

# Hashtag Sociology

## Online Activism, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Use of Twitter for Ethnographic Observation

### Introduction

The purpose of the research was to explore how Twitter is used as a tool for activism, social movement networking and community-building, and socio-political change. I also wanted to begin creating a methodological framework for the use of Twitter as an ethnographic field site for sociologists to conduct observation and data analysis in an ethical, structured and informed way. I focused on the Black Lives Matter movement and those located in Montreal engaged with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter or #BLM.

### Methods

I created a Twitter account and explained my research on my profile. I then reached out to 69 Twitter users in Montreal who had used the hashtag #BLM or #BlackLivesMatter from April to August 2020. I conducted interviews with those who agreed to participate. Interview questions were based around developing an understanding of participants' primary motivations for and experiences with using Twitter, specifically as a way to get involved in social movements or activism.

5 men, 1 woman

Ages 30 to 42

Places of birth: Cameroon, France, Canada, the U.S.

Occupations: podcaster, producer, IT analyst, biologist, graphic designer, online vendor support

Accounts had 45 to 3,337 followers

### Demographics

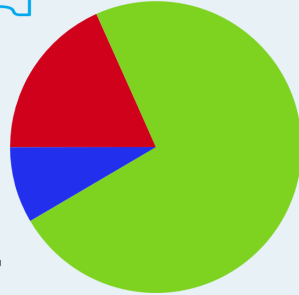


Participants (6)

Unable/Declined to Participate (13)

Unresponsive (50)

### Response Rates



4/6 stated that they would feel equally comfortable engaging in political discussion on Twitter vs. in person. 1 reported that, as an introvert, he would be more comfortable engaging online.

Most reported that they had experienced negative feedback or "trolling" on Twitter, and discounted these experiences as minor, and no one reported receiving hate messages.

Multiple participants reported that there are unspoken rules or norms amongst Twitter users ("it's like an unknown law, that you do not erase your tweets"). One participant stated that the social media site is "a bit of a game, ... so you really have to understand" it and "know the rules."

### General Use of Twitter

9.5 years average age of account

5.5 hours average time spent on Twitter per week

25% average % of followers they know personally

4/6 participants reported that they have physically met up with people they were initially introduced to through Twitter.

### Online Activism

#### How do Twitter Users View Online Activism?

4/6 felt that they could express their true and full political beliefs online; the remaining 2 cited career concerns and the fear of "leaving" it all out publicly as holding them back.

Decreasing delineation between "online" vs. "offline" activism; blurring of the lines between the two

5/6 participants admitted that they did not consider their activity on Twitter as activism until asked to define it. 1 participant maintained that he does not consider himself to be an activist.

Twitter has made participation in activism more accessible; 3 participants cited health concerns that prevented them from attending physical protests and pushed them to use their online platform

"Activism is activism ... Anything that you do that is to vocalize and act upon disenfranchisement can be [considered] activism."

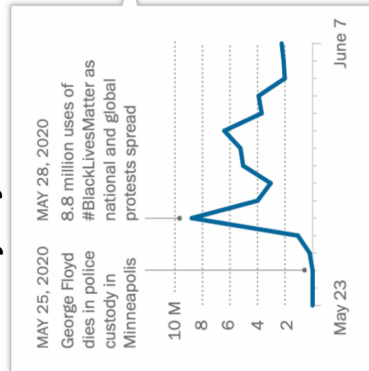
All participants reported an increase in the use of Twitter for political engagement or activism in recent years and/or months

"I feel like on social media, it might even have a bigger ... impact [than physical protesting]."

"As much as I like to be part of the protests that were going on and still go on, there are other factors I have to take into consideration. So the only way that I could be a part of it as much as I can is to disseminate information, aggregate it and be vocal about it. So ... [Twitter] has been good in that aspect."

All participants reported an overall positive perception of Twitter as a tool for socio-political activism and knowledge dissemination, and 5/6 could name at least 1 positive concrete change they had witnessed as a result of online activist efforts (i.e. the Washington Football Team name change).

### Use of #BlackLivesMatter, from May to June 2020



Cohen, J. (2020, July 20). #BlackLivesMatter Hashtag Averages 3.7 Million Tweets Per Day During Unrest. Retrieved August 18, 2020, from <https://www.pcmag.com/news/blacklivesmatter-hashtag-averages-37-million-tweets-per-day-during-unrest>



### #BlackLivesMatter

2 black participants reported that they often needed to take a step back from Twitter during peaks in the use of #BlackLivesMatter.

"Every time I see that hashtag, it comes with a certain pain, a minimum of pain ... I have to take breaks from [Twitter] sometimes, just to make sure ... my thoughts are straight."

"Just call it out ... if you have to start something, start with the movement online has prompted her streets to start something. The least I can do is have a discussion."

One participant reported that her involvement with the movement online has prompted her to call friends and family members out for racism.

"It brought both movements out ... A lot of people revealed themselves [as racist]. You could have these people as your neighbour but you would never know how they feel."



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