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#BLACKLIVESMATTER:  
CREATING AN ONLINE DISCURSIVE STRUCTURE

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Communication Division  
Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Nicole Veronica Bush

April 2017

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This thesis, written by

Nicole Veronica Bush

under the guidance of a faculty committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

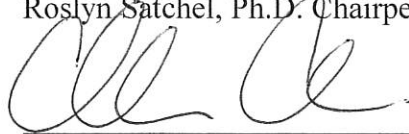
April 2017

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to those who feel powerless, vulnerable, and without a voice in this troubling period in American history. In these uncertain times, it is important that we come together, love one another, and focus on what we have in common: our humanity. I wrote this thesis so the world can better understand the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement that is rooted in love, not hate. Black love matters. Black lives matter. I pray that my future children will grow up in a world in which they do not feel limited by their skin color, gender, or sexual preference. The only limitations that exist in this world are the ones we create in our minds. Any idea that we are bound is a delusion.

To my brothers, Rico Bush and Tino Bush: May you walk down the street with your heads up high and grow up to be empowered, gracious Black men who never take your privilege for granted. To my grandmother, Myrna Bush: You are my everything. There are not adequate words to express what you mean to me. To my father, Hector Bush: Everything I do is possible because of you. From the time I was young, you emphasized the importance of my Black identity, and just as you said, it has become a source of strength. To my grandfather, Norman Bush: Thank you for your unconditional love and support. To my sister, Jessica Mack: I love you, and I miss you. Even though we are far apart, we are cut from the same star. To my partner, Joel Cavness: I am so happy to be on this journey with you. To Dr. Roslyn Satchel: Thank you for your guidance and encouragement. Your intelligence, compassion, and dedication inspire me.

To all those who continue to fight for equality and justice in this world: May we not lose hope. We must continue the good fight so we might create the world in which we want to live. I believe in us because I believe in God. God is love, and love conquers all. And so it is.

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#BLACKLIVESMATTER:  
CREATING AN ONLINE DISCURSIVE STRUCTURE

by

Nicole Veronica Bush  
April 2017  
Dr. Roslyn Satchel, Chairperson

ABSTRACT

The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 as a response to the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman. What started out as a hashtag on a social networking site quickly grew into a large offline grassroots movement, with no formal hierarchy and with decentralized chapters spread across the United States. By using social media platforms such as Twitter, local BLM chapters can respond to the incessant violence against Black people and can contest Black stereotypes appearing in the news media.

This paper is about how the media frame and represent Black people, and how the BLM movement represents itself. There is exigency for this study because few academic studies explain how the Black Lives Matter movement uses Twitter to represent Black people non-stereotypically. Moreover, a need for studies that explain how the Black Lives Matter movement's social-media use challenges negative stereotypes about Black people (Langford & Speight, 2015). To address these gaps in the literature, this paper demonstrates how the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis BLM chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure that could potentially counter the prevalent Black criminality stereotype perpetuated by mainstream media narratives. My study demonstrates how the BLM movement's use of Twitter constitutes a discursive structure.

In this study, I analyzed tweets appearing in these three chapters' Twitter accounts during the month of December 2015, the month the Black Xmas protests occurred. I followed van Dijk (2001) and Shirazi's (2013) approaches to critical discourse analysis to understand how the chapters' use of Twitter constitutes a discursive structure. These two approaches allow me to study "the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352) on social media. I find that the chapters represented the movement and its supporters in a manner that challenges the Black criminality stereotype. Through its use of social media, the Black Lives Matter movement has helped deconstruct stereotypes and challenged media hegemony. With this study, I aim to bring about social change by understanding how the movement's use of Twitter constitutes a discursive structure, which represents Black people in a new way, and by doing so to affirm that Black lives matter in a world in which it seems they do not.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

On the evening of February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin walked into a 7-Eleven in Sanford, Florida. The 7-Eleven surveillance video shows the 17-year-old Black boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt and purchasing a bag of Skittles and a can of AriZona Iced tea. This footage captures Martin's last moments before he encountered a neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman. Zimmerman spotted Martin, started following him, and called 911. He reported Martin, claiming he was a "real suspicious guy" (Botelho, 2012, para. 10) and was on drugs. The 911 dispatcher told Zimmerman it was not necessary for him to pursue Martin, but Zimmerman continued to do so anyway.

We are not certain what happened after Zimmerman called 911 or what led him to fire a bullet from his 9-mm semiautomatic handgun into Martin's chest. When the police arrived at the scene, they found Martin "face down in the grass" (Botelho, 2012, para. 21). Neighbors said they had heard the two men yelling. One neighbor told officers he heard one man yelling "Help!," (para. 16) or "Help me!" fourteen times in a span of 38 seconds. Martin died at 7:30 p.m., three minutes after firefighters from the Sanford Police Department arrived on the scene. Zimmerman's nose and the back of his head were bloody, and he said that Martin had attacked him and he had killed the unarmed 17-year-old in self-defense. The Sanford police did not arrest Zimmerman that evening, claiming there was not enough evidence to disprove Zimmerman's claim of self-defense.

On March 13, 2012, the Sanford police took Zimmerman into custody, claiming the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman was "ultimately avoidable by Zimmerman, if

Zimmerman would have remained in his vehicle and awaited the arrival of law enforcement” (Botelho, 2012, para. 37). Moreover, they reported there was no indication “that Trayvon Martin was involved in any criminal activity” (para. 38). On April 11, 2012, special prosecutor Angela Corey charged George Zimmerman with second-degree murder. On July 13, 2013, an all-female jury, consisting of five White women and one member of a nondominant racial group, found Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder or of the lesser charge of manslaughter, despite the evidence the prosecution had presented to the jury, such as that investigators found only Zimmerman’s fingerprints on his gun, and Zimmerman’s racial-epithet-filled call to 911. In addition, the Sanford police did not find Zimmerman’s DNA under Martin’s nails, which is atypical when a physical altercation takes place (Botelho & Yan, 2013).

The failure of the court to bring George Zimmerman to justice was the catalyst for Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi’s creation of the #BLACKLIVESMATTER hashtag, and for the subsequent movement. Alicia Garza made the first post of that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement on Facebook in July 2013. It read, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our Lives Matter” (Langford & Speight, 2015, p. 78). Patrisse Cullors reposted Garza’s status and added the hashtag #BLACKLIVESMATTER. Cullors maintained that she created the hashtag out of grief for the Black community and to affirm the significance of Black community matters (Langford & Speight, 2015). Despite the positive impact of the 1960s civil-rights movement on the Black community, there continues to be unnecessary violence against Black people, which people sometimes justify by misconceptions perpetuated by news media, in which Black people are featured as dangerous, violent criminals (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Black people are still the most regular victims of crime and casualties of police brutality (Chaney &

Robertson, 2013; Dixon & Maddox, 2005). To affirm Black lives, Cullors and Garza decided to start a social media campaign, and they asked Opal Tometi to join their efforts. The three women began using the hashtag on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, but #BLACKLIVESMATTER failed to gain widespread use in the Black community and mainstream news media until August 2014, more than a year later, following the death of Michael Brown, another unarmed Black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri.

On August 9, 2014, Brown and a friend were walking to Brown's grandmother's house. Officer Darren Wilson approached the teenagers in his police vehicle and told them to "get the [explicative] on the sidewalk" (McLaughlin, 2014, para. 14). Wilson nearly hit them with his vehicle, and grabbed Brown by his neck. According to witnesses, Brown escaped Wilson's grasp and the two teenagers started running away from Wilson, who fired shots at them from his car window. One of the shots hit Brown, who ran and hid behind a nearby car. Wilson got out of his car and approached Brown, who then stood up and put his hands in the air. Wilson claimed that Brown hit him with a car door and attempted to grab his gun, and that he killed him in self-defense. The forensic evidence indicated that Wilson shot Brown at least five times from a distance of at least 35 feet. This evidence casts doubt on Wilson's account of the events that led to Brown's death (McLaughlin, 2014). Within three minutes of Wilson's initial encounter with Brown, other officers arrived on the scene to find Brown dead ("Ferguson Protests," 2014).

Brown's murder sparked protests in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, and throughout many American cities. People began voicing their frustrations on social media and used the #BLACKLIVESMATTER hashtag as a display of their support of the emergent movement. #BLACKLIVESMATTER became the battle cry of the protesters; the hashtag spread

on social media, and news media began featuring the phrase when talking about the Ferguson protests. #BLACKLIVESMATTER started out as merely a hashtag on social networking sites, but it quickly grew into a large offline grassroots movement with no formal hierarchy and with decentralized chapters spread across the United States. Demonstrating the impact of the hashtag on the American public, the American Dialectic Society named #BLACKLIVESMATTER its word of 2014 (Langford & Speight, 2015).

Over Labor Day weekend of 2014, Cullors and Darnell L. Moore organized and led a Freedom Ride to Ferguson to support the protests there (Garza, 2014). Supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement from around the country traveled to Ferguson and protested Michael Brown's murder. This freedom ride was the Black Lives Matter movement's first national protest (Ruffin, n.d.). On November 24, 2014, a St. Louis grand jury decided to not charge Wilson with murder, generating even more outrage in the Black community and inciting more protests and more support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Buchanan et al., 2015). Black Lives Matter is rooted in the community and is a shared lived experience. Each local chapter of the movement has its own social network, and each chapter contributes to the public sphere through general assembly meetings, town hall events, and staged protests in major cities of the United States, such as the Black Xmas protests.

Garza (2014), a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, explained her aspirations for the movement, stating:

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contribution to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of violent



oppression. (p. 1)

She explained that the movement celebrates Black lives in an American society that belittles Black lives. By doing so, the movement functions as a counter-hegemonic force to the White hegemony that persists throughout much of American society. Moreover, Bailey and Leonard (2015) maintained that the Black Lives Matter movement “is an act of collective imagination, one that both envisions and tries to bring about conditions that will guarantee that the voices, humanity, and lives of African Americans are protected, valued, and embraced” (p. 68). The movement’s supporters’ use of social media is one of the primary ways they build upon this shared vision, as evidenced by #BLACKLIVESMATTER starting and growing from a hashtag on social media.

The capabilities of social networking sites present the Black Lives Matter movement with the opportunity to spread its ideology to the public and avoid the mainstream news media’s priming and framing information about the movement. By priming news, giving certain stories more coverage, and including some details while omitting others, the news media influence how the public thinks about issues such as the Ferguson protests, and reinforce harmful stereotypes about Black people in the minds of audiences (Holt, 2013; Miller, 2004). The news media’s framing of the Black Lives Matter movement also affects the way the public views the movement and its supporters, especially those of the public who don’t have firsthand knowledge of the movement (Kuypers, 2009). Audiences use media frames to make sense of and comprehend the news, as facts are neutral and have no meaning on their own (Gamson, 1989). Through this process, both media priming and framing can negatively influence the way individuals think about the Black Lives Matter movement and its supporters.

Mainstream news media priming and framing are particularly dangerous because newsmakers can use them to reinforce racial stereotypes and the systems they represent. Stereotyping plays upon binary distinctions such as black and white, good and bad, and us and them, and essentializes people by just a few basic traits based on their natures (Hall, 2013a). Furthermore, stereotyping is one of the ways the majority preserves its power and dominance over nondominant groups (Kay & Jost, 2003). Mainstream media functions as a discursive structure, which is a space in which institutions form a shared way of talking about things that gives these things meaning and creates a way of knowing, and perpetuates stereotypical representations and reinforces the power of hegemonic institutions, such as news media (Satchel, 2016). This power imbalance is what makes it essential for movements such as Black Lives Matter to create discursive structures that introduce the opportunity for social change (Del Felice, 2014).

News media overrepresent Black people as criminals, and this representation negatively affects the way people think about Black people (Dixon, 2008; Hall, 2013a). Mainstream news discursive structures provide a way for people to understand Black people. Moreover, by priming racial stereotypes about Black people, they make audiences more likely to view Black people as criminals and to believe crime is a natural tendency of all Black people, which could lead to people mistreating and mistrusting Black people. Mainstream news discourses reinforce harmful stereotyping, and because of this, it is necessary for movements such as Black Lives Matter to circumvent mainstream discursive structures and create their own alternative discursive structures.

Black people use Twitter more than other racial groups, and Black Twitter is an

understudied public (Brock, 2012). In light of this argument, my study explores the way the Black Lives Matter movement uses Twitter as an alternative discursive structure to generate a shared way of talking about and understanding the movement (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Bailey and Leonard (2015) argued that the movement's use of Twitter is a "discursive intervention" (p. 76), and creates a space for Black people to redefine Blackness. My study explores how the Black Lives Matter movement's use of Twitter creates a discursive structure that opens up the opportunity for this discursive intervention.

### *Significance of the Study*

In this paper, I use critical discourse analysis to understand how three of the largest chapters in the Black Lives Matter movement use Twitter to construct a discursive structure and whether this creates an opportunity for the chapters to challenge the Black criminality stereotype. I pursue the following research question: Do the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure, and if so does it create the opportunity for the discourse to counter the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media?

The primary purpose of this study is to understand better how the Black Lives Matter chapters use Twitter to establish a discursive structure, and how, in so doing, they and their supporters create the opportunity to provide a counterframe to mainstream news media narratives. Moreover, the purpose of my study is to understand how these three chapters' Twitter feeds circumvent traditional news media framing, priming, and stereotyping, and operate as a news source. By operating as its own news source, the movement can control the flow of information about itself and can reframe information about the Black Lives Matter movement

and its supporters.

The Black Lives Matter movement is relatively new, and only a limited number of studies exist on it. Specifically, there are few published studies on its use of social media. Studies are needed that detail the way the movement's use of social media can potentially counter derogatory stereotypes of Black individuals (Langford & Speight, 2015). By showing how the Black Lives Matter movement uses Twitter to create discursive interruptions and counterframe mainstream new media discourses, my study addresses this gap in the literature and contributes to our understanding of the Black Lives Matter movement. The potentially dangerous effects of priming on audiences' attitudes toward Black people further demonstrate the exigency for my study. Moreover, Comunello and Anzera (2012) argued that there is a need for additional research to describe more fully the impact social networking sites have on social movements such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement.

My study is one of the first to use critical discourse analysis to analyze Twitter messages. Moreover, it offers a new way of understanding Twitter as an alternative discursive structure. It is significant to explore whether the Black Lives Matter movement's use of Twitter constitutes a discursive structure, because by creating an alternative discursive structure, the movement can generate new meaning and knowledge about Black people and can share this knowledge socially through the Twitter network.

In the next chapter, I provide the theoretical basis for my study. I discuss priming and framing theories and how these activities affect stereotypical representations. I then examine the literature on racial representation in the news media, how stereotyping functions, and the danger of stereotyping. Next, I consider how news media perpetuate the Black criminality stereotype

and examine the impact this has on audiences. I identify news media as a discursive structure and provide a discussion of the influence of social networking sites on social movements.

In Chapter 3, I reintroduce my research question and discuss why I chose to analyze the Twitter accounts of the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters. I provide an overview of van Dijk's (2001) and Shirazi's (2013) approaches to critical discourse analysis, and explain why this is a suitable method for understanding Twitter, despite that I am the first scholar to apply it to this particular social media platform. I outline my units of analysis, which are subject and sources of the discourse. Finally, I outline how I collected data and my coding process.

In Chapter 4, I present my data and results. I provide an in-depth discussion of how tweets function as a discursive structure that generates meaning. I also discuss the subjects and sources the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles chapters include in the discourse. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss my results and the significance of my findings.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

In the previous section, I discussed the origins of the Black Lives Matter movement and explained the significance of this study. In this chapter, I provide the theoretical basis for my study. I then discuss discursive structures, media priming, framing, representation, and stereotypes. These concepts affect media representation and provide the theoretical basis for my study of the Black Lives Matter movement. I also discuss the impact of social movements and Black Twitter and provide a further discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement.

#### *Media Priming and Framing*

Media priming and framing occur within the mainstream news media's discursive structure. A discursive structure is a space in which institutions form a shared way of talking about things that gives these things meaning and creates a way of knowing (Satchel, 2016). Discursive structures provide a way of "representing a particular topic, concern, or object" (Nixon, 2013, p. 300). Furthermore, a discursive structure is a system of representation that generates understanding through the inclusion of language, pictures, and other symbols, and moreover discourse is the relationship between power and knowledge (Satchel, 2016). Media priming and framing share this meaning and way of knowing. Media priming and framing socially share this knowledge through the contextual map of mass media, which is way of displaying and socially sharing knowledge (Hall, 2013b; Satchel, 2016). News media perpetuates knowledge, which is a form of power, through the institution of news media and technologies such as Twitter and other media platforms. Media framing and priming are how the discourse of the discursive structure creates meaning (Hall, 2013b). Discourse creates this meaning, and when

it is shared through both mainstream and alternative media, discourse frames and primes information and by doing so, shapes and influences how people think, which can potentially affect how they behave.

Media framing and priming are pertinent to my study because they are the tools through which the hegemonic institution of news media reinforce the systematic imbalance of power in society and perpetuate stereotypes (Satchel, 2016). Media priming and framing occur within mainstream news media discourses, and they operate in a manner that emphasizes and fortifies the insider-outsider mentality, which entrenches the power of the insiders and marginalizes the outsiders. Through the meaning-making process of news media priming and framing, news media reinforce power imbalances in society and preserve the power of the majority, and because of this they are pertinent to my study. I further discuss how priming and framing function, as well as explore their potential impact in the following two sections.

### *Priming Theory*

The media affect the public agenda by giving certain issues more airtime and prominence within the mainstream news discursive structure (Miller, 2004). By doing so, the media influence public opinion and what audiences consider important or relevant. The media not only tell the audience what to think about, they also influence how the audience thinks about those issues. Influencing how the public thinks about an issue is second-level agenda setting. Priming and framing are two key concepts of second-level agenda setting that also influence the activation of racial stereotypes.

Priming is “a mental process in which certain aspects of an issue are made more prominent by media and thus more influential in guiding a person’s judgment” (Holt, 2013, p.

110). Priming causes individuals to make assumptions about groups of people they have never encountered based on previous media exposure. Mainstream news media discourses reinforce stereotypical representations of certain groups of people. Stereotypes operate as a type of schema that allows individuals to organize what they know about other social groups (Gorham, 2013). Furthermore, they “structure our expectations and influence how we perceive incoming messages” (p. 19). Gorham underscored the potential impact of stereotypes on viewers and highlighted stereotypes’ effects on people’s perceptions. Moreover, priming is “the effect of a particular, prior context on the retrieval and interpretation of information” (Miller, 2004, p. 275). Media prime audiences with concepts, which results in viewers being more likely to perceive incoming messages as containing features they expect (Gorham, 2013). By highlighting certain facets of an issue, media can also shape how the public perceives the issue (Holt, 2013).

The effects of priming and the impact of news discourses on audiences are the reason stereotypes are influential and potentially dangerous. Priming can influence the way White audiences think about Black people who the media regularly feature as criminals (Holt, 2013). Cognitive research shows, “Once primed, stereotypical beliefs are activated more quickly, and are more likely to cause people to view [Black people] along stereotypical lines” (Holt, 2013, p. 111). This finding underscores the potentially harmful effects of media priming and highlights how priming can be used to reinforce racial stereotypes and the systems they represent. It is likely that stereotypes were at play when Officer Timothy Loehmann shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice for playing with a pellet gun less than a second after seeing the child (Thrasher, 2015).

### *Framing Theory*



Like priming, frames are used to make sense of the world (Lind & Aravena, 2013). Gamson (1989) described a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of events and suggesting what is at issue” (p. 157). Through this process that occurs in mainstream news discursive structures, media frame stories so audiences can make sense of them. Framing is also “the process through which media emphasize some aspects of reality and downplay other aspects” (Miller, 2004, p. 275). Through this discursive process, framing influences how audiences think about issues. Frames affect audiences’ attitudes and decisions and make “some aspects of our multidimensional reality more noticeable than other aspects” (Kuypers, 2013, p. 181). Frames are particularly salient when audience members do not have firsthand knowledge of a particular issue or story.

Media activate frames in a number of ways. First, they frame issues through the size and location of the news piece, and its narration and tone. They also include certain details while excluding others (Miller, 2004). Individuals seldom notice or question this process because individuals often readily accept and rely on the easily assessable information they find in the media (Kuypers, 2009). Similarly, Entman (1991) claimed that frames are contained in the “keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images” (p. 7) that media emphasize in their narratives. In this way, frames emphasize certain aspects of a story while overlooking others (Lind & Aravena, 2013). This emphasis is significant because facts are intrinsically neutral and have no meaning on their own. Instead, media’s framing of the facts makes them more easily comprehensible to audiences and creates meaning (Gamson, 1989). Moreover, media establish frames of reference that audiences use to interpret and debate public events (Tuchman, 1978).

These media frames are structures that the media use to present news, and audiences use frames to comprehend the news; this underscores the potential negative impact of mainstream news media discursive structures (Scheufele, 1999). There are two unique framing constructs: media frames and individual frames. A media frame is “a central organizing idea of a story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events....The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1994, p. 376). Through this process, media frames turn a typical event into a “discernible event” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106). In turn, media frames influence how audiences understand news events. Alternatively, individual frames are “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Individual frames are cognitive strategies that function as unordered categories people use to classify news stories. Both media and individual frames are influential in shaping audiences’ perceptions. The media prime and frame Black men and women in their news stories, and these frames can influence how audiences think about Black individuals.

#### *Racial Representation in News Media*

This discussion of media framing and priming is significant because news media affect the way people view the world. Van Dijk (2000) maintained that news media are “the main source of people’s knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies” (p. 36). However, this is potentially dangerous because the news media do not simply present news events; instead, a media outlet “(re)-constructs them” (van Dijk, 1989, p. 203) and, “plays a very specific role in the distribution and acceptance of ethnic ideologies” (p. 203). The manner in which the media represent Black people affects the way audiences think about Black people. Thus, media representation connects meaning, language, and culture (Hall, 2013b). Moreover, representation is the creation of

meaning through language. Representation is an integral component of practice in which one creates meaning, and members of a culture share these meanings to communicate with each other. Meanings vary, Hall asserted, because meaning is intrinsically connected to the relationship between people and things. Individuals create mental representations or signs of meaning. The relationships among things, concepts, and signs “[lie] at the heart of the production of meaning through language” (p. 5). Representation is a process that connects things, concepts, and signs, and creates arbitrary meaning. This belief that meaning is arbitrary reflects the constructionist approach, which recognizes that meaning is not fixed to language. Instead one “construct[s] meaning, using representation systems—concepts and signs” (p. 11).

Mainstream media routinely feature binary representations in their depictions of people by portraying non-Whites as a racialized Other. The majority of White audiences perceive non-White people as them and White people as us (Hall, 2013a). Moreover, media represent people they deem different as opposites of the majority (e.g., positive-negative, cultured-uncultured, or competent-incompetent). Hall detailed the history of the media’s representation of Black individuals. In the United States, the binary representation of Black people and White people and the racialization of the Other originated during the colonization of North America and the enslavement of Native Americans and Black people by European settlers. The enslavers used binary representations that featured Black people as savage and inhuman to justify enslaving them as the racialized Other. Media representations juxtapose “‘civilization’ (White) and ‘savagery’ (Black)” (p. 232) and establish Black people as a different species, and therefore as ripe for subjugation as inhuman. By doing this, media also naturalize and essentialize difference. Naturalizing is “the practice of reducing the cultures of Black people to nature” (p. 234). By

naturalizing the otherness of Black people, the White majority essentialized Black people to a few basic traits attributed to their natures.

### *What Is Stereotyping?*

Research has shown that individuals who hold essentialized beliefs are more likely to endorse “stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among racial minority groups” (Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007, p. 341). This endorsement is likely because racial stereotypes also reduce people to a few essentialized features and also depend on binary representations of otherness. Hall (2013a) elaborated, “[Black people] are trapped by the *binary structure* of the stereotype, which is split between two extremes” (p. 252). Stereotypes depend on this binary structure to reduce people to a few essential qualities determined by nature. A stereotype is a kind of schema that helps simplify people and information in a complex, oversaturated media environment (Gorham, 2013). Stereotyping allows people to process a large amount of information quickly on the basis of a few pertinent details. Stereotyping also affects individuals’ perceptions, and in doing so, it works for the hegemonic power of the majority.

Stereotyping is “central to the representation of racial difference” (Hall, 2013a, p. 247). To represent racial difference, stereotyping uses a splitting strategy, determining what is acceptable and what is unacceptable and excluding anything that the majority considers unacceptable. Closure and exclusion are also central components of stereotyping, as the practice sets limits and omits anything different. Furthermore, Hall maintained stereotyping typically occurs in situations where power is uneven. Stereotyping categorizes people according to a norm, excludes the others, and perpetuates hegemony. Hegemony is “a form of power based on leadership by a group in many fields of activity at once so that its ascendancy commands

widespread consent and appears natural and inevitable” (p. 248). Stereotyping, by essentializing people to a few intrinsic traits, is one of the numerous ways the majority preserves its power and perpetuates hegemony.

#### *How Does Stereotyping Function?*

Hegemony persists because the majority of individuals base their identities and senses of self on the misconception that things and people are either good or bad (Gilman, 2013). People utilize stereotypes to tell the difference between themselves and others in a reality in which no real distinctions exist. Individuals rely on stereotypes to cope with the instabilities of the world. Stereotyping is necessary when a person’s self-integration is under threat, and an individual should utilize stereotyping as “a temporary coping mechanism, one that can be used and then discarded once anxiety is overcome” (p. 279). Stereotyping as a coping mechanism is not good per se, but it is necessary at times, when a person finds herself in a threatening situation. In addition, people automatically activate stereotypes when encountering a person from a particular unfamiliar cultural group, and this suggests stereotyping is at times unavoidable (Devine, 1989).

Although the majority of individuals are aware of stereotypes, Devine (1989) highlighted the difference between knowledge and endorsement of a stereotype. High-prejudice people are more likely to endorse stereotypes, whereas low-prejudice people “use some type of controlled cognitive processing to suppress the automatically activated stereotype” (Gorham, 2013, p. 19). This suppression explains why stereotypes are hugely influential for some individuals and less so for others. Moreover, the stereotyping process occurs in two stages: in the first stage, media automatically activate the stereotype, and in the second stage a person deliberately applies the stereotype. People activate stereotypes implicitly but do not always implement them explicitly

(Ramasubramanian, 2007). People activate implicit attitudes from gut feelings, whereas explicit attitudes are “the basis for overtly expressed evaluations” (Arendt & Northup, 2015, p. 732).

Likewise, Arendt and Northup maintained that implicit stereotyping is an involuntary practice that requires no effort on the individual’s part. Expanding upon this, Ramasubramanian (2007) argued, “Media stereotypes can serve as cognitive shortcuts to immediately and quickly activate the cultural stereotypes associated with the group” (p. 251). The automatic nature of stereotyping is why it is important to understand the impact of media stereotypes on audiences’ perceptions, particularly their perceptions of Black men and women.

#### *Strategies to Counter Media Stereotyping*

While the scholars discussed above demonstrated that stereotypes are automatic and often result in negative, incorrect assumptions about a group of people, it is still possible to counter stereotyping. This is because stereotypes do not have fixed meanings. Instead, they change over time to reflect the current state of society and the mind-set of the individual perceiving the message (Dixon, 2008). Similarly, Hall (2013a) claimed that individuals can counter stereotypes and suggested three ways to change the stereotypical representation of Black people. The first is the integrationist strategy, which involves Black people assimilating to White culture. The second is the substitution of White representations for Black representations, which helps balance media representation of Black people. The third strategy is to “contest [the stereotype] from within” (p. 262).

In the same vein, Ramasubramanian (2007) detailed two strategies for stereotype reduction: audience-centered and the message-centered approaches. In the audience-centered approach, facilitators instruct individuals on how to reduce stereotype activation. In the second

approach, facilitators do not provide instruction. Instead, they expose individuals to information that counters stereotypes. Through an experiment with 158 participants, Ramasubramanian (2007) found that a combination of both approaches reduced racial stereotype activation. These results suggest that movements such as Black Lives Matters can counter prevalent and harmful stereotypes.

It is important for groups such as Black Lives Matter to counter stereotyping because stereotyping thwarts social change and helps maintain hegemony (Kay & Jost, 2003). Kay and Jost argued that even seemingly good stereotypes, such as “poor but honest” (p. 823), perpetuate the idea inequality is acceptable. Through four studies in which participants witnessed stereotypical representations of gender, Kay and Jost established a relationship between seemingly benevolent stereotype exposure and agreement with statements that support the status quo, and in doing so showed that stereotyping helps maintain the current social order. By countering stereotypical representation, Black Lives Matter activists can disrupt the status quo and bring about social change.

#### *The Black Criminality Stereotype in News Media*

It is necessary for the Black Lives Matter movement to counter stereotypical representation because the stereotypical representation of Black people is prevalent through much of America’s media, particularly the news media (Hall, 2013a). By overrepresenting Black people as criminals, news media further perpetuate racial stereotypes (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Arendt and Northup (2015) explored how news media perpetuate racial stereotypes by studying the impact of prolonged exposure to news stereotypes on both implicit and explicit attitudes. Through an experiment in which they exposed 316 individuals to stereotypical news coverage

featuring Black people as perpetrators of crime, the authors found that local television news negatively affected audiences' implicit attitudes. Furthermore, they found that implicit attitudes are at the root of explicit attitudes. In light of their findings, the authors concluded that heavy television viewers display greater intuitively negative feelings toward Black people (Arendt & Northup, 2015).

Similarly, Dixon (2008) explored whether exposure to news has a considerable effect on the way individuals perceive Black people. Through telephone surveys of 506 participants, Dixon found that exposure to network news contributes to stereotypical views of Black people. Specifically, network news exposure "depressed estimations of African-American income" (p. 330), increased endorsement of racial stereotypes, and resulted in higher racism scores. While these results do not imply causation, they do show a relationship between exposure to network news and negative perceptions of race. Likewise, in a study that explored news media's effect on people's judgments of Black people, Dixon and Maddox (2005) found that stereotypical representations of Black people in the news media "may contribute to cultural stereotypes" (p. 1566) about Black people and other racial groups. In support of this finding, Devine (1989) asked White respondents to provide traits typical of Black people, and they chose criminal, unintelligent, violent, poor, and jobless. Moreover, participants in MacLin and Herrera's (2006) study told the researchers they perceived Black criminals to be physically large, with dark skin, baggy clothing, and gold teeth. These findings underscore the pervasive influence of pejorative Black stereotypes on the way White people perceive Black people (Abraham & Appiah, 2006).

Even without stereotypical descriptions of Black people, news media reinforce these perceived negative Black traits through the use of images. Abraham and Appiah (2006) found



that news media more frequently juxtaposed crime stories with implicitly racialized images of Black men, that “the racial subtext primes frequently activated stereotypes about [Black people]” (p.189) and that this association provided “concrete clues for understanding the [news] story”. Thus, even without stereotypical descriptions of Black people, Abraham and Appiah demonstrated news media can reinforce pejorative stereotypes more subtly by using “implicit visual imagery that activates racial attitudes” (p. 196). Similarly, Entman (1990) found that television news regularly featured police detaining Black criminals in handcuffs, or showed mug shots of Black suspects (Welch, 2007). These findings demonstrate the potential negative impact of news media on people’s perceptions of Black people even in the absence of stereotypical descriptions.

That American news media portray a greater number of Black people as criminals than White people despite statistics that suggest the contrary furthers the negative impact of stereotypical representations of Black people as criminals (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). News media represent White people as perpetrators on television news 21% of the time, despite their being perpetrators of crime in 28% of cases. Moreover, news media represent White people as the victims of crime 43% of the time, but White people are only the victims of crime in 13% of crime reports. This misrepresentation affects the way the public perceives Black people and causes them to assume Black people are more likely than White people to be criminals, which is untrue (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). Highlighting the significance of this finding, Welch (2007) argued, “The stereotyping of [Black people] as criminals is so pervasive throughout society that ‘criminal predator’ is used as [an] euphemism for ‘young black male’” (p. 276)

The assumption that all Black people are criminals causes White people to associate

violence with being Black and to believe that crime is a natural tendency of all Black people (Holt, 2013). Holt argued, “Media messages matter as they prime racial stereotypes” (p. 111), and they also reinforce previously held negative beliefs. The reinforcement of negative racial stereotypes and negative judgments affects the way people treat Black people. The assumption that Black people are criminals negatively affects the accuracy of eyewitness accounts.

Individuals who watch television news, according to Drabman et al. (1981), are more likely to recall the suspect in a newscast as being a Black person even in the absence of any identifying information, and furthermore, they are more likely to select a Black person as the perpetrator of a crime when police investigators ask them (Malpass, Tredoux, & McQuiston-Surrett, 2012). In light of these findings and the impact of stereotyping on the reinforcement of the Black criminality stereotype, it is vital for the Black Lives Matter movement to challenge derogatory stereotypical representations of Black people by using social media to construct an alternative discursive structure.

News media feature narratives that function as a type of discourse within the news media’s discursive structure. The stereotypes and narratives presented by the news media function as a “system of representation” (p. 29) and are a form of discourse. Foucault (as cited in Hall, 1992) defined a discourse as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment....Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language” (p. 165). Discourse is the way we produce meaning (Hall, 2000). In the same vein, van Dijk (1995) maintained, “meaning, interpretation, and understanding” (p. 21) are all involved in creating discourse in news media. The mainstream narratives of news media function as a type of

discourse because they provide a way of representing knowledge of Black people. The mainstream news media discourse provides a way of understanding Black people in the year 2015, and by doing so, it produces power, knowledge, and meaning through language, which restricts the other ways the public understands Black people (Hall, 2000).

Moreover, discursive structures are places where news media create meaning by representing a particular issue (Nixon, 1996). Foucault (as cited in Cousins & Hussain, 1984) argued that discursive structures “refer to the same object, share the same style and...support a strategy...a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern” (pp. 84–85). The news media give meaning to the Black criminality stereotype through their shared style and strategy of reporting. By doing so, they reinforce hegemonic knowledge and power in today’s historical context. The body of knowledge of the derogatory stereotypical representation of Black people is circulated and reinforced by the discourse occurring in the news media’s discursive structure (Hall, 2000).

### *Social Networking Sites and Social Movements*

I have demonstrated that the news media function as a discursive structure. But to what extent can organizers of movements like Black Lives Matter make use of social networking sites, such as Twitter, to create shared meaning in alternative discursive formations? Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social networking sites as,

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 2)

The use of social networking sites is how most people begin to participate in online social activism (Brodock, Joyce, & Zaeck, 2009). Social movements can mobilize and spread information easily and freely via social networks. Moreover, social networks allow movements to reduce “the costs of coordination” (Shirky, 2011, p. 35). Rolfe (2005) argued that access to and knowledge of social networking sites are vital resources for activists. Social networking sites are potentially powerful tools that organizers of social movements such as Black Lives Matter have at their disposal, but what effect do social media have on spreading the ideology of the movement and helping it circumvent traditional news media?

Activists are free to use the Internet as an alternative medium and are using it as a way to circumvent the media, present an alternative to the mainstream news discourse, and establish an alternative discursive structure. Analyzing the role of the Internet in mobilizing action, Owens and Palmer (2003) argued that the media have historically functioned as a “gatekeeper between movements and the public” (p. 356), but, they noted, this is no longer the case. They maintained that the Internet gives social activists the power to define their media images and present their ideologies to a watching public. The authors suggested that the mainstream media are no longer the sole information gatekeeper; instead, the mainstream and alternative media have a relationship in which they influence one another (Owens & Palmer, 2003). The authors argued that new media provide users with new and unmediated forums for discussion and create an opportunity to build momentum behind causes by gaining mainstream media visibility via the Internet, which has a positive impact on social movements (Owens & Palmer, 2003).

Alternative discursive structures have emerged out of attempts to respond to mainstream news narratives, and have come to function as a space in which alternative ideologies can

circulate, which increases their “emancipatory potential” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). Alternative discursive structures emerge on the Internet as a way for marginalized, minority opinion groups to participate in democratic deliberation and influence mass media, which results in greater discourse and pluralism in society (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Furthermore, participation in virtual discursive structures contributes to the destabilization of the hegemonic news discourse and creates the potential for new forms of discursive fragmentation and media heterogeneity in society.

### *Social Movement Discursive Structures*

To what extent can social movements’ discourses affect hegemonic mainstream news media discourses? I explore this question using examples from other social movements, such as the women’s movement. Clark (2016) discussed activists’ use of hashtags as a form of protest on Twitter and referred to this kind of activism as “hashtag activism” (p. 788). She argued that feminists can use hashtag activism to “intervene on oppressive discourse produced by commercial, news, and entertainment media” (p. 789). Hashtag activism is an essential form of activism for combatting popular hegemonic discourses. This type of activism creates new discursive spaces for marginalized groups, and moreover, hashtags have the ability to create and connect stories from individuals who otherwise would be unable to connect. Hashtag activism is a form of discourse activism and is “capable of triggering social political change with or without the help of collective activism offline” (p. 791).

Discursive activism triggers this change by linking personal action frames together through social networking sites like Twitter. This discourse challenges conventional understanding, establishes “new definitional claims” (Clark, 2016, p. 797) about social issues,

and results in a shift of mainstream discourses. Moreover, this discourse presents a counterframe to mainstream news media framing, which develops into a point of reference for interpreting future events. Mainstream media journalists may refer to this new framework when reporting on future events. Social media discourse, according to Molaei (2015), can function as a source of information for mainstream news media but can also affect mainstream media's agendas. This could in turn result in mainstream media more accurately representing domestic violence victims and other marginalized groups. In the same vein, Lievrouw (2011) argued that social movements contest mainstream discursive structures as a way of challenging hegemony and illustrating that "there are alternative ways of seeing the world and other stories to be told" (p. 372).

In a study of Black women blogging in the United Kingdom, Gabriel (2016) found that the discursive space of the blogs created a counterhegemonic discursive structure in which Black women could define Black womanhood and "oppose dominant constructions of Black female identity" (p. 1628). This allowed them to oppose hegemonic news media discourses. Moreover, self-representation is an instrumental way of affecting negative stereotypes. Discursive activism is a mechanism for Black English women to pass on the tradition of Black resistance. Gabriel concluded that these women bloggers function as "agents of knowledge" (p. 1632) by "invoking cultural authenticity as a strategy for challenging negative representations of Black British female identity by sharing their everyday lived experiences" (p. 1631).

Social networking sites allow activists to function as agents of knowledge by giving activists the opportunity to participate in alternative, self-managed discursive structures in which they can reframe social issues such as homelessness and crime (Toft, 2014). This reframing allows activists to challenge social norms by creating different accounts of and answers to social

problems. By challenging social norms, Del Felice (2014) maintained, alternative discourse structures create the opportunity for change.

### *Black Twitter*

I established above how social networking sites can constitute online discursive structures. Next I discuss how Black Twitter constitutes an understudied public. In August 2014, in response to Michael Brown's death and the stereotypical manner in which media portrayed Brown, hundreds of Black social media users began using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter to raise awareness of the media's reliance on stereotypes and how this affects the way the public perceives Black people (Richardson, 2015). Posts containing this hashtag featured two photos: one depicting the user in a stereotypical manner and the other showing a positive, flattering photo of the user. Black Lives Matter's organizers did not endorse this hashtag, but many of the movement's supporters participated. By challenging the way people see Blackness, the tweets underscored the imagery used by news media to "justify the unjustifiable—namely, Black Death" (Bailey & Leonard, 2015, p. 74). Moreover, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown stresses the media's role in shaping the public's perception not only of Black people but of "guilt and innocence as well" (p. 74). #IfTheyGunnedMeDown underscores how the media routinely rely on stereotypes when depicting Black people and how activists can use features of the Twitter platform to challenge people's perceptions of Black Americans.

Black people's use of Twitter is notable because, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, more Black people use Twitter than any other racial group (as cited in Duggan et al., 2015). While only 64% of Black people are wireless Internet users, 87% of Black and Hispanic people own cell phones, compared to only 80% of White people (Smith, 2010). The

proliferation of cell phone use in the Black community and the ease of access to Twitter through mobile phones is one of the primary reasons Black people have historically used the platform more than other racial groups (Brock, 2012). Twitter was created as a short messaging service platform intended to connect small social groups and limited the messages to 140 characters. The brevity and minimalism of Twitter allowed users to access easily the platform on their mobile phones regardless of the type of phone or the protocol, and this played a vital part in Black people's acceptance of the social networking site.

Black Twitter users employ Black discourse over the social networking site. Wilson (2009) highlighted three features of Black discourse on Twitter: comments and retweets, culturally specific hashtags, and trending topics. Comments and retweets within users' social networks allow for direct conversation, and moreover, concise but frequent updates result in deeper and closer connections among Black Twitter users (Brock, 2012). In the same vein, Sharma (2013) maintained that the participatory nature of sites such as Twitter "[proliferates] online identities, interactions, and meanings at speeds and magnitudes which appear to defy conventional hermeneutic approaches" (p. 54).

Culturally specific hashtags, the second element of Black Twitter's discursive style, also further the creation of online identities, interactions, and meanings on the social networking site. These hashtag, according to Brock (2012), led to the "discovery" (p. 534) of Black Twitter, in that they exposed Black Twitter to the mainstream. They revealed important topics, but also the people behind the creation of those topics. Furthermore, "Hashtags enable Twitter to mediate communal identities in near-real time; allowing participants to act individually yet en masse while still being heard" (Brock, 2012, p. 539).



Finally, trending topics are the way mainstream Twitter users and other media to become aware of hashtags occurring in the group-level discourse of Black Twitter. Trending topics are topics of interest, and they are responsible for bringing Black Twitter to mainstream public awareness online and outside of Twitter (Brock, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Black Twitter's trending topics bring attention to "instances of violence, discrimination, or harassment" (Speight & Langford & Speight, 2015, p. 87), which eventually contributes to news media beginning to cover those topics. In light of these three elements and the unique practices of Black Twitter users, Brock (2013) argues, researchers can view Twitter as an understudied public, which he defines as "a community constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike" (p. 530).

#### *#BLACKLIVESMATTER*

In light of the notion that Black Twitter is an understudied public, I next discuss #BLACKLIVESMATTER as an extension of this public, a public that I demonstrate to be a discursive structure. Garza, Tometi, Cullors, and other activists are attempting to counter mainstream news discourse by affirming that Black lives matter. April Tometi, one of the creators of the Black Lives Matter movement, said that it "was created out of a profound sense of Black love" (Bailey & Leonard, 2015, p. 70), which Bailey and Leonard (2015) argued makes it a "political intervention" (p. 70) in the racist system the news media embody. The hashtag #BLACKLIVESMATTER makes the world "more receptive to [Blackness]" (Langford & Speight, 2015, p. 87) by bringing the public's attention to the brutal institutional racism and discrimination Black Americans experience.

Black Lives Matter organizers and supporters use social media to garner the public's

attention. Social media's ability to frame and shape "the immediate present" (Bailey & Leonard, 2015, p. 68) has been imperative to the movement's visibility and growth. The Black Lives Matter movement not only focuses on saving Black lives, but challenges derogatory stereotypes to protect "Black life in a society conditioned to only see Black death" (p. 75). Moreover, the movement's supporters' use of Twitter creates a "discursive intervention" (p. 76) that challenges hegemonic news narratives that equate Blackness with criminality, and in so doing confronts news media's devaluation of Black life. Black Lives Matter's use of Twitter deemphasizes pejorative stereotypes about Black people while emphasizing the significance of Black lives, replacing "concrete classifications" (Speight & Langford, 2015, p. 86) with new "broad classifications" (p. 86). Langford and Speight argued that this discursive intervention creates a new space in which Black people can challenge negative stereotypes and redefine themselves as more than just their bodies. This new space is what I define as a discursive structure, and I will now demonstrate that the local Black Lives Matter chapters' use of Twitter constitutes a discursive structure that challenges the Black criminality stereotype.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

In this paper, I pursue the following research question: Do the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure, and if so, does it counter the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in the mainstream media? The main purpose of this research question is to ask how the chapters use Twitter to challenge stereotypical representations of Black people, and how, by doing so, Black Lives Matter activists and supporters create a counterdiscourse to mainstream media narratives.

#### *Significance of the Sample*

In this study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy to explore the Black Lives Matters organizers' Twitter usage. I made "informed judgments" (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011, p.110) in obtaining the sample for this study and chose units of analysis that would be crucial to understanding how the local Black Lives Matter organizers represented themselves. I obtained my sample by studying messages on the social networking site Twitter. The pervasiveness of social media in American society suggests the sample I obtained from Twitter is both socially and culturally meaningful.

Whereas Shirazi (2013) analyzed activists' use of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, I made a departure and obtained my sample from Twitter exclusively and focused my analysis on the Black Lives Matter organizers' discourse on the site. My sample from Twitter is significant because Black people have historically embraced this platform more than other groups. Brock (2012) maintained that Twitter constitutes a Black "social public" (p. 545) in which Black people engage in a discourse specific to the Twitter medium. While the 2015 demographics of Twitter

users were more balanced, a larger proportion of Black people use the platform than Whites or Hispanics (Duggan et al., 2015). The demographics of the site are significant to this study because they could influence the way the social network represents Black people. Twitter provides a possible discursive structure in which people freely communicate and interact with one another and represent their varying cultures and interests. Furthermore, I analyzed Twitter because the Black Lives Matter movement gained its momentum on the site.

I examined tweets appearing on the Black Lives Matter's Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Chicago chapters' Twitter accounts throughout the month of December 2015. I analyzed messages from this period because the organizers of the 2015 Black Xmas protests promoted and organized the protests on Twitter during this period. Black Lives Matter activists organized protests throughout the country on December 23, 2015, to interrupt the commercial activity associated with the Christmas holiday. A press release from the Minneapolis, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and San Francisco Bay Area Black Lives Matter chapters stated the purpose of the demonstrations:

Black Xmas is here, and there will be no business as usual until we get accountability for our dead, and justice for the living. Instead of buying gifts to fuel this system, Black Xmas is a day of action to reject the degradation of Black families and communities by police, politicians, and predatory companies, and declare our inherent worth. We will disrupt business as usual until city, state, and federal budgets stop funding Black death and start funding Black futures. ("Black Lives Matter Statement," 2015, para. 3)

On December 23, 2015, local Black Lives Matters chapters protested throughout the United States. In Los Angeles, Black Lives Matter activists shut down the 405 freeway and

California Highway Patrol officers arrested nine protesters. In Chicago, hundreds of protesters shut down Chicago's famous shopping district, the Magnificent Mile. In Minneapolis, protesters gathered at the Mall of America as a diversion while another group of protests shut down roads to two Minneapolis airports (Pearse, 2015). The protests garnered a great deal of media attention, and because of this I believe that December 2015 is a fitting time period to study the Black Lives Matter discourse on Twitter. Furthermore, by using a sample from this time, I show how Twitter constitutes a discursive structure in which activists represent themselves to their supporters and critics in times of acute media attention. Finally, the sample I obtained from this period is significant because understanding the chapters' use of Twitter during this time allows me to understand better how the movement's use of Twitter represents its supporters and their communities.

To better understand this representation, I focused my analysis on messages appearing on the Twitter accounts of the Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis chapters, because these were the most visible Black Lives Matter chapters during the 2015 Black Xmas protests. Moreover, these chapters have the most prominent Twitter presence, as measured by the numbers of tweets, followers, and photos and videos uploaded to the account (Table 1).

Table 1

*The Three Most Prominent Black Lives Matter Chapters as Determined by Twitter Presence*

	Chicago	Los Angeles	Minneapolis
Tweets	3,222	2,917	11,800
Following	698	293	317
Followers	4,405	7,413	19,700
Photos/Videos	458	155	420
Likes	980	1,808	2,566

*Note.* Figures as of May 27, 2016

I took a qualitative approach to analyzing these chapter's Twitter activities in December 2015. This allowed me to identify patterns and trends in the sources, subjects, and validity of the three chapters' Twitter activities. In addition to quantitative data, I incorporated qualitative components into my analysis of the sample. I took this approach in light of van Dijk's (1985a) argument that critical discourse analysis research should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative section of my research allowed me to categorize the tweets, and by doing so, to code in greater depth.

*Analytical Procedures*

I used van Dijk's (1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1991, 1995, 2000, 2001) approach to critical discourse analysis to understand how the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure that counters the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media. This approach enabled me to "[study] the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text

and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). Van Dijk (1995) defined critical discourse analysis as “a special approach to the study of talk and text, emerging from critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse, and communication” (p. 17). It is thus a critical method of understanding text and talk. Researchers take this approach to understanding “relations of power, dominance, and inequality and the ways these are reproduced or resisted by social group members through text and talk” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 18). I will do this by showing the complex discourse structures and strategies in relation to the contexts they occur in (van Dijk, 2000).

Moreover, critical discourse analysis is well suited to my study, because I aim to do more than count and measure a phenomenon. My study, as with critical discourse analysis, is aimed at showing how talk and text work together to create meaning, which affects power in society. I aim to understand language as a social practice, and my study is rooted in the critical theory tradition of relying on a priori reasoning, which is deductive reasoning independent of experience. Both critical discourse analysis and my own study are aimed not only at understanding discourse, but at using this understanding to influence the power imbalance in society and ultimately bring about change.

Furthermore, critical discourse research fits my study because it involves analyzing the way discourse relates to the context it occurs in and the way discourse replicates or challenges unequal representations in the mainstream news. Van Dijk (2000) used critical discourse analysis to understand the role the media play in the reproduction and resistance of racial inequality by deconstructing and analyzing quotations from and local meanings in Britain’s news media.

While critical discourse analysis has been used to understand mass media, limited social media research has made use of the approach. Nonetheless, it is suited to analyzing the various types of media appearing on social networking sites because social media contain elements both of traditional news media and of visual media, which enhance the messages on social media. This is significant because van Dijk (1995) argued that critical discourse analysis is befitting to the understanding of “other semiotic dimensions” (p. 18), such as photos, audio recordings, and other types of media. In light of van Dijk’s argument that critical discourse analysis is fitting for understanding both the texts and visual elements contained in social media, I maintain that the approach is suited to studying social media.

Moreover, Albert and Salam (2013) maintained that critical discourse analysis is a viable approach for scholars to use in the development of social media theory. The authors encouraged future researchers to use critical discourse analysis in their studies of social networking sites (Albert & Salam, 2013). Shirazi (2013) used critical discourse analysis to analyze social media messages and investigate the impact of social media on protests in the Islamic Middle East and North Africa. Shirazi’s method suggests that critical discourse analysis is suitable for understanding activists’ use of social media on social networking sites such as Twitter. This research builds upon Shirazi’s methodology and further demonstrates that critical discourse analysis is suitable for analyzing both mainstream online news and messages on Twitter.

Shirazi (2013) also used Habermas’s discourse theory to guide his critical discourse analysis of social media and movements in the Middle East and Africa by studying the validity of social media messages “to better understand the role of meaning as generated through the process of communication discourse and its impact on mobilizing social actions” (p. 35).



Lyytinen and Hirschheim (as cited in Shirazi, 2013) explained that Habermas's approach to analyzing discourse "tries to discover and evaluate arguments proposed for or against a message, regarding its clarity, truthfulness, correctness, and appropriateness" (p. 36). These four elements determine the validity of the arguments contained in a message and allowed Shirazi to identify any potential distortions in it. The validity of the message is important, according to Calhoun (cited in Shirazi, 2013), because validity "drives discourse forward in a cumulative fashion towards certitude" (p. 36) and in so doing creates a discursive structure that can bring about social change through the creation of meaning and knowledge. Understanding the tweets' validity allowed me to understand better emancipatory potential of discourse and learn how the activists' discourse aids in the construction of a discursive structure through the creation of meaning and knowledge.

#### *Units of Analysis*

To understand how the discourse on Twitter constitutes a discursive structure and whether the discourse within that structure challenges Black criminality stereotypes, I selected: (a) validity, (b) subjects, and (c) sources as the units of analysis for this study.

#### *Validity*

Validity is how well a tweet's comprehensibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity fulfill Habermas's criterion of communicative action. This criterion is pertinent to this study because a message's validity establishes the discourse's ability to aid the creation of meaning and knowledge while avoiding potential distortions. The validity of the discourse aids in the creation of a new discursive structure, which creates original meaning and knowledge about Black people. Furthermore, the new meaning and knowledge allow readers to understand Black

individuals in a different way and contradict mainstream news narratives. I determined the discourse's validity by using the following criteria, previously used by Shirazi (2013) in his study of social media and social movements in the Middle East and North Africa.

1. Comprehensibility: This deals with “the pragmatics of language in terms of syntax and symbolic representation” (Shirazi, 2013, p. 37). Moreover, compressibility deals with how “sufficiently intelligible” (p. 36) the discourse is.
2. Truth: The truth of an argument, as determined by the evidence activists use to support their tweets and other relevant information to support the truth claim.
3. Legitimacy: The interests of the person who is writing the message as well as of those who are omitted. Legitimacy also “addresses the norms and social context” (Shirazi, 2013, p. 37) of the discourse.
4. Sincerity: This is how the author's rhetoric promotes or undermines the reader's understanding and the consistency of the discourse.

### *Subjects*

A subject is a single concept that stands for a larger complex issue (van Dijk, 1991). I analyzed the subjects of the tweets to gain further understanding of the subjects on which the local Black Lives Matter activists' most frequently posted. By understanding what subjects the activists most often included in their discourse, I was able to see how the discourse represented Black people beyond the subject of Black crime. By identifying the number of subjects in the discourse, I demonstrated how the discourse of the Black Lives Matter Twitter accounts represents Black people in varying circumstances, and in doing so contradicts the Black criminality stereotype. I used Van Dijk's (1991) list of subjects, as it encompasses a wide range

of the topics news media present. Examples include politics, immigration, employment and unemployment, and education. I have included a full list of subjects in Appendix A.

### *Sources*

A source is the media type, organization, and author on which the information in the tweet is based. Identifying the sources allowed me to determine which sources Black Lives Matter activists used the most. Being referenced is a form of power, and those who are referenced have more power than those who are not. The source of information of a tweet also affects the subject matter of the tweet and its potential impact. Understanding the sources of the tweets allowed me to see what forms of media the activists use to spread their ideologies. By showing the sources of the information in the tweets, I demonstrate how the discourse includes sources that traditional news media omit and how the inclusion of these alternative sources and authors results in a novel representation of Black people that contradicts the Black criminality stereotype. Examples include journalist-activist Jasmyne Cannick, Minnesota Public Radio, community organizers, Black Lives Matter press releases, and alternative news sites such as telesurTV.

### *Data Collection*

I conducted a qualitative content analysis to evaluate how the discourse appearing on the three Twitter accounts created a counter discourse that challenged hegemonic media corporations' stereotypical representations of Black people. I collected my data from the accounts of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, Black Lives Matter Chicago, and Black Lives Matter Los Angeles from the month of December 2015, using Twitter's advanced search function. In this period, there were 113 tweets from Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, 63 from

Black Lives Matter Chicago, and 58 from Black Lives Matter Los Angeles. I included all 234 tweets in my analysis. I evaluated the tweets' text as well as the images and media contained in them. I also coded embedded videos and links to external media. After collecting the tweets, I imported the data into QDA Miner and Microsoft Word. After the computer coded the data, I exported the results to Microsoft Excel. Following the computer coding, I coded the text in Microsoft Word using Shirazi's (2013) validity claims to guide my coding.

### *Coding Process*

I used two different types of coding. First, I coded the tweets by validity, as determined by how well they fulfilled the criteria of comprehensibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity. I open-coded the tweets for validity using Shirazi's (2013) guiding questions, and used these criteria to identify potential distortions. A full list of the guiding questions appears in Appendix B.

Next, I coded for the tweets' subjects and sources using QDA Miner to establish frequencies. I used the software to code the subject of the tweets in accordance with van Dijk's (1991) list of subjects, as they are relevant to my analysis and encompass topics that appear frequently in current American media. I have included a full list of these subjects in Appendix A. I used the software to establish the frequencies of the most common subjects on the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter pages. I used the same software to code for the tweets' sources. I coded for the following sources: mainstream traditional online news sites (e.g., Minnesota Public Radio, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*), alternative online news sites (e.g., telesurTV), blogs (e.g., Estatley Blog), social media, press releases, and Black Lives Matter chapters. In addition, I looked at what particular author, corporation, or other entity was

the source of the material used by Black Lives Matter activists on Twitter. As with the subjects, I established frequencies for the information sources the Black Lives Matter organizers referenced most often.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

In this section, I present the results of my study in three parts. In the first section of my results I discuss the meaning-making process that occurs in the Black Lives Matter chapters' discourse. Using Satchel's (2016) definition of discursive structure, I provide a thick description of how the Black Lives Matter discourse creates meaning and knowledge. By doing so, I demonstrate that the Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure. Then I present my findings on the subjects and sources of this discursive structure and engage it with the literature on social movements. Using this literature, I show how the activists' inclusion of subjects and use of sources reframe the Black Lives Matter movement in a way that generates a new way of thinking about the movement and its supporters.

#### *Analysis of Data*

A discursive structure is a space in which institutions form a shared way of talking about things, which gives these things meaning and creates a way of knowing, and this knowledge is socially shared through the contextual map of mass media (Satchel, 2016). The Black Lives Matter chapters I included in my analysis create a discursive structure that generates shared meaning and knowledge among its participants. The chapters' Twitter pages are conceptual maps and are the mechanism through which Black Lives Matter activists and supporters display and share knowledge about the movement socially. In the analysis below, I decode the tweets using critical discourse analysis and a priori reasoning to understand how talk and text work together to create meaning and establish a discursive structure that upholds the criterion of validity I outline in my methodology. The discourse on the Black Lives Matter Twitter pages generates shared

meaning and a way of knowing among those most likely to engage in the discourse, primarily by using a shared language and figurative language. The use of hashtags further generates shared meaning and a way of knowing. Finally, Black Lives Matter activists use images and videos as conceptual maps to generate further knowledge and a way of understanding, which they share socially on Twitter via these visual media.

First, the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter chapters produce meaning and a way of knowing through the use of a simple, concise language that contemporary Black Americans can easily understand. This tweet, from BLMChicago (2015d), is a concise call to action: “Show up tonight at 6:30 at 53rd and King Drive, the site of Ronald Johnson’s killing. #NoJusticeNoPeace #Justice4Ronnieman #Alvarezgottago.” being concise, it contains enough detail for readers to understand where and when to meet to protest Ronald Johnson’s murder. The tweet only contains information about where to show up, and it evokes Johnson’s name and killing. This is sufficient to galvanize Black Lives Matter supporters. The author did not explain who Ronald Johnson is; instead she assumed that readers knew this and were familiar with the Chicago area. The use of hashtags also creates meaning and connection; the author used a hashtag of the recognizable protest chant: No justice, no peace. This familiar call for justice allows readers to associate Johnson’s death with other unjust killings of Black Americans. The tweet also contains “#Justice4Ronnieman,” which is the hashtag the Chicago Black Lives Matter chapter uses on all its tweets about Ronald Johnson. This hashtag uses a nickname for Johnson, which further suggests familiarity, connection, and relationship with Johnson, as well as the cause his death embodies. Last, “#Alvarezgottago” is another common hashtag in the Chicago Black Lives Matters chapter’s discourse. The author assumed, in using it, that readers knew who

State Attorney Anita Alvarez is, as they would be familiar with Johnson's killing and city politics. It thus functions as a concise representation of Black Lives Matter Chicago's demand for justice. These hashtags create a shared language and meaning, and the author framed the tweet using these hashtags as a call to action for supporters who were already familiar with the Chicago Black Lives Matter movement. The hashtags allow the Black Lives Matter activists to connect their tweets and demands in a simple, easily understood format.

The use of figurative language is another way this discourse generates shared meaning that the discourse's contemporary Black American audience can easily understand. The tweets in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure were written by Black authors for Black audiences using language and references they were likely to comprehend. The Black Lives Matter tweets contain metaphors and connotative words that, as the hashtags in the previous example, help readers understand and further the knowledge of those familiar with the cultural references to which the authors alluded. For example, #BlackLivesMatter-LA (2015c) shared the following tweet: "'We are no longer dying in, we are rising up.' @DocMellyMel Stand with us, and call on Sheriff Jim McDonnell to release #BlackXMas activists." This tweet contains connotative phrases such as rising up and stand with us. These words, in this context, transcend their literal meaning, and the author was evoking their figurative meaning as a call to action. The author did not literally mean for people to stand or rise up; the phrases represent the need for unified action to get BlackXMas protestors released. The tweet also contains "#BlackXmas," as a way to connect it to other tweets about the BlackXMas protests throughout the entire Black Lives Matter network. The use of Xmas instead of Christmas draws on the specific language of the national movement. Thus the language of the tweet generates a shared way of talking and creates



meaning not only for Los Angeles activists and supporters, but for activists throughout the entire Black Lives Matter movement's network. This allows the meaning and knowledge of the discursive structure to propagate a shared understanding among Black Lives Matter audiences on a national level.

A tweet from Black Lives MPLS (2015h) also contains figurative language in the form of metaphors: "Tear down Babylon, Black people the bomb! #BlackXmas #WeReadyWeComing." These metaphors allude to references familiar among Black audiences, such as the Bible and popular '90s slang. With Tear down Babylon, the author drew on the understanding of people familiar with Bible stories about the ancient city of Babylon. In the Bible, Babylon represented sin and pride. In this tweet, it also represents the sin and pride of America. By invoking this metaphor, the author bolstered the shared meaning it represents and encouraged audiences to confront American society's depravity. This is a call to action for the audience to bring about change. The author coupled this metaphor with phrase Black people the bomb!, which also functions as a metaphor. The author did not mean that Black people are a literal bomb, but is using '90s slang. Contemporary Black audiences interpret the phrase the bomb as meaning great or awesome. This phrase bolsters the social position of Black people and reinforces the author's cry to confront American sin and greed. Both metaphors promote understanding among Minneapolis Black Lives Matter supporters, and this understanding reinforces the author's call to action. Finally, #WeReadyWeComing also functions a rally cry, and while not grammatically correct, it invokes the vernacular of Black Americans.

The tweets in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure propagate meaning and knowledge by framing the immediate present in a manner easily understood by Black audiences.

All three Black Lives Matter chapters provided firsthand accounts, in real time, of the movement's demonstrations and other events it was involved in, such as the state attorney's press conference on Ronald Johnson's death. The Black Lives Matter Chicago Twitter page provided a play-by-play account of the press conference, and this allowed the chapter to prime and frame its discourse and shape the media representation of the immediate present. The following tweet from BLMChicago (2015e) provided details of the press conference: "States Attny assistant said the 911 calls help explain why Hernandez believed #Ronnieman had a gun. Again, this is irrelevant. He had no gun!" The author provided an indirect quotation from State Attorney Anita Alvarez's assistant. By not containing a direct quotation, the tweet could frame the remark to emphasize some details while omitting others. Moreover, the phrase at the end, "This is irrelevant. He had no gun," further allowed the author to frame the discourse by including information not presented by the state attorney's assistant. They referred to Ronald Johnson using "#Ronnieman" again, which creates a shared way of talking about this death. Furthermore, this hashtag continues to suggest familiarity with Johnson and helps readers connect this specific discourse with the overall discourse about Johnson.

In another tweet from the press conference, BLMChicago (2015f) said, "State's Attny says a mythical struggle occurred but of course is not captured on video. So we are supposed to just take them at their word." Again, the tweet provides an indirect quotation from the state attorney and then adds the additional information that the mythical struggle was not on the video of Johnson's death. The author framed the information provided by Alvarez by including other information she omitted and undermining the idea that a mythical struggle occurred. This reframing allowed the author to include new information and knowledge in the Black Lives

Matter discursive structure. The tweet also says, we are supposed to take them at their word, which underscores the distrust in the Black community toward police officers. The phrase highlights the irony that the Black audience is supposed to believe the police. This irony is most likely to be understood by Black audiences. It thus generates further shared meaning among the Black audience participating in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure.

The author employed further irony in another tweet, which says, “Anita Alvarez is now defining ‘reasonableness’ in the taking of Black life” (BLMChicago, 2015a). The use of the word ‘reasonableness’ with quotation marks around it suggests the absurdity of Alvarez’s statement. The quotations marks frame the word in a way that emphasizes it to suggest that what Alvarez described as reasonable was actually unreasonable. Black audiences understand the irony of the use of the word. In the minds of Black audiences, it is common knowledge that in no circumstances is it reasonable to take the lives of Black people, especially their own lives. This irony reinforces a shared way of speaking about Black lives and reinforces their collective value.

The discourse further frames the immediate present and the meaning it generates itself through conceptual maps of visual media and the tweets. The authors produced socially shared language and a way of knowing through the use of conceptual maps, which are illustrative tools that represent knowledge. The visual media the author included in the discursive structure allows the discourse to be used to represent and share knowledge socially. The visual media feature certain images and aspects of events while omitting others. This allows the discourse to represent further the immediate present.

In Figure 1, BLMChicago provided visual evidence of the protests, and through its use of a woman holding a simple sign, the chapter was able to frame the demonstration as peaceful.

Furthermore, the subject's being a White woman suggests unity and illustrates the support of White allies in a supposedly racist movement. The single subject is one among many supporters, which suggests a large group of people was participating in the movement and shares the supporters' demand for change in the Chicago city government.

*Figure 1. Black Lives Matter Chicago Protesters on Clark Street (BLMChicago, 2015i)*

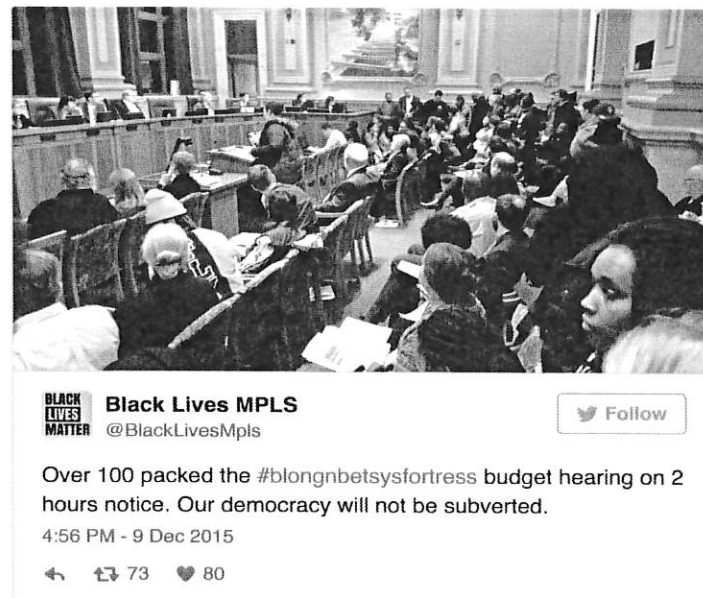


In another example of the framing of the immediate present shared via the conceptual map of visual media, BLM MPLS tweeted from a budget hearing in which the city council attempted to pass a budget that included \$605,000 to fortify the police department in the fourth precinct. One tweet from the meeting provided information about the budget hearing, saying, “over 100 packed the #blongnbetsysfortress budget hearing on 2 hours notice. Our democracy will not be subverted” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015d) This tweet is another call to action, and it includes a description of the number in attendance and uses the strong verb subverted, which suggests the activists in attendance would not let the government undermine the power of the

movement.

To illustrate further the strength of the activists, the tweet includes visual representation of the size of the group, shown in Figure 2, which further reinforces the force of the activists by representing them as a large group with a significant physical presence. Further demonstrating how the movement used visual images to frame the immediate present, the Los Angeles chapter live-streamed its Black Xmas protests at the Grove. These streams allowed audiences to watch the protests live and unedited, which helped them avoid potential distortion of the videos. By including visual media in their tweets, the Black Lives Matter chapters were able to share discourse meaning and knowledge and generate a shared way of knowing about the movement that is distinct from mainstream news discourses.

*Figure 2. 4<sup>th</sup> Precinct Budget Hearing (Black Lives MPLS, 2015d).*



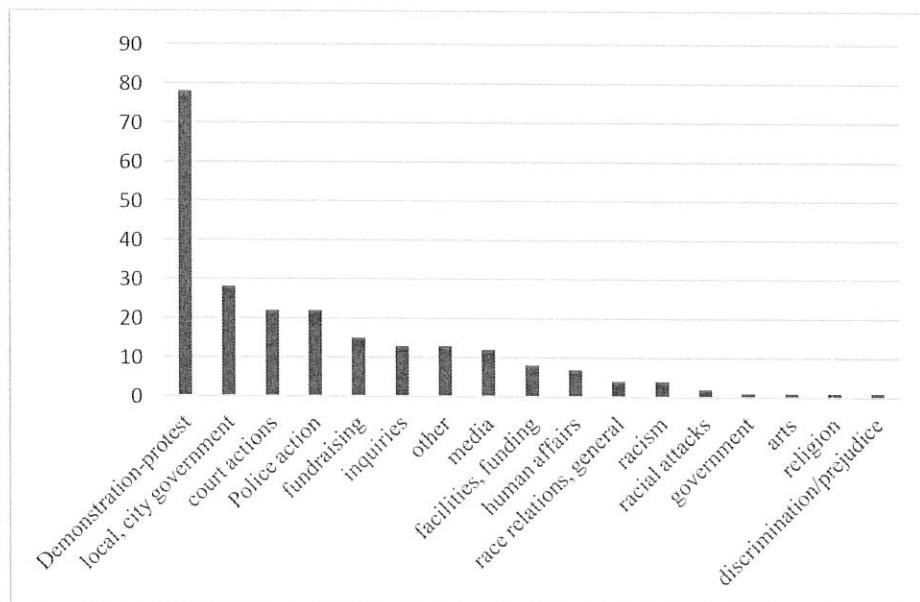
### *Subjects*

I discussed how the Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter

chapters' discourse constitutes a discursive structure. In this section I discuss the subjects and sources the authors included in the discourse and determine whether the discursive structure counters the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media discourse. I do this by comparing the authors' inclusion of certain sources and subjects as ways to create the opportunity for discursive change.

A wide range of subjects appeared in the Black Lives Matter Twitter discursive structure in December 2015. Figure 3 represents these subjects and how often they appeared. The authors' inclusion of these subjects let them use the discursive structure to reframe social issues through the hashtag activism, and let activists engage in self-representation of the movement.

*Figure 3. Number of Tweets Arranged by Subject.*



Demonstrations and protests are the subject of 78 of the tweets. The inclusion of this subject allows the authors to represent Black Lives Matter demonstrations without the influence of the mainstream media discourse. A representative tweet from Black Lives MPLS (2015a)

read, “Protestors led by clergy have taken over city hall to demand an end to the #taleof2cities and #justice4jamar.” Toft (2014) argued that self-representation allows social movements to reframe issues. Furthermore, he maintained it is an influential way to counter pejorative stereotyping. Black Lives Minneapolis represented itself in this tweet and others in the discourse, and framed the demonstration in a manner that might refute the mainstream media discourse.

Another demonstration tweet read, “Reminder: We are on high alert for a raid on #4thPrecinctShutDown by @MayorHodges. Make sure to text @blacklives to 23559 for raid alerts” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015b). Tweets such as this provide descriptions and firsthand accounts of the demonstration in which Black Lives Matter supporters protested the fatal police shooting of Jamal Clark. The tweet includes the hashtag “#4thPrecinctShutDown,” which is an instance of hashtag activism (Clark, 2016). Clark argued that hashtag activism is a form of discursive activism that promotes collective activism, and she maintained that this type of activism creates discursive spaces that have the potential to enact social change (Clark, 2016). Moreover, the tweet links to Mayor Hodges’s Twitter page, allowing the discourse to transcend potentially the Black Lives Matter movement’s discursive structure and participate in government discourse.

Court actions and police actions are the third and fourth most frequent subjects in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure, appearing 21 and 19 times respectively. The inclusion of these subjects allowed the Black Lives Matter activists to reframe the subjects in a way that avoids the distortion of mainstream media discourses. Tweets such as this from BLMChicago (2015j) highlight the absurdity of the courts’ decisions: “BREAKING: Judge acquits Chicago cop Glenn Evans for shoving a gun down a [suspects’] throat in spite of DNA evidence.” The

self-managed discursive space allows Black Lives Matter to highlight information and frame the story in a way that portrays the police officer in a criminal manner and the Black man as an innocent victim (Toft, 2014).

On the subject of police action, tweets such as “#LA activists are still locked up! Show support, call @LaCoSheriff (323)267-4800 & demand their release. #BlackXmas...” (#BlackLivesMatter-LA, 2015b) and “A young man was snatched from the crowd without warning. #BlackXmas” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015f) underscore and frame police officers’ tyrannical responses to the Black Xmas protests in Los Angeles and Minneapolis, in which police officers forcefully arrested peaceful protesters. The Black Lives Matter chapters’ framing of these events and use of words such as snatched and locked up highlight police officers’ oppressiveness. Furthermore, tweets such as this frame Black Lives Matter activists and supporters as victims and the police as their oppressors, perpetuating the us versus them binary.

### *Sources*

In this section, I provide the sources of tweets in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure in December 2015. The discourse uses sources that let it function as its own media source and operate as an agent of knowledge. Moreover, retweeting and quoting of other Black Lives Matter activists allows the discourse to link personal action frames and engage in collective discursive activism. Table 3 shows the media sources used in the discourse and how often the tweets from each chapter cited them in December 2015.



Table 2

*Sources of Tweets in December 2015*

	# of Tweets
BLM Chapters	183
Social Media	23
Mainstream News	18
Alternative News	7
Blogs	2
Press Release/Press Conference	1

Table 2 indicates that Black Lives Matter chapters are the main information source. The tweets rarely reference outside sources: Black Lives Matter is the information source in 182 of the 234 tweets I analyzed.

Tweets such as “Watching Anita Alvarez lie about #Ronnieman. A [Department of Justice] investigation means nothing if killer cops continue to go free. #Justice4Ronnieman” provide firsthand accounts of demonstrations, city council hearings, and legal matters affecting the Black Lives Matter movement (BLMChicago, 2015g). The chapters’ Twitter pages functioned as a principal source of information for people who wanted to know about the movement in December 2015. Moreover, this allowed the chapters to function as agents of knowledge and their discourse to frame the news about the movement (Gabriel, 2016; Toft, 2014). These tweets let activists share their daily experiences participating in the movement.

Further allowing the activists to share their points of reference, some tweets provide firsthand accounts of the chapters’ actions, as in this: “Dec 23rd, 1 pm, we will return to the Mall of America unless we get #Justice4Jamar. Join us” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015h). Others function as sources of information from other Black Lives Matter supporters, such as this one: “Our

community needs resources not police” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015c) from community organizer Rod Adams of Minneapolis Neighborhoods Organizing for Change. The chapters also quote people affected by police brutality, such as Dorothy Holmes, Ronald Johnson’s mother. One tweet reads, “Dorothy says that she wants the case re-opened and wants Hernandez charged with murder” (BLMChicago, 2015b). The discourse includes information from opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement but does not contain direction quotations. This way, activists could omit details and frame their opponents in a way that reinforces the ideology and point of view of the movement.

The Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Chicago chapters reference social media accounts second-most. Of the December 2015 tweets, 26 referenced outside social media accounts through Twitter’s retweet function. The tweets in this study referenced social media accounts of Black individuals who were closely involved with the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, the Los Angeles chapter frequently retweeted the personal account of Dr. Melina Abdullah, a Black Lives Matter Los Angeles organizer and professor and chair of pan-African studies at California State University, Los Angeles. These retweets include, “We’re dreaming of & working for a #BlackXmas! In the names of #EzellFord #RedelJones #BrotherAfrica #KendrecMcDade #MeaganHockaday” (Abdullah, 2015a) and “These fools really tried to block our ability to raise funds! But our CrowdRise is back up! Please contribute” (Abdullah, 2015b). In this tweets, Abdullah frames the Black Xmas protests and the fundraising efforts of the movement by using hashtags, which Clark (2016) maintained is a form of activism in its own right. These tweets support Black Lives Matter’s ideology by using hashtag activism to demand justice for Black individuals killed by the police, and make a call to action to support the movement finically.

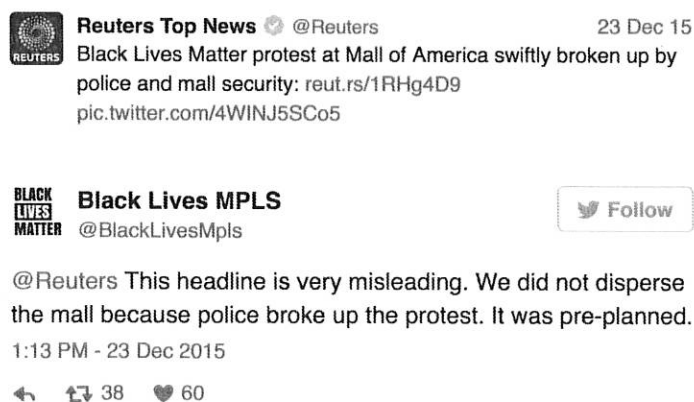
Furthermore, the use of hashtags that evoke the names of Black people killed by the police is a form of discourse activism, which according to Clark (2016) can trigger social change by linking personal action frames together. Reference to the Twitter discourses of other Black Lives Matter supporters and chapters, and the use of hashtag activism, contribute to the creation of a collective discourse, which Clark maintained could cause a shift in mainstream news discourses.

The Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis Twitter accounts occasionally reference mainstream news media and alternative media. Surprisingly, in this period they referenced mainstream media 18 times and alternative media only seven times. When the tweets reference mainstream media sources such as the *Star Tribune*, Fox 9 News, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, they use the sources in a way that provides further insight into news affecting the Black Lives Matter movement: “Take note, trolls. | Man Fired After Posting Racist Comment [to] BLM Facebook « CBS Minnesota <https://t.co/o8xiUh3Wi0> #BlackXmas” (Black Lives MPLS, 2015i). In this tweet, Black Lives MPLS cites CBS to bring attention to the possible negative consequences of attacking the Black Lives Matter Minneapolis chapter. By including news from some mainstream stories and omitting others, the activists frame news about the Black Lives Matter movement. They use both mainstream and alternative news in a way that includes additional details of Black Lives Matter news, as here: “Johnson’s mom Dorothy Holmes is now speaking. Watch live: <https://t.co/pFQxTRukvG>” (BLMChicago, 2015c). In this tweet, BLMChicago provides a link to CBS 7 News, where Dorothy Holmes speaks about her son Ronald Johnson. Similarly, #BlackLivesMatter-LA reposted an article from journalist Jasmyne Cannick that discussed the L.A. Police Union’s plan to raise money for a police officer accused of assault. The content of the article and its placement within the tweet, which says, “We

will not forget #AlesiaThomas” (#BlackLivesMatter-LA, 2015a) frames #BlackLivesMatter-LA’s message and adds emphasis.

In several tweets, the chapters responded to mainstream news articles, and in some instances, they corrected information in those articles. In the tweet in Figure 4, Black Lives MPLS corrected Reuters coverage and provided more accurate information about the protest. In this and other tweets where chapters corrected news coverage, they reframed information about the movement. This self-representation provided mainstream news journalists with a new framework to use when reporting on the Black Lives Matter movement. It thus allowed the activists to function potentially as agents of knowledge, by becoming as an information source for mainstream news media. This could result in more accurate representation of the movement and its supporters in mainstream media discourses (Molaei, 2015).

*Figure 4. Black Lives Matter Minneapolis Corrects Reuters Black XMas Coverage (Black Lives MPLS, 2015g)*



## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice

In this chapter, I discuss my results and their implications for research and practice, outline the limitations of my study, and provide suggestions for future research. In this study, I pursue the following research question: Do the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure, and if so does it counter the Black criminality stereotypes prevalent in mainstream media? The data indicate that the discourse on these chapters' Twitter pages does establish a discursive structure, and through the authors' inclusion of varying subjects and their functioning as their own primary information source, these chapters create the potential for their discourse to destabilize hegemonic news discourses that perpetuate the Black criminality stereotype, and create the opportunity for social change. I discuss how I came to this conclusion below.

#### *Discussion of Findings*

The Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter chapters' Twitter pages constitute a discursive structure because their discourse forms a shared way of talking about the movement and its supporters. This shared way of talking generates new meaning and creates a way new way of knowing (Satchel, 2016). As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Black Lives Matter activists did this by using a simple, concise language that those who were mostly likely to participate the discourse could easily understand. The discourse was written by Black authors for Black audiences. The authors used language that a contemporary Black audience would be likely to understand, and through this use of language they created a shared way of talking about the movement.

Moreover, to propagate shared knowledge among their audience they created a shared way of talking about the movement that generates knowledge through the use of metaphors, hashtags, irony, and other figurative language. The use of hashtags allowed the activists to be concise, and at the same time to use key phrases that represented the movement as a whole and promoted familiarity with the issues the movement addressed. The tweets did not contain unnecessary details, but instead used metaphors that Black audiences would understand. This shared way of talking about the movement generated knowledge and functioned as a call to arms for the audience.

Furthermore, by using shared knowledge and a shared way of talking about the movement, the discourse's authors framed the immediate present by tweeting in real time about Black Lives Matter events and demonstrations. In these tweets, they employed irony, which highlighted the absurdity of the injustice the movement is trying to combat. The authors used figurative language to frame the immediate present, which further generated shared meaning. The Black Lives Matter activists shared this meaning through tweets, which function as conceptual maps, as they are a way to illustrate knowledge. The activists further illustrated knowledge through the use of visual media such as photographs and videos. These conceptual maps allowed the chapters to provide visual representation of the meaning of the discursive structure.

The discourse is valid because it generated shared meaning and a way of talking about Black lives, resulting in the creation of knowledge that Black Lives Matter activists shared through the conceptual map of Twitter. My results suggest that the tweets are comprehensible, truthful, legitimate, and sincere, and they create a discourse that aids in the production of

knowledge of Black Americans. In regard to comprehensibility, the discourse allowed readers to understand the tweets but did not burden them with unnecessary details. The chapters used images and videos to share the discourse truthfully. This allowed the discourse to generate and share meaning socially. By framing the immediate in a way that emphasizes the legitimacy of Black people and the movement, the chapters used the discursive structure to offer a unique shared way of knowing and speaking about Black Lives in this historic moment. Finally, that the discourse is sincere, as with its comprehensibility, further generates shared understanding and knowledge among its audiences. Unlike mainstream news discourses, the tweets in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure represent Black people through the use a shared style of language that is specific to Black audiences.

### *Subjects and Sources*

In this section, I discuss the subjects and sources the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis chapters included in the discursive structure. I also discuss how the activists' inclusion of these subjects and sources creates a discursive opportunity that might challenge mainstream news discourses that reinforce the Black criminality stereotype. First, I discuss the subjects of the discourse. Demonstrations and protests were the subject of 78 tweets. Through the inclusion of media that show the protestors as peaceful and demanding the end of unnecessary violence, the discourse framed individuals as protesting in a positive, noncriminal manner. The people demonstrating were mostly Black, and the media and textual descriptions painted them as individuals fighting for equality, not as dangerous criminals. According to Clark (2016), this reframing allowed the discourse to offer "new definitional claims" (p. 797) that could positively affect mainstream news discourses and function as a point of reference for future news.

Moreover, the tweets on the subject of court action and police action framed judges and police officers as the opposition to these Black Lives Matter chapters' quest for justice. The tweets included details of specific incidents in which the police unfairly targeted Black Lives Matter activists and supporters. These tweets reinforced the us versus them binary but reframed Black people as the victims and the courts and police as the oppressors. Through the inclusion of these subjects and the way they were framed, the chapters represented Black people as good and those who opposed the movement as bad. This challenged mainstream news discourses and allowed the discourse to oppose the dominant representations of crime and justice, which Gabriel (2016) argued is an influential way to counter negative stereotypes reinforced by mainstream media.

Regarding the discursive structure's sources, the Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles chapters seldom used outside news media articles except to reinforce their ideologies, and in doing so these three chapter's organizers took responsibility for their own media representation. By offering firsthand accounts and functioning as their own primary information source, these chapters countered mainstream news narratives through the creation of their own narratives within their discursive structure. In this structure, Black people represent themselves and are in control of the flow of information. Gabriel (2016) argued that self-representation such as this is instrumental in countering pejorative mainstream news stereotyping.

The tweets in this study cited social media accounts of Black individuals who were very involved with the Black Lives Matter movement, further reinforcing the ideology of Black Lives Matter. By primarily referencing themselves and their supporters, the chapters were able to frame their stories in a positive, self-affirming way that challenges the Black criminality



stereotype. Moreover, this allows the activists to link personal actions frames and include their supporters' discourse in the Black Lives Matter discursive structure. Surprisingly, the chapters referenced mainstream media more than alternative media. However, they primarily did so to correct and comment on mainstream media coverage. In this way, the three chapters were able to reframe the news and become agents of knowledge by working as a source for mainstream news, which could also affect the agenda of mainstream news (Molaei, 2015). This could allow the discourse to influence mainstream news discourses, and potentially modify hegemonic media constructions by offering a counter frame that contains new information and definitions that would suggest that there are numerous ways of seeing the world (Lievrouw, 2011).

The Black Lives Matter chapters' use of these sources is significant because by functioning as the principal source of information about the movement, they were able to frame and shape the immediate present and act as their own news source, a source that frames Black people as innocent victims instead of dangerous criminals (Bailey & Leonard, 2015). The chapters' use of Twitter supports Bailey and Leonard's (2015) argument that the Black Lives Matter movement's supporters' use of Twitter creates space for a "discursive intervention" (p. 76) that challenges and circumvents hegemonic news narratives that equate Blackness with criminality. Moreover, the Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles Black Lives Matter chapters' ability to function as a discursive structure, one that also operates as a new source, allows the chapters to define their own images, engage in a horizontal deliberative process, and interrupt traditional news media's historical function as gatekeepers between the public and social movements (Owens & Palmer, 2003).

Furthermore, the discursive structure's ability to allow alternative ideologies to circulate

enhances the “emancipatory potential” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68) of Black Lives Matter’s discursive structure. Fraser’s argument that the Internet has disrupted the traditional flow of information supports my argument. Social media allow activists to control the flow of information and represent themselves in a way that contradicts mainstream news discourses and creates the opportunity for social change. Moreover, Owens and Palmer’s (2003) argument that social networking sites allow social movements to define their own images also supports my findings.

### *Significance of Findings*

The findings of this study are significant for a number of reasons. The first is that my study expands upon the body of research, which suggests that activists’ use of social media has a potential for a positive impact on social movements. This study fills a gap in the literature highlighted by Comunello and Anzera (2012), who argued that there is a need for additional research to clarify the impact of social networking sites on social movements. Moreover, Langford and Speight (2015) contended that there is a need for studies that detail the way social movements can challenge derogatory stereotypes of Black individuals, such as the Black criminality stereotype. This study expands the limited body of research on the Black Lives Matter movement, and more specifically, the way the movement uses social media to create the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and alter the systematic power imbalance in American society.

Brock (2012) argued that Black Twitter is an understudied public. This study investigates a particular public within Black Twitter and expands on Brock’s argument: understanding the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter Twitter pages as a discursive structure through which the chapters develop a shared way of talking about the movement and

produce and socially share knowledge (Brock, 2012; Satchel, 2016). Further highlighting the significance of my study is the dangerous effect of priming, othering, and stereotyping. By showing how these Black Lives Matter chapters are a discursive structure that could influence mainstream news discourses and counter the Black criminality stereotype, this study offers a new way of understanding the potential influence of alternative discursive structures and the impact of social movements. I hope my study makes people rethink how stereotyping functions and question how news media represents Black people and other nondominant ethnic groups.

Using a ground-up process of reasoning, I conclude the discourse as well as the discursive structure are valid. I determined this by considering how well a tweet's comprehensibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity fulfill Habermas's criterion of communicative action. The validity of the Black Lives Matter discourse creates original meaning and knowledge about Black people. As I demonstrated, the tweets were comprehensible, by using a shared language, and are intelligible by contemporary, Black audiences. The discourse is truthful, as the activists used photos and news articles to provide evidence for their arguments. Moreover, the discourse was legitimate and sincere, as it represented the interests of Black Lives Matter activists and supporters and used figurate language that promotes the reader's understanding and the consistency of the discourse.

### *Limitations*

The most notable limitation of this study is that little previous research uses critical discourse analysis on Twitter or other social media networks, but I expand critical discourse analysis to include the study of social media to understand better how discourse on social networking sites such as Twitter constitute a discursive structure that can create the opportunity

for discursive change. I used Shirazi's (2013) method to increase my study's validity and reliability despite my unique approach to the critical discourse analysis of social media. Another limitation is that I was unable to view the Los Angeles Ustream Live protests videos, but I overcame this limitation by focusing instead on textual descriptions and the tweets' photos. The limited time period I included in my analysis is another limitation, as is that I only coded text and media that appeared on the Los Angeles, Chicago, and Minneapolis Black Lives Matter Twitter accounts, but this allowed my study to have greater focus and acuity and allowed my findings to speak to a pivotal time for the movement. Finally, I was unable to compare the Black Lives Matter discourse to specific mainstream news discourses, and because of this I was unable to determine the definite impact of the Black Lives Matter discursive structure on mainstream news discourses.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Future research should extend beyond the limitations I identify. Subsequent studies should include more Black Lives Matter chapters, and other social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Future studies should also examine how the Black Lives Matter discursive structure specifically challenges the Black criminality stereotype and other pejorative stereotypes. Researchers should also explore longer time frames to draw more extensive conclusions about how the discursive structure functions, and could perform critical discourse analyses on mainstream news discursive structures as well as the Black Lives Matter discursive structure. This will allow researchers to understand how the Black Lives Matter discursive structure challenges specific stereotypical representations and determine what impact, if any, the Black Lives Matter discursive structure has on mainstream news discourses. Last,

subsequent studies should explore specific strategies the Black Lives Matter movement chapters can develop and employ to influence mainstream news discursive structures in order to challenge stereotypical representations of Black people.

### *Conclusion*

Black lives matter. The Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Chicago chapters' use of Twitter challenges stereotypical representations of Black people. By doing so, the movement can help people think about Black people in a new way. The Black Lives Matter movement's usage of Twitter challenges the status quo and calls for a change in the way White Americans perceive and treat Black people. By creating a discursive structure that offers a novel representation of Black people, the movement functions as a counterhegemonic force and creates counter frames that could challenge media heterogeneity.

It is possible that if we lived in a country where the media did not perpetuate the idea that Black men are dangerous criminals, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Ronald Johnson, and Freddie Brown would still be alive. This study matters because Black lives matter. As long as we live in a country where the police unfairly target Black men, we must fight to change the way the news media represent Black people. This fight is crucial because the devaluation of and assaults on Black lives in the United States are a genocide against Black people (Garza, 2014). In spite of this, the Black Lives Matter movement operates from a place of hope in a country where many have lost faith. This is not an issue limited to Black people, because as the great Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Many of our white brothers...have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom" (King, 1968). Garza (2014), a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, echoed

Dr. King's sentiment: "When black people get free, everybody gets free" (p. 3). All people have a vital stake in the progress of the Black Lives Matter movement. By creating a space to challenge stereotypical representations and affirm Black existence, the movement continues the prodigious legacy of Dr. King and moves us one step closer to realizing his dream of freedom for all people.

## Appendix A.

## List of Subjects

1. Government
2. Local, city government
3. Politics, parties
4. Immigration
5. Repatriation
6. Housing
7. Social affairs
8. Facilities, funding
9. Employment/unemployment
10. Education
11. Academic research
12. Crime
13. Drugs
14. Illegality
15. Health
16. Arts
17. Religion
18. Media
19. Inquiries
20. Race relations, general
21. Racism
22. Discrimination/prejudice
23. National Front
24. Racial attacks
25. Minority attacks
26. Demonstrations
27. Riots
28. Socio-cultural differences
29. Racism abroad
30. Policing
31. Court actions
32. Black sections
33. Honeyford
34. Affirmative action
35. Court cases on riots
36. Unions
37. Personal consequences of riots
38. Grant, Bernie
39. Sports

40. Human affairs  
41. Other  
(van Dijk, 1991)



## Appendix B

## Guiding Questions to Identify Validity Claims

## Shirazi's (2013) Guiding Questions to Identify Validity Claims

Comprehensibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the communication sufficiently intelligible?</li> <li>• Is the communication complete?</li> </ul>
Truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the level of detail too burdensome for the reader?</li> <li>• What is said about the citizen's demands?</li> <li>• Are the issues and options clearly defined?</li> <li>• What benefits have been identified and assessed?</li> <li>• What evidence has been provided to support these arguments?</li> <li>• Has the relevant information been communicated without distortion or omission?</li> </ul>
Legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there ideological claims which are unexamined?</li> <li>• Who is speaking, who is silent, what are their interests?</li> <li>• What is not said about the critics?</li> <li>• What is assumed or implied?</li> <li>• What is missing or suppressed in the discourse?</li> <li>• How are decisions legitimized?</li> <li>• Who is involved? Who is not involved?</li> <li>• What are the stakes and interests involved or excluded?</li> </ul>
Sincerity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do metaphors and connotative words promote or suppress understanding?</li> <li>• Do metaphors and connotative words create false assurances?</li> </ul>

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