Social movements today look different than they did even five or ten years ago but many of the same processes used to build trust through face to face interactions still apply in online relationships. Controlling images created by dominant groups have shifted people's trust and pushed them to find different avenues to share their stories. In short, participants of this

study view social media as a tool to make local issues global, build trust, connect people, and bring about progressive social attitudes and activism, thus building social capital.

Literature Review

Social Capital & Social Trust

According to Robert D. Putnam, social capital is composed of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust. Social capital has many positive effects in areas such as in democracy, at schools, for businesses, and in curtailing the emergence of crime. Putnam stated that face-to-face interactions create the avenue to build norms of reciprocity, such as voting, reading the news, and being involved in the community. In the 1990's he argued that social capital was diminishing because people were watching too much television and not having enough interpersonal interactions (Putnam 1995). Lower levels of social capital meant that people were less likely to trust institutions, participate in community projects, vote, and so on (Coleman 1988; Zhang & Chia 2006).

As an important building block for social capital, trust must be cultivated in relationships before any type of civic action takes place (Coleman 1988; Zhang and Chia 2006). Strong social bonds and increased social action are a result of a society with high levels of trust (Sztompka 1999). Researchers define it as a "Psychological state, a positive attitude toward the partner and confidence that the partner will perform" (Nguyen and Rose 2009:167). When people interact, they establish a habit of exchange where obligations and bonds of indebtedness increase (Blau 1964). Trust is built when expectations, hopes, and anticipations are consistently met through interpersonal interactions (Yap and Lim 2017).

Pamela Paxton states that trust is not only an element needed to build social capital, but it is also found as an outcome in a society that has high levels of social capital (1999). High levels

of social capital and associational membership signify that people are consistently interacting and working towards a common goal. The process creates a cycle, as Putnam states, “Networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms for generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust” (1995:67).

For Erving Goffman, social trust is about ensuring an individual’s interactions are consistent with the presentation and role that others expect. He used theatrical performance as a framework to understand human behavior in social situations and analyzed how consistency in appearance, manners, setting, etc. establishes social trust between people. Goffman makes the analogy that life is similar to performing on stage, people are actors who play different roles while performing for an audience. When people are “on stage,” they are conscious about their behavior and how the audience interprets what they say and do. The audience is continually evaluating and giving meaning to the actor’s presentation and behavior. Since incongruencies between these elements foster distrust, an actor’s actions should be consistent with his or her appearance and manners (e.g. social status) (Goffman 1959).

The Decline of Social Trust

Today, Pew Research shows that levels of generalized social trust are decreasing, the overall levels of interpersonal and institutional trust are low. Compared to 1958, when about three-quarters of Americans said they trusted the government to do the right thing, today only 18% of Americans agreed with this statement. The General Social Survey (GSS) administered in the U.S. shows that people trust each other less now than they did 40 years ago, affecting elements like the economy and the culture of the country (Pew Research Center 2017; Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2018). This is a problem because social trust is a critical building block of

social capital, encouraging communication, cooperation, and motivating groups towards a common goal (Sheng-Yi et al. 2012; Sztompka 1999).

The Use of Social Media is Rapidly and Consistently Increasing

Even though research shows that the levels of social trust are decreasing and people are having less interpersonal interactions, the use of social media is growing. Society is increasingly using social media not only as a way to connect with people, but as a source of news. Shah analyzed a national survey conducted to 3,400 people, showing that the internet is used for information acquisition and social surveillance. Even though society has not stopped using traditional news sources, social media is fulfilling the role of reading a newspaper or a magazine (Shah et al. 2002). Nowadays, about two-thirds of Americans report that they read at least some of their news from media platforms (Shearar and Gottfried 2017). During the 2016 presidential primaries 62% of adults reported getting their news from social media. The age demographics of individuals using social media for news is also increasing. In 2017, 78% of people under 50 reported getting news from mediated sources. For the first time, more than half of the population of U.S. citizens 50 years or older reported getting news from these sites (Shearar and Gottfried 2017).

Social Media Use and Social Trust

Although the number of people using social media is increasing, the percentage of those who trust the information they find through these sources is low. Research shows that only 5% of social media users trust the information they gather through these sites “a lot” (Anderson et al. 2018). Regardless, people use mediated sources to keep in touch and reconnect with friends and family. It is also an avenue to share and gather information, aiding people to perform job-related activities and allowing individuals to participate in civic and political activities (Raine 2018).

Even though social media connects people globally, there is much controversy about whether individuals have access to diverse information through these platforms. Since people select whom to befriend and follow, social media can be seen as an “echo chamber” for like-minded individuals with similar socioeconomic status (Bakshy et al. 2015). Algorithms can also sort information depending on a person's activity, their interactions, and their clicks to specific websites. Such algorithms can filter information, limiting people’s exposure inside ‘filter bubbles’ (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

Social Media as a Networked Public Sphere

At the same time, however, social media is not limited to a specific location. Mediated sources encourage horizontal communication, creating a “networked public sphere” (Choi 2014). A recent example is a study conducted by Hwang & Kim (2015), which found that Facebook is an avenue for people with casual connections to come across resources that they might not come across in their normal day to day. One of Facebook’s advantages is that it allows people to network, as well as create and share user-generated content.

Hwang & Kim (2015) demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of bridging social capital (casual connections) who use social media are more likely to intend to participate in social activism. Facebook provided a wider variety of resources, so people encountered more messages regarding social movements, “...but bridging social capital that comes from social media use is a critical factor in increasing social participation intent” (Hwang & Kim 2015:486). Bridging social capital online can develop into bonding social capital (relationships for people with similar objectives, strong ties, who support each other through shared experiences) (Hwang & Kim 2015). This process is similar to face to face interactions because these relationships start with casual connections that can then become stronger enduring partnerships.

Likewise, a study by Bouchillon (2014) demonstrated that social networking sites supplement people's connections and affect social trust. Facebook increases levels of trust because it has a significant indirect effect on trust through bonding social capital. Even though Facebook does not directly foster trust, active members of the community increase the quantity and quality of their social ties when using this platform. Bonding, even if done online, leads people to be involved in a community, "Like the physical community, social networking sites are thus a crucible for connecting, and it follows, for social capital" (Bouchillon 2014:520).

Despite this decline in interpersonal interaction that affect social trust and social capital, people are connecting over the internet. The internet serves as an alternate for networking and civic participation (Zhang and Chia 2007). While numerous studies raise concern about diminishing interpersonal social ties, there is increasing evidence that virtual connections are positively correlated with public engagement. They provide resources for people to be active members in society, strengthening social organizations, and positively impacting social capital (Shah et al. 2002).

The Power of Controlling Images: Public News Sources

As shown in the studies mentioned above, social capital is being built through social media. Research explains that one of the reasons people are more likely to turn to mediated sources for activism is because it provides data that is not filtered by bigger organizations (Warren 2014). News sources have shared certain perspectives of events that have been harmful for many individuals, especially underrepresented groups. These alternative venues for news and communication, therefore, are trustworthy to those who see mainstream media as representing only the dominant perspective. Patricia Hill Collins defines the descriptions created by the dominant group as controlling images which are "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and

other forms of social injustice appear as natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins 2000:70). Many times, the news tells a story that creates these controlling images and shape society’s views on specific groups of people, which is why African Americans and Hispanics use social media to vocalize their opinions (Anderson et al. 2018).

In her book titled, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins explains how the controlling images created by the dominant group towards Black women kept them in subordination. For example, as slavery ended, the Black woman was identified as a mammy. The mammy image represented a faithful and obedient domestic servant in a white household. It encouraged Black women to be warm and loving, while also reminding them of their positions as domestic servants. This image perpetuated intersectional oppression because it pointed to the racial superiority of their white employers, it pinned Black women as asexual, and it economically exploited them. The descriptions used by the dominant group fueled the cycle of racial subjugation, “Moreover, by meshing smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression, they provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender justification, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies” (Collins 200:271).

Today the controlling images portrayed through media affect how racial minorities are perceived by society, including the criminal justice system. Media overrepresents racial minorities as criminals, causing them to receive harsher punishments. Dukes & Gaither (2017) research explained that trials for the death of a Black person can be biased, even if they are portrayed as victims, because of media. Media tends to focus on a Black person’s past/current behavior as criminals, their physical compositions, the location where the event happened, and negative, stereotypical elements about their lifestyle, which adds to the negative controlling

images. This as a result, puts the blame on them for their own death and makes the shooter less at fault (Dukes & Gaither 2017).

People feel like they can have honest political discourse through social media because it is not overseen by organizations (Choi 1994; Grieco 2017). Consequently, it is a tool for formulating opinions and judgments about different groups and issues (Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan 2007). Instead of isolating individuals, mediated sources facilitate interactions and encourage society to be civically and politically engaged. It allows for the formation of relationships even though it might not happen with an individual's immediate community because it can create a cycle between community engagement, social ties, and trust (Shah et al. 2002; Hwang & Kim 2015).

In his research, Warren et. al indicates how social media connects people, "many, many, many of us do not understand each other's perspective so I think social media has the ability to allow us to voice out and share our individual perspectives... In some way, it unites us, ” (2014:287). Research shows that people are increasingly using social media and using it as a space for organizing and activism. At the same time, there are low levels of general social trust and trust of information online, so questions remain about whether and how social media opens the door to diversity or not, and how the networked public sphere can be a space where community, norms of reciprocity, and trust are built. As such, I examine Black Lives Matter as a case of a movement that is built on line to understand how social capital, specifically focusing on trust, emerges through mediated interactions and social organizing.

Methods

This study employed qualitative techniques to capture how social capital and social trust are built online. It employed a convenience purposive selection of participants by interviewing

seven individuals who were actively involved with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, meaning they were a part of the local chapter of the state in which they reside, have been posting or following content online, and have attended events as a result of online participation. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 46, two were the presidents of the BLM chapters in their states, and the remaining five were active members.

An online virtual setting was applied because BLM is a network that is connected across the United States, Canada, and the UK. Even though an online virtual setting does not include a shared physical space, it incorporates the necessary components of interviewing such as interacting, observing, interviewing and, participating (Bailey 2018). All the participants of this study resided in either the capital or a major city in their state.

The study began in the Spring of 2018 and was completed in the Summer of 2019. Preliminary contact with participants took place through the BLM website and Facebook. Introductory emails and Facebook messages were sent to chapters in Los Angeles, Little Rock, Tulsa, Kansas City, etc. describing the purpose of the research and inviting members to participate. Initial access was challenging since no personal relationships previously existed, but once contact was made the study relied on snowball sampling.

As a result of location and convenience, interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 30-60 minutes. Seidman (2019) acknowledges that phone interviews can be less personal, therefore the researcher was conscious of developing equitable relationships by being respectful about participant's time and priorities throughout the interactions. Moreover, even though Skype was a viable option, the phone gave people the flexibility to interview from different locations, including their home or work office. Interviews were semi-structured, based on questions that were prepared ahead of time as well as ones that built upon the participants'

narratives (Seidman 2013; Bailey 2018). Questions addressed the history of each respondent's involvement with BLM, their use of social media, its reliability, etc., and further ones are asked to leaders of the movement regarding the role media played in formation of new chapters.

Once data saturation was fulfilled, open and focused coding was completed using NVivo. Data was coded according to key themes that emerged: similarities of social capital in face to face interactions and online communication, the importance of consistency in presentation, manners and roles, and trust in social media versus news media. In compliance with IRB guidelines data was protected by a password and pseudonyms were given to all respondents. To disseminate information, the aim is to publish this paper and present the information at local conferences or with individuals involved in social activism.

Case Study: #BlackLivesMatter

As the case study, this research looks at the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement because it is the quintessential example of social media encouraging political involvement, engaging citizens, and promoting activism (Anderson et al. 2018). The Black Lives Matter Global Network started in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin. Its founders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter as a platform and organizing tool to propel conversations and to develop plans of action. The hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, has been used to share stories and empower people with similar beliefs and experiences to act against violence on African American communities (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

In his book, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, Christopher J. Lebron describes Black Lives Matter as a “force demanding change in America.” Equality has consistently been a question for African Americans throughout historical events such as slavery, the death of slavery, the Jim Crow era, the civil rights movement and more. The fight goes beyond a war

fought with rifles and guns, it is a battle against people's identity being weighed down by oppression. It is the history of people taking control of their own authority to protect their lives, their self-respect and, and their potential for flourishing (Lebron 2017).

African Americans have not only been weighed down by big historical events like the ones mentioned above, but also in more subtle ways by how their identities and their stories have been framed through media. Patricia Hill Collins uses the term "controlling images" to describe the ideologies used by the dominant group that specifically kept Black women in subordination. The controlling images portrayed in media and through the news against African Americans depicts them as different or as "other than," as criminals and problematics. This affects, how institutions, such as law enforcement, and individuals act towards them (Lee 2017; Entnam & Rojecki 2000).

Therefore, Black Lives Matter has provided a way for people to share their full experiences without stereotypes or controlling images influencing their stories. Social media is a tool BLM uses to reach its goal: to have a world where African Americans have the power to thrive socially, economically and politically, connecting diverse groups to act in their communities (Black Lives Matter n.d.). BLM has produced what Pamela Paxton argues is evidence of high social capital: political participation and volunteering (Paxton 1999). Online, according to Pew Research, from July 2013 through May 2018, the BLM hashtag was used an average of 17,002 times per day. Furthermore, BLM has spurred other hashtags related to events or political issues that have emerged throughout time, including #MeToo and #Resist (Anderson et al. 2018).

BLM has moved beyond the virtual space to political engagement and social activism. For example, after police shot Mike Brown in 2014, social media users organized a national ride

called the Black Life Matters Ride. Within 15 days It brought together over 600 people to support those in Ferguson. As a result of the online movement, African Americans have been able to call out anti-Black politicians, win critical legislation, and influence the talk about African Americans around the world. The movement has expanded throughout the U.S. and to other countries including Canada and the UK. (Black Lives Matter n.d.). By using the hashtag people are able to share their personal stories and are exposed to first-hand occurrences without the spin brought by television or the newspaper. The movement has provided an avenue for people with similar to meet, to get to know each other, and to act upon their beliefs.

Findings

This article is organized into three main themes that transpired from the thematic analysis conducted for this study. The three themes answer the question of how the Black Lives Matter movement facilitates social trust among members and establishes social capital through mediated platforms. The first theme, aligned with Putnam’s view of social capital, explains how social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust, the elements needed to build social capital, are found in online communication just like they are in face to face interactions. The second theme specifically focuses on Erving Goffman’s framework of theatrical performance to understand human behavior in social situations to specifically examine how social trust is built. In face to face interactions people trust individuals whose presentations, manners, and roles are consistent, which is a similar to the process that people go through to trust others online (Little 2016; Goffman 1959). Lastly, this report shows that underrepresented groups trust social media because there are no “controlling images,” like Patricia Hill Collins describes, that are managed or created by bigger organizations. This gives people, especially minorities, the freedom to tell and share about an event without there being a “spin” on the story.

Social Capital Built Online

The same elements Putnam found are needed to build social capital in face-to-face interactions - social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust - can also exist in online exchanges (Putnam 1995:66). Black Lives Matter is an example of how social capital can be built online because all three of these elements are present. First of all, BLM not only brings people together, but it also connects individuals, forming the social networks on which social capital relies. One of the participants, Lee, is an attorney who has been part of BLM since 2015. Lee said that BLM makes local issues global because it is heavily interconnected,

“It amplifies and elevates voices because a lot of activists have hundreds or thousands of followers, because when you have a network that potentially has over 10 million followers, you can get your story out very quickly...What mainstream media fails to realize is that Black Lives Matter is not an organization, it’s a network, so there are numerous organizations that comprise the movement.”

BLM is not just a haphazard online forum, but it is also a global network with more than 40 chapters that use social media sites as a tool to empower people. Chapters have formed all throughout the United States from California to New York, and in countries like Canada and the UK (Black Lives Matter n.d.).

According to Putnam, networks are the social bonds that create norms of reciprocity and encourage social trust, “ Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved (Putnam 1995:67). Networks provide a space for people to support and educate one another, share ideas, reach a common goal, and in this case, keep each other accountable. For Lee, social media is a tool that connects him with the community,

“It [social media] helps me educate people on what the law actually says and how the law actually works. It engages me directly with the community, so they understand that the movement of oppression didn’t end in the 60s, it just transformed.”

Lee said social media connects him with young people. His social media accounts are filled with videos regarding current events where he explains what is going on in each situation and the legal procedures that need to be taken. Lee said that he uses these platforms to teach youth how to channel their passion to create change. Without social media, he would not be able to networks with this community and reach as many people as he currently can.

Another example of the impact generated through social media networks was given by Mark, the president of a BLM chapter in his state. Mark described the use of social media for BLM as “social activism” because it allows groups of people with similar experiences to congregate and bring about change. In this case, individuals who were fighting against the same issue used social media to keep elected officials accountable. These platforms proved to be much more effective than the traditional method of calling representatives on the phone,

“The perfect example of social activism is in my neighborhood. I told people to contact their elected officials and they [the elected officials] didn’t respond, but once I posted that video and tagged them and put the phone numbers of the individuals calling their offices, then the elected officials wanted to get involved and called them [back].”

This example shows that people are still communicating and coming together about different issues in their community. In this case, social media was a tool that connected that linked this group of people and facilitated coordination.

The next essential aspect in fostering social capital according to Putman are norms of reciprocity. A norm of reciprocity is “the rule of human interaction that says people need to reciprocate the action of another person,” so people come to expect others to act and respond in a certain way (Edlund 2007). Putnam states that face-to-face interactions build norms of reciprocity because expectations are built and communicated through these exchanges. Voting, being involved in the community, and reading the news are examples of norms that can be built within a group (Putnam 1995). Even though communication through social media differs from

in-person interactions, people build patterns and behaviors online where expectations are created, norms are built, and thus social capital emerges. Spreading information through Tweets or posts, creating Facebook groups around a specific topic, and sharing data with people outside the group, are all norms of reciprocity that can be built online.

An example of how norms are built online comes from Ray. Ray heard about the death of Trayvon Martin through a hashtag online, which led him join a rally that was organized in the city where he lived. In this rally, he met people with similar interests. They started talking about community issues regarding the African American community, which lead to them starting a BLM chapter. Social media, for Ray, is an instrument to get the word out,

“It's like getting on the loudspeaker and letting people in the community know. Now you use #activism for the people who can't get to the rally. For the ones who are still supporters from around the world, they can still post the proper information and use the flyer and the hashtag to post – the information will spread... It's about communication, spreading awareness, and letting people know these things are happening... Sometimes we need to use word of mouth, and social media is our word of mouth. Social media is our form of marketing and digital advertising.”

Methods in social activism have changed. Even though people still rally and protest today, these are not the only tools available to get the word out. Now, social media is a new tool to get people in the community and from around the world involved.

Another example of a norm of reciprocity comes from Mark. As a leader of BLM, he also sees the value of Facebook because it helps spread information and connect people. For example, when an event is happening, a Facebook group is created where people are communicating, getting to know each other, and are encouraged to participate. In this case, this platform is used to exchange information and dialogue,

“What is good about Facebook is spreading news, that is what our Facebook page is good for. Usually it's through the interactions on our Facebook page that people will agree and like jump up and say something. In our Facebook, for every event we have

there is a Facebook group, so there is group communication. Different activists go into those groups and share what they are doing.”

For Hanifan, the direct communication that was important to improve the community and build social capital occurred through community gatherings (1920). Today, a lot of this communication exists through social media. Facebook groups are starting point for norms of reciprocity to be built because it helps people feel safe to participate and communicate, it is a place where individuals can “jump up” to share their thoughts and opinions. Once people get to know each other through these groups, they start expecting each other to get involved in different ways, like through marches and rallies.

Other members of BLM, like Jessica, use what they learn through the movement to go into their community and educate others. Part of her contribution is building relationships that affect children by creating specific curriculum with content related to BLM and talking about it at schools. She calls herself an educator and is building social capital by using the discussions happening online to teach and connect with kids.

Social Trust Online

Finally, social trust, as the cornerstone of social capital, is also built online through the Black Lives Matter movement. Social trust has long been considered an iterative outcome of face-to-face interactions and relationship formation. For Goffman, social trust is about ensuring your interactions are consistent with the presentation and role that others expect of you.

Goffman uses theatrical performance as a framework to understand everyday social interactions and behaviors. The first division in his theory is, front stage, which is when the actor is officially performing in front of the audience. Off stage is when the actor meets individuals face-to-face and is not worried about performing, so he is seen as he truly is. Lastly, back stage is spent with close family and friends, this is where the actor feels completely comfortable and can prepare for

being on stage. To Goffman, social actors are all constantly engaging in each of these stages of interaction, and trust happens when the “performances” in these scenes are consistent.

Interestingly, however, these same three stages are apparent in building trusting relationships online, just like they emerge through face-to-face interactions. In online communication, front stage is the image that is put out on social media. This is what the actor does when he is performing based on internalized roles and expectations. This performance is described by Goffman as, “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (1959:22). On social media these are the stories, comments, tweets, etc. that BLM regularly shares in order to give a voice to an issue, interact with people, and draw attention to events.

The messages shared in the front stage are captured and analyzed by the audience, so these must be congruent in order to build trust. Goffman states the importance of consistency in an actor’s performance, “We often expect, of course, a confirming consistency between appearance and manner; we expect that the differences in social status among the interactants will be expressed in some way by congruent differences in the indications that are made of an expected interaction role” (1959: 24). What is posted by a member of BLM must be similar with the role they play and who they are. Mark is the perfect example of how consistency builds trust and how this is done online. The audience sees him as credible because there is accordance between who he is and what he says,

“I think they think I am reliable. They trust my insight. I wouldn’t even say they trust my insight; they trust my heart. Especially on Twitter, I usually get, “I don’t agree with you, but I think your heart is in the right place.” They think I am reliable and reasonable but strong at the same time.”

The message the audience is analyzing here is what Mark is posting during his performance on front stage, the messages he is putting out there for anyone to see. People trust Mark's performance because they trust his intentions, they are willing to listen, even if they don't agree, because they know his goals are in line with those of BLM. Yet consistency needs to exist within front and off stage in online communication. Any interference between stages will hurt trust, "When a disruption occurs, then, we may find that the self-conceptions around which his personality has been built may become discredited" (Goffman 1959; 243). Therefore, affinity needs to exist between stages. Ray said that good rapport needs to be established in the front stage of social media because that builds credibility for off-stage, in-person interactions:

"You want to establish good rapport on social media... Some people, like me, are able to have these relationships online as in person and people are anxious to meet me because they like how I present myself online. They are refreshed when they meet me because I am the same person. I did not misrepresent who I was or what I stood for."

Ray's interactions with the audience publicly and privately are "refreshing" because as Goffman said, there are no discrepancies that discredit the individual. Whether online or face-to-face, the actor is not breaking with his performance, so the audience starts to build trust. This is not only seen in how the actor present themselves, but also in what they post online.

There is an unspoken concern on whether anyone can just make up stuff online, yet for the organization to be trusted people need to be extra captious about being consistent if they want their message to resonate and attract people to the movement. In face-to-face interactions, actors are normally performing in front stage and can "rest" and stop worrying about performing when they get to the back stage. In these interactions, the front and the back stages are unconnected, and discrepancies can exist. On the other hand, online interactions are a combination of front stage and back stage; actors always have to be cautious about the information they post, no matter where they are, like Ray explained,

“It [social media] has played a role because everything is about communication and having a cohesive message and people need information. When people have the same information people can act accordingly. We tell people to be careful and don’t spread information that they can’t back up.”

Since different people post messages and they do so from different places, the organization has to be vigilant about sharing congruent messages. To build credibility and get people to act, BLM heavily encourages their members to be cautious with the information they post.

The actor’s integrity online is the starting point to the relationship he or she will build with the audience. Even though online and face-to-face interactions differ in that people are not in physical contact with one another, they can still share thoughts, opinions, music, etc. online. What builds trust is the exchange that happens between people, “When individuals share signals, rules, and interpretations of the world with others, they are likely to perceive the world as predictable, and so they are more likely to trust” (Zucker as quoted by Paxton 2007:49). An honest and sincere performer builds trust with the audience. If actors misrepresent themselves in person or online, people will notice incongruencies in posts or once they meet face to face.

Leaders of the movement, like Lee, can tell whether people are being honest,

“You have to realize that there are certain ways that people post that you can tell whether or not they are in the movement. If they are not in the leadership movement, say if something happens in Sacramento, it may be tweeted out that something happened, but [at the same time] there are also internal conversations to verify it.”

Consistent with Paxton’s view of trust, members of the movement recognize how and what people post in such a way that they are able to identify if they are consistent with the movement and their overall goals. They can not only tell by what they post, but because leaders internally are having conversations about the details of events. If the audience is continually getting homogeneous stories, they start to trust what BLM says. In the same way, if those who post on BLM pages have a certain way of posting where people can tell if they are being truthful or not.

Goffman addresses people's motives as sincere or cynical. Cynics do things for their own good or as a means to an end. When acting in sincerity, people perform out of the genuine expression of who they are. If an individual is sincere, their continual direct response to situations will be one that is consistent. On social media, sincerity is analyzed through google and by fact-checking the honesty in people's profiles. For example, what Ray does to check if he can trust a post is analyze the profile of the person who posted it,

“What kinds of friends do they have? What interactions do they have? What are the comments they receive? You have to look at all these things to see if this person is worth believing and following. Is this person trolling us? Is this person genuine concerned about the movement? Everyone is different and has their own different criteria. Is this a real profile or a trolling profile or a trolling post vs a real post? What news sources are they posting? All these things matter. The links they post matter.”

People compare an individual's profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. and look for consistency and predictability.

A person's sincerity is confirmed if their posts, interactions, and friends are in accord with their different profiles. Will, another founder of a BLM chapter in his state explained the process he goes through to trust people he meets online,

“...I don't just trust people off the top just meeting them through social media. I will look at their Facebook profiles and I am a pretty good judge of character. When you start an organization, you have to be aware and you have to have discernment. You have to really be aware and really know how to balance these and look at certain things and add and subtract and come up with a sum... I've heard that employers use Facebook and social media to check out a person. I don't know if it's true or not, but I've heard that. What they are doing is looking at their pictures, what they are putting out there, and then kind of make an assessment of what type of person they are and whether I can trust them or is it a person or if I need to be careful of as I communicate. Do I need to ask them questions to make an assessment and see how I can deal with that person?”

Employers and members of BLM use the same methods of checking an individual's profile to know if a person can be trusted or not. Even though these contexts are different, this is one way to build trust through social media.

Social Media vs. News Media

Media shapes our views of social realities, including minorities. Mainstream media has affected views of Black people, “convey[ing] impressions that Blacks and Whites occupy different moral universes” (Entnam & Rojecki 2000:6). These images transmit attitudes and assumptions that harm Blacks by portraying them as criminals and problematic. Stereotypical roles that Black actors play, as well as how Blacks are portrayed through the news affect how institutions and individual people respond to this community (Lee 2017; Entnam & Rojecki 2000). As a result, participants said that because of how news media frame stories, they actually feel like complete narrative are shared through mediated platforms.

Although the goal of conventional media is to be unbiased and objective, the respondents of this study see the news as only telling a one-sided story. These narratives don’t do justice to current events because news media can filter information to please a specific crowd. Patricia Hill Collins describes these images that are portrayed by the dominant group as controlling images. These images are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear as natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life (Collins 2000:70). Many times, the news on television tells a story that creates these controlling images. Sam, an organizer, interculturalist, artist, and activist got involved with BLM because she was frustrated that important details regarding George Zimmerman, who shot Trevon Martin, were omitted on the news. She tried talking with her district attorney but realized that wasn’t helping, so she used BLM as a platform to share the story. Sam describes the information shared through social media by BLM as timely and to the point,

“It’s real time. You don’t have time to not believe, they [gatekeepers] don’t have time to edit it or to make you see what they want you to see. This is really what the news does a lot, they try to make you see it their way, “Oh a Black man put up a struggle and we shot

and killed that person, and so you think he was fighting with the police so that's why they were killed. No, the police were trying to put his camera off..."

Differing from news media, social media posts are shared by people who witnessed the event. Therefore, people are empowered and trust social media because the information does not need to be approved by gatekeepers. Laura, a young woman who has been involved in BLM for four years sees the limitations that conventional media can have,

"Most of the news on TV... they are owned by corporate sponsors, so they are limited in the things they can say, but news sources from BLM groups aren't, so they have more free range to tell the truth versus trying to please people."

The news on TV can be seen as biased, especially by minorities who do not feel like their voices have been heard. Even though conventional media fact checks their data, people like Laura, have realized that these sources also have "corporate sponsors" who can represent the ideologies of dominant groups

How people are depicted through media affects how the public views them. African American males, for example, have been portrayed as having bad attitudes, using foul language, being bad students, and criminals. Diuguid & Rivers found that these stereotypes hold African Americans back, especially those who work hard towards education, housing, jobs, and promotions (Diuguid & Rivers 2000). Yet through social media people find freedom. Individuals have found a way to share their personal narratives without people controlling and influencing their stories like Lee states,

"It allows the community to go around mainstream media and get the information of what actually happened without the spin. It allows them to make sure that the story is not killed... [Social media and the news on TV are the] Absolute opposite. Media tries to craft a narrative that keeps the status quo, the movement crafts a story that tells the truth."

Just like Laura, Lee has realized that conventional media can be biased. Through their experiences, they have both feel like the stories of Black people in their community have not been portrayed fully, but they see social media as an avenue to actually do this.

Individuals also trust social media because it provides evidence through videos. Videos do not require anyone to interpret events but allow individuals to determine for themselves what they see happening. Sam said these videos can be watched again and again, in such a way that it will bring clarity to events that have occurred,

“Well, it’s almost like the camera becomes a weapon now. If you have a gun you can shoot me and kill me because you have a gun, if you do and I film you doing that, you are going to be in jail. We start arming ourselves with videos that all our phones have... Yes, it gives you transparency, which is needed. We already knew but it's like being able to show and play and rewind it and look at it carefully. It takes the emotion out of it and then it becomes known.”

Members of BLM feel that through first-hand accounts that are shared across mediated platforms such as videos and tweets, have proved to controlling images created and shared by media has proved to be harmful to Blacks.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to identify how contemporary conversations and relationships conducted online facilitate broad-based social trust. This thesis shows how the elements needed to build social capital, specifically networks, norms of reciprocity and social trust, are found online. For some types of social organizations, like BLM, social media has strengthened social capital and provides an avenue for those historically excluded from political voice and action to connect to people in the community and provide resources for engagement.

Yet questions remain about whether social media is trustworthy. Is the information accurate? Who is the person posting behind the screen? Are they reliable? While this study cannot settle broader debates concerning the benefits or harms associated with spreading truths

and falsehoods over social media sites, it does explain how, in the case of BLM, it brings people with similar experiences together, validating those experiences and, at the same time, speaking a form of “truth to power.” Moreover, in context of the BLM movement, there are specific strategies the movement has developed to build social trust and social capital online, in such a way to make the movement successful.

The controlling images created by dominant groups have shaped society’s perspectives of those silenced and excluded from the mainstream, affecting how they are perceived, treated, and stereotyped. By providing a medium through which those who have historically been silenced can tell their own stories, social media offers an opportunity to reframe what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as controlling images. A recent example comes from Yusef Salaam, one of the five men who was framed for the rape and attempted murder of Trisha Melli in 1989 (Harris & Jacobs 2019). He now advocates for changes in the criminal justice system. He talks about the impact media can have and the influence it had during his trial, “...What I know is that the media back then was the Wolfpack. They were the mouthpiece of the police and the prosecution” (Salaam 2019). Conventional media told a story and spread information, but Salaam did not feel like his side of the story was shared. For him and the other four boys involved in this case, social media could’ve spread their side of the narrative and made a difference in the outcome of the trial, “If we had digital and social media back in 1989, we probably would have never gone to jail” (Salaam 2019). Social media is an important and powerful tool that gives a voice to the voiceless and mobilizes people.

As such, social media can be an avenue for people to find freedom from these controlling images and build a powerful community based on the shared experiences of exclusion, suppression, and oppression. Since people befriend those with similar political ideologies

(Bakshy et al. 2015), the use of social media for BLM does not necessarily resolve the problem of people selecting groups where they already fit in. Social media is useful for people within the group to communicate and share news, but this doesn't necessarily mean that information is being spread and conversations are happening with those outside the group. While this presents opportunities for building social capital and creating trusting networks that advocate for social change, it also reifies questions about general social trust. In particular, while those within the social network can create mechanisms for selecting into this network and then building trust, this will not allay the suspicions of those outside the network, and may, in fact, reinforce those suspicions. Furthermore, alternative perspectives and movements can just as easily build and sustain their own "truths," leading to echo-chambers of attitudes and belief systems that are farther apart.

Thus, as a result of this study, I argue that trust has shifted. Research shows a decline in individual and institutional trust, which affects social capital. But social capital has not disappeared, it simply looks different in the age of social media. Initial contact and conversations that lead to activism are increasingly starting online. Movements like BLM build social capital and encourage different components of democracy such as asking for the rights and freedoms of all people to be respected, giving everyone equal opportunity for success, asking the government to be open and transparent, respecting the views of those not in the majority, and having the freedom to peacefully protest (Pew Research 2018). As such, for those generally excluded from power or social status, social media can be a powerful tool to make themselves heard.

Accordingly, social trust needs to be examined as a multidimensional facet of social relationships that is as much contingent on and embedded in the organization and its goals as it is in abstract notions of sincerity and falsehoods. As Goffman (1959) noted long ago with face-to-face

relationships, social trust is as “bolted down” in the setting in which those communications take place.

While attending to new forms of social trust, it is worth noting that there are some levels of increased exposure to unlike others through mediated platforms. Since conversations aren’t happening in closed-structures, people have friends who share information that is varied, and they can also easily click on diverse content, “17% of conservatives and 6% of liberals will click on cross-cutting content, (Bakshy et al. 2015). As one of the participants of this study described, he was able to have a conversation with a member of the opposing political party over Twitter where he influenced him to support a specific ballot proposal for the mid-term elections in 2018. Thus, mediated platforms can be an avenue for people to have these conversations across “truths” online. Subsequent research should more carefully consider both the settings and our ability to converse across them.

More research can also be done to understand the use of social media in building social capital through different movements like #MeToo, #LoveWins, and #JeSuisCharlie. These can be analyzed and compared to see how different causes are similar or different in pushing towards a new era of social capital. It would also be interesting to study use of social media in democracy, especially focusing on minorities. In this paper I have made a case for how social media harbors trust and builds social capital. Thus, it would be noteworthy to learn how social media has affected and is affecting democracy. More individuals have a voice as a result of these platforms, which is changing its landscape.

One limitation of this study is the number of participants interviewed. Even though I reached data saturation, I think that interviewing more members of BLM can bring more depth into the relationships built not only within each state, but across states and throughout the world.

Although my sample is relatively small, my participants offered detailed responses that coincided with one another and answered the question for this research. A second limitation is that because social media tends to be a platform for younger generations, this can exclude certain people and create implication on the findings for this study. As a result of people's limited use of social media, they may not be as actively involved in online movements or may choose to participate in these movements in different ways than younger people. Therefore, it is difficult to study how trust of mediated sources may be different for different generations.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Research Protocol Approval Letter



To: Shauna Morimoto
MAIN 229

From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee

Date: 07/12/2018

Action: **Exemption Granted**

Action Date: 07/12/2018

Protocol #: 1804116831

Study Title: Mediated Attitudes: Reconsidering Social Trust

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Diana Carolina Cascante, Investigator

Appendix B. Interview Guide.

- Tell me about your involvement with BLM
- How did you first get involved?
- What is the overall purpose of BLM? Does social media affect this?
- What role has social media played in your participation with the movement?
- Describe what communication looks like for BLM
 - Who within BLM communicates through social media?
 - What type of information do you hear/post about through social media regarding BLM?
- How do you know if you can trust online sources?
 - When information is being disseminated (about a current issue or event), how is this approached through social media? Is this information trustworthy? How do you know?
 - In general, do you feel that most people can be trusted? What about people on-line? How do you know when you can trust on-line sources?
 - How does the organization respond to false stories or posts?
- Describe what the network of people involved in BLM looks like. Describe how relationships form.
 - Have you been able to connect with people as a result of social media that you wouldn't have if it wasn't because of it?
 - One of the goals of BLM is to build and nurture community. What role has social media played in this?
 - Describe the difference between relationships you have built regarding BLM through social media vs face to face? Are these connected? How so?
- What does it take for you/others to commit time and resources to BLM? How is this accomplished through social media?
- How has social media affected the way you view immigration, race, and diversity?
- Where do you see the movement going?
- How is the information posted through the BLM movement different than the news?

Specific questions for leaders:

- Is social media used in the creation of the different chapters? How?
 - How does social affect the way you communicate and support chapters in other states?
- Do you have a strategy for posting on social media?

Demographics:

- How old are you?
- What is your race?
- What is your gender?
- What is your marital status?
- What is the highest level of school you have completed or highest degree you've received?
- What is your current job?