

**Out of Bounds:
Exploring the response to professional athletes' support for BLM on Twitter**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to explore the ways that audiences respond to professional athletes using Twitter to support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Athletes and their relevant associations and leagues turned into powerful social media influencers of opinions and action that led to political and institutional turbulence and crisis. This research paper investigates how audiences choose to accept or reject the messages that professional athletes post on Twitter, and how this affects their support for the movement. For this end, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews to discover how audiences respond to professional athletes using Twitter to advocate for BLM. I expect to find out that most people will have a mixed opinion on this specific Twitter use, while others will have opposite or polarized opinions.

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Introduction

Sports play an important role on the court, the field or the ice, but also in the social and public battlefield. Professional athletes, players and competitors have a reach far beyond their respective sports, one that extends towards becoming more mobilized and influential in social and political movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Ince, et al., 2017). The #BLM movement is a social, cultural and political response to the systematic discrimination and violence based on race thrust upon members of the African-American community (Dixon, 2018), such as the recent unsettling murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Although it began back in 2013, the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter has grown and circulated worldwide in recent years, becoming a powerful tool for those who believe in the continuous support for this movement (Ruth, 2017).

Professional athletes possess the ability to connect with their fans on an emotional level, causing some audiences to consider them more credible and trustworthy than politicians (Frizzell, 2011). They have a personal influence on their fans from a political standpoint, serving as not only a national voice for justice, but an important link between the movement and heightened political engagement (Towler, et al., 2020). This personal influence speaks to the power one has to influence or sway the decision making of others. Along with social media's capacity to reshape interpersonal relationships, it is also capable of "strengthening historically and systemically disenfranchised communities" (Sujon & Dyer, 2020, p.1126), such as in this case, the African American community.

Social media platforms have lessened the barrier between celebrity and fan, and allowed the "participation of those who have been typically left out of public engagement by creating a horizontal civic space" (Hwang, 2015, p.480). However, not everyone responds to the social media messaging and influence the same way. While some fans are very supportive and

encouraging of those in positions of power and influence using their platforms to advocate for social movements, others believe that professional athletes should keep their personal beliefs separate from the media (Gill, 2016). The effective outcome of social movements on digital media platforms depends on the way followers respond and apprehend messages sent out by athletes.

The response of fans to professional athletes' support for #BLM on social media is impactful to the #BLM social movement. This is why the aim of this research project is to explore the way audiences respond to the Black Lives Matter messaging of professional athletes on Twitter by examining how followers decode and apprehend messages.

The theoretical framework used is built up of the Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory of communication (1980), and Katz and Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow Theory (1948). Using the Encoding-Decoding theory, this research focuses on discovering how audiences decode and respond to the messages about #BLM being shared with them through tweets posted by professional athletes. Based on one of the three possible readings - dominant, negotiated and oppositional - the study embraces the Two Step Flow Theory's idea of opinion leaders to study the consistency of a certain reading. Through this framework, professional athletes were considered as opinion leaders to discover which traits make them more, or less, influential.

The research questions were addressed by conducting fourteen semi-structured interviews that focus on audience's responses and opinions about professional athletes speaking about #BLM on their personal Twitter accounts. Thirteen questions were used to guide the interviews, and the initial findings were categorized into an analysis grid that focuses on three main topics: (1) type of reading, (2) impact of opinion leaders and (3), general thoughts on the phenomenon.

The main findings of this research highlighted that most audiences have a negotiated reading of the #BLM tweets posted by professional athletes, meaning they are moved by certain aspects of the message sharing, but question others. Knowing this aids in measuring the impact of sport and professional athletes on social media in changing views or stances on political movements. This also provides a lens on the reach of Twitter and to what extent this platform can contribute to or impact social injustices. Supporting findings demonstrated that audiences look to professional athletes as opinion leaders because of their expert knowledge and candid opinions, rather than precisely curated thoughts crafted by having professional communication backgrounds. These kinds of patterns contribute to audience research by investigating how certain audiences react to different kinds of opinion leaders, and in this case, professional athletes.

The general plan for this research study begins by introducing some background information about the phenomenon and issue at hand. This includes an overview of professional athletes' role in political activism and the diverse reactions it draws from different audiences. Following this, the problematization of the topic is set up and put into context during the literature review. This focuses mostly on the concepts of Social Media and the Black Lives Matter movement. The theoretical framework portion of the problematization chapter highlights the main two communication theories being applied to this research project: Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory of communication (1980), and Katz and Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow Theory (1948). The section on methodology summarizes the methods previously mentioned, justifies their use, and explains a few of their limitations. The findings and results analyze and explain the data collected during the interviews, while the discussion answers the main research question using the findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the results and reflects on the

practical implication of this study. This last chapter will also mention some limitations of the research study and suggest possible future directions for research on this topic.

Chapter 1: Examining the link between Black Lives Matter and social media

This chapter includes a selective literature review on social media and online activism, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Encoding-Decoding theory of communication, and the Two-Step Flow Theory. It helps to set up the theoretical framework of the paper in which these elements are further investigated. Finally, the research questions are presented.

Social media and online activism

Social media are a set of digital tools which impact the way that individuals, communities and organizations create, share and consume information from each other. They serve as varied spaces that connect people globally and enable richer and dynamic social links (Sujon & Dyer, 2020). Social media have become increasingly central to the dissemination of news and opinions, allowing its users to find information, build relationships, drive interest on a specific topic or simply, be entertained (Pradhan & Kumari, 2018).

Despite the lack of a widely accepted definition of the term (Weller, 2015), social media are described as platforms for the exchange of information and tools for action. Social media are interactive (Kent, 2010) and allow for an online exchange of ideas, thoughts and relationships (Scott, 2015), creating a space for ideas to turn into action. The convergence of shared similar ideas by multiple parties can inspire movement that is taken offline. They enable “online communication in which we move between the position of viewer and creator instantly and easily without having to know how to code [messages]” (Thornley, 2019), making social media accessible to anyone with a device and an internet connection. As a bottom line, social media are a participatory and community driven tool for multi-way interactions and multi-media content

(Duong, 2020). They are a vehicle for “a more inclusive public discourse around society’s most pressing issues” (Moscato, 2020, p.3), causing organizations to be very careful about how the platforms are used by their representatives (Jukes, 2019).

As a social media microblog, Twitter’s affordances not only permit the sharing of messages, but the leveraging of public interest in order to amplify the messages and enable action. This is done through retweeting, commenting on, responding to, and liking posts, by which members participate and distribute information and opinion, even without being a primary source of the information (Penny & Dadas, 2014). These retweets empower the diffusion of information and help spread it beyond the scope of the original tweet’s followers (Kwak, *et al.*, 2010). As a tool for action, hashtags also play a role in supporting this capability, by extending the reach to other people, building and deepening relationships, and mobilizing support behind a message (Guo & Saxton, 2014). As a means of grouping those with similar interests together, hashtags have a powerful role in turning social media content into real action offline. They connect individuals with similar beliefs and offer them a means of gathering and getting together in real life for events such as protests and strikes. The hashtags help those fighting for the same causes to find each other, giving them strength in numbers. Twitter holds a strong influence on the opinion of the public in certain domains such as social movements (for example MeToo, Never Again and Black Lives Matter), and in return, the public influences the outcomes and support of social movements.

Twitter has become a tool for activism, helping to accelerate, mobilize and coordinate collective action (Wilkins, 2019). It is consequently widely used in advocating for humanitarian causes, environmental problems, political and economic debates (Beirut, 2009).

Social media activism can be conceptualized as a way of increasing degrees of engagement to a cause by using the Internet and various social media platforms to gather and spread information, provide solidarity to a cause, assist protestors and influence others' opinions (Halupka, 2016). At the base, it can be perceived as “an essential first step in the mobilization of future action” (Foster, *et al.*, 2019, p.2). This benefits from its online environment by being able to “break through preconceived notions or agendas that might provide greater resistance in traditional media spaces” (Moscato, 2016, p.3). It creates a venue for user-generated content that helps to support a decentralized method of creating and disseminating ideas that change the way that media coverage discusses a certain theme or topic (Ince, *et al.*, 2017).

In contrast to the transparent benefits of social media activism, there are also some potential limitations, like for example *slacktivism*. Slacktivism is the idea that the simple posting, retweets and “likes” of social media activism is an “easy, symbolic online act”, instead of “tried and true forms of collective activism” (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016, p.1994). In fact, many participants of online activism “may not even want to make political or institutional changes, but rather have other motives for online participation, [such as the] search for attention or the feeling of fulfillment” (Kopacheva, 2021, p.77), something coined as the “feel-good” effect (Morozov, 2011). To overcome the bias of the potential slacktivism, the decoding of how one understands or reacts to a message helps measure the effectiveness of social media activism.

Another potential limitation of social media activism is that online forms of participation do not require a minimum level of commitment, political interest or political knowledge (Li & Marsh, 2008). This implies that those who get involved may not fact-check and may be susceptible to manipulation, false information or bandwagoning¹ (Sproule, 2001). This is why it

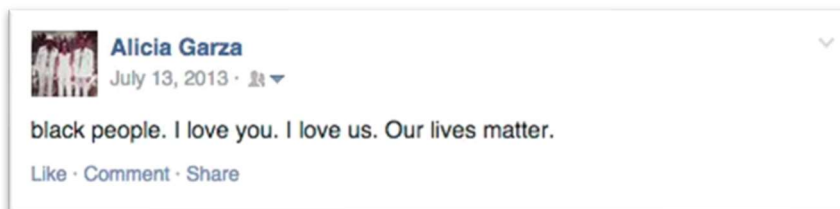
¹ Bandwagoning: to have people “follow the crowd”, to accept an idea or plan because “everybody’s doing it” (Sproule, 2001)

is important to decipher between simply following someone on Twitter, and actively supporting them. It is equally important to consider what the different levels of commitment or interest in a person or movement are, especially for a movement like Black Lives Matter.

Black Lives Matter movement

The #BLM movement is an American-based social activist organization that has the goal of stopping violence and injustice against African-American people. While the fight for racial equality goes back decades, this particular movement made its name back in 2013, in response to the release of George Zimmerman, a man who had been charged with murdering black teenager Trayvon Martin (“Herstory”, 2019). This being just one of many controversial legal rulings against the African American community in the United States of America (USA), a black woman named Alicia Garza spoke up on social media, writing an extended Facebook post reacting to the Zimmerman verdict, and ending with a message to all African-Americans that she loved them, and their lives mattered (Taylor, 2021). This message can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Alicia Garza's Facebook post



SOURCE: Robinson, W. (2016). 'We believe that all lives matter,' co-founder of Black Lives Matter tells F&M audience. Retrieved from https://www.pennlive.com/news/2016/03/we_believe_that_all_lives_matt.html

This is a message which has spread, been shared and reposted millions of times since, with the addition of the now popular hashtag, #Blacklivesmatter. According to a study by PC Magazine, “the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag had been used 47.8 million times on Twitter from May 26 to June 7, 2020 – just under 3.7 million times per day,” (Cohen, 2020). Since then, this

hashtag and movement have sped through social media and particularly Twitter, as a link to protests, calling for fairness for those of colour in several social structures, such as society, education, employment and the justice system (Ruth, 2017). It has become a response to racial subordination and inequity (Dixson, 2018), a tool for political stances, and a way of bringing people together to oppose the racial injustices. Although social media have played an important role in accelerating support for #BLM, activism in sports have been around for much longer.

Activism in sports

Before the advent of social media, black professional athletes like Pele and Muhammad Ali have paved the way for using traditional media to advocate for civil rights (Wulf, 2019). They spoke out, protested and stood for their beliefs. However, moving towards the 1980s and early 2000s, there was a shift away from prominent athletes taking public stances on political issues, due to a fear of social activism having a detrimental effect on their reputation, finances and career (Coombs, 2017). Despite some fans being hesitant about supporting athletes who make a public stance about social media, others' attitudes have shifted back and the voices of professional athletes on important issues such as racial discrimination came back louder than ever, thanks partially to social media.

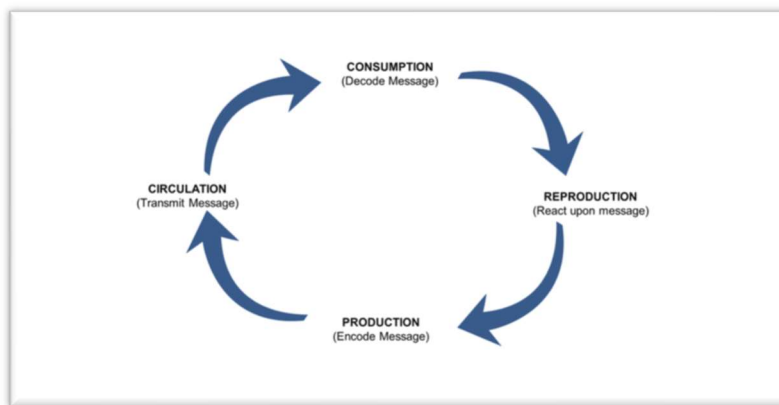
In the present days, activism in sports consists of social media posts about league strikes, public speeches and social demonstrations. Black athletes and other allies have spoken up and campaigned against the injustices on marginalized communities (Wilkins, 2019), and the online presence of the #BLM movement grew as more and more cases of injustice occurred (Inces *et al.*, 2017). While, for example, Lebron James and his public stances brought on overwhelming support and encouragement from fans, it also inspired backlash and hate. This was also seen in the response to Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem. Some sports fans insist that "athletes should not use their platform to share their beliefs" (Gill, 2016, p.401), or be

involved in social issues on company time. There is a strict insistence that the two identities of an athlete (that of a player and that of an activist) must be kept separate, and that their “views and attitudes [must] not transcend sports” (Gill, 2016, p.408). As there are several ways that audiences choose to react to the messaging of professional athletes concerning #BLM, it is important to consider how they receive and apprehend messages.

Encoding-Decoding Communication Theory

The ways that audiences receive and apprehend certain messages can affect the extent to which they approve, accept, and retain what is being said, before eventually acting offline. Audiences are not passive and inert sum of individuals: they receive, decode and interpret messages and signs differently (Greenberg & Salwen, 2008). Stuart Hall’s Encoding-Decoding theory of communication (1980), as depicted in Figure 2, states that the message that is being sent is “encoded” in a certain way, meaning the message is produced, constructed and framed by the meanings and ideas of the sender (Shaw, 2017).

Figure 2: Encoding-Decoding Theory (Hall, 1980)



SOURCE: Beyond the Right of Access: A Critique of the Legalist Approach to Dissemination of Climate Change Information in Kenya - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Four-Stages-of-Encoding-Decoding-Communication_fig1_340148715 [accessed 27 Aug, 2021]

On the other end, the same message is decoded by the receivers following one of three readings: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. The dominant reading emerges when the audience positively receives and approves the message with very few discrepancies from the initial intention of the sender. The oppositional reading occurs in situations when the audience rejects the message that was intended. A mix of both, the negotiated reading is when the audience accepts some elements of the message, and rejects others, based on how they decode it (Hall, 1980, pp.171-173.) Rejecting the message means that the audience does not agree or support what is being said. This rejection can sometimes be partial or temporary, and it can occur at different points during the reception process. For example, it is possible to reject a message when it is first received, and then have change one's mind once more facts or information are presented. In the same way, it is possible to also accept a message at the beginning, and then reject it once more context is discovered. In this sense, the acceptance or rejection of a shared message is fluid and changes based on what information is consumed, from whom, and by whom.

When the receiver decodes a message using a dominant reading, it is because they mostly support the aim or original intention of the sender. When they use an oppositional reading, it is because they instead do not fully agree with the message of the sender or with a particular statement or element of the message. These types of decoding are often not set in stone and are very susceptible to change for a few different factors such as mentioned above, the inclusion of new information. Some elements of a message may be accepted on a conditional basis, meaning they are only approved of if an additional component is present or included. The same works for the rejection of a message- some aspects may be disapproved on the basis of which other factors are considered.

These three types of readings can exist simultaneously for different receivers, because polysemic and composite meanings invoke the existence of a variety of interpretations instead of one single dominant one (Croteau & Hoynes, 2013). This leaves room for active audience members to create their own interpretations, since “the meanings of things [and message] are in us, not in the things [themselves]” (Costall & Richards, 2013, p.4). When the audience interprets messages as genuine, they might be more likely to support or agree with what is being said. It is even more likely that one message can have multiple meanings for audiences because they acquire their sense and become transformed thanks to their circulation (Straw, 2017). On social media, the message can also become reinforced by other discursive forms such as sharing, post visits, retweets, or the like, which add another layer to the meaning-making and interpretation process (Bødker, 2016), as well as the personal influence athletes might have on their fans.

When professional athletes have a strong, emotional bond with their followers, their influence can potentially affect the attitudes and beliefs of their fans (Melnick *et. al.*, 2002), as well as the way they interpret certain messages. The attachment that sports fans possess or develop for certain sport celebrities allows the athletes to become well positioned to influence and alter the way their fans think (Towler, 2020). The celebrity interaction and relationship that exists between the athletes and their fans holds a potential to mobilize these fans into taking action (Towler, 2020).

Specific social media framings could also have an impact on the possibility of a negotiated reading (Bødker, 2016), especially when considering that audiences are more likely to criticize and question information when they have personal grievances about a topic (“Deliberative Discourse of Controversial Social Issues on Social Media”, 2018). Social media framing is defined as the process of influencing the interpretation of a phenomenon by limiting

the different perceptions of it and focusing on one angle or view instead (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Stuart Hall (1980) stated that “the process of negotiation—either within encoding or decoding—are accentuated by new, problematic or troubling events, which breach the expectancies and run counter to 'common-sense constructs' and 'taken-for-granted' knowledge of social structures" (p.123), implying that the more a message is accompanied by an unfamiliar or problematic situation, the more likely audiences are to question or reject certain elements of it. As audiences are often hesitant, their responses can be sometimes difficult to grasp. The reading of the audience is also affected by a set of personal features such as opinions and ideas that shape personal influence. Therefore, the decoding process of the messages can be impacted by the status and relationship between the sender and receiver, in the way that well-respected athletes have a more open following with a willingness to listen and be openminded. Some athletes can possess substantive influences on their audiences, like for example, Lionel Messi, who was able to draw thousands of new fans to PSG, simply by signing on as a player. Athletes with this amount of influence on their audience can potentially be considered as opinion leaders, a term explained in the next section.

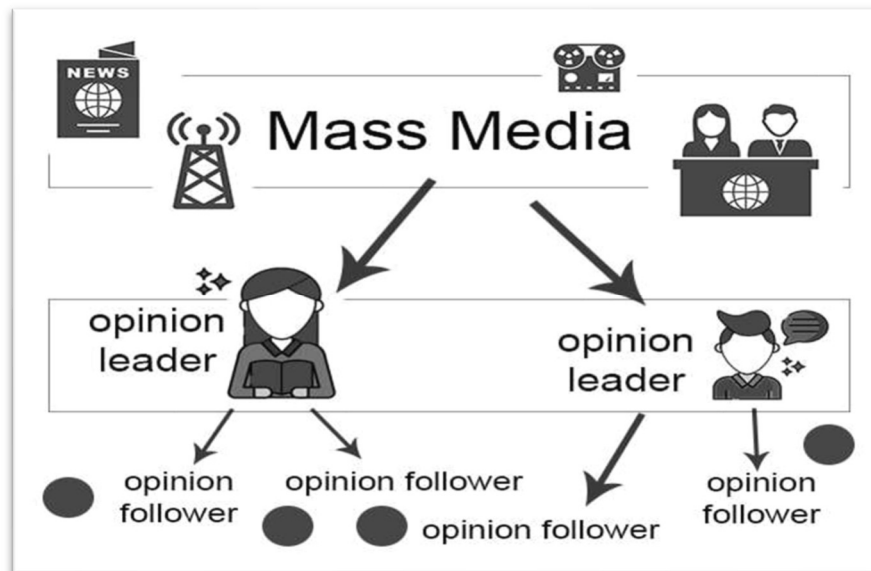
Two-Step Flow Theory and Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders, initially described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), are communicative, well-informed on specific issues and well-connected individuals within their social networks (Jungnickel, 2018). While they do not necessarily hold positions of power or prestige, they often do stand for certain values, and are recognized for their competence in a certain area of expertise (Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This is known as “expert power” (Shoham & Ruvio, 2008), a term used to refer to the proficiency and knowledge one has on a certain subject, and the ability to share this information with others. Those who are seen as opinion leaders often hold weight

and credibility in the information they share, and social recommendations can contribute to the level of trust that audiences have in an opinion leader (Turcotte, *et al.*, 2015).

The Two-Step Flow Theory, depicted in Figure 3, was first introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), and studies the way the influence flows from opinion leaders to other members of the community.

Figure 3: Two-Step Flow Theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) explained in a 2021 publication



SOURCE: “Two Step Flow Theory of Communication: Definition and Analysis.” (2021). Retrieved from <https://media-studies.com/two-step-flow/>

The opinion leader receives the messaging from the surrounding environment, such as media and other opinion leaders, and then spreads the information in their own proximate social networks (Lazarsfeld, *et al.*, 1948). In a 2018 study, researchers summarized opinion leaders as having three distinct traits: a special influence on others’ awareness opinions and behaviour surrounding an issue; the use of mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication; and a lack of professional background or training as communicators (Jungnickel, 2018). As these are three unique traits that define opinion leaders in a way that separates them from their celebrity

status, they were also chosen to guide the analytic framework of the methodology of this study, and will be explained later on.

Social media and the digital environment have shifted the role of the traditional Two-Step Flow Theory and opinion leaders in digital media (Walter & Brüggemann, 2020), and while several communication scholars have attempted to address this fact, their findings differ considerably, making it difficult to reach a consensus (Schaefer & Taddicken, 2015). Some suggest that the impact of new media on the Two-Step Flow Theory is limited, due to the fact that traditional news outlets can also effectively make use of new media platforms (Wu, *et al.*, 2011). However, other studies insist that “social media, under certain circumstances, provide users with the opportunity to become opinion leaders in the wider online debate” (Walter & Brüggemann, 2020, p.268), even without any prior involvement in traditional media. This solidifies the opportunity for professional athletes to potentially be perceived as powerful opinion leaders.

The shift towards the virtual environment has slightly changed the requirements for digital opinion leaders, since the change to the digital media environment creates new and sometimes easier opportunities for people to attempt to persuade or influence others in their social networks (Weeks, *et al.*, 2017). Under highly tense situations, a dominant or shared opinion of an online influencer can sometimes be enough to impact the reactions or attitudes of the receiver (Salcudean & Muresan, 2017). However, “these benefits only come if the [opinion leader] is personally involved in the network [or situation], without artificial messages written by campaign organizers” (Tasente, 2019, p.56).

One type of opinion leader with the ability to reach millions of fans is the professional athlete. They are well-known personalities who hold “opinions, causes and issues they care

about, but unlike many everyday people, their status and platform give them incredible influence in American culture” (Gill, 2016, p.400) and “an influence that can potentially affect the attitudes and beliefs of their fans” (Coombs, 2017, p.428). Their opinions and ideas feed sport and other domain activism that can be defined as “a complicated social, organizational, racial, systemic, and political endeavor that requires strategies beyond gestures, Tweets, and tributes on shoes” (Gill, 2016, p.409). This is why professional athletes are opinion leaders who must be both cautious and deliberate in the way they choose to speak out about sensitive or controversial topics.

In this study, an opinion leader is defined as a person who is well-informed on specific issues, well-connected within their social circles, and holds an expert power on certain topics, as traditionally described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). However, given the shift towards the virtual environment, there are a couple of other characteristics that must be taken into consideration for the context of this study: the personal firsthand experiences that make up the expert power of an athlete, and the ability they hold to inspire change and action in followers. Since social media are participatory, community-driven and give the average person the opportunity to express themselves (Duong, 2020), the notion that only those with social status have a platform to speak on, is removed. While the professional athletes in question do possess a social status, it is not the main factor indicative of why they may be perceived as opinion leaders, and this personal influence is no longer as central to the concept of opinion leadership. Instead, it comes down to what they know on the topic, how they present this information, and how their fans and followers choose to respond.

Despite not being experts in political or social issues such as BLM, professional athletes and other celebrities should still be considered as opinion leaders. This differs from issue to issue, but

as a general statement, if they stand for certain values and are recognized for their competence in a certain area of expertise (Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, 1955), they hold the right to speak about it publicly as well. One does not need formal training on an issue to understand the impacts of said issue. Instead, their background comes from being personally involved in the situation (Tasente, 2019) and holding personal opinions about these causes (Gill, 2016).

The influence of an opinion leader may impact the way audiences decode messages, as well as their support for the athlete's activism. While there are existing studies about professional athletes being active in the political sphere, we still know little about how the reception and decoding of tweets about #BLM by the fans affect their support for the athletes.

Research Questions

To fill this gap, our research paper aims to respond to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do audiences feel about professional athletes' Twitter activism about the Black Lives Matter movement?

RQ 2: Do they receive the overall messaging on this topic with a dominant, negotiated or oppositional reading?

RQ3: Which characteristics of an opinion leader do audiences view the athletes as having?

RQ4: How do the audiences feel about the possession of these characteristics by the professional athletes speaking about BLM?

These questions will be answered by using the Encoding-Decoding Theory as the theoretical framework, and the three characteristics of an opinion leader as the analytical framework.

Contribution of existing research to frameworks

The Encoding-Decoding communication theory provides a theoretical framework for the understanding of the topic of this research paper, and helps in establishing a link between how audiences receive the messages from the professional athletes and the actions they take because

of them. Investigating this theory from its three different readings verifies some measurable criteria for analyzing the responses of the audiences and takes into consideration some different framings, influences or noises that may impact how receivers choose to decode some messages. These are all necessary notions to flag when trying to best understand how people react to certain messages or ideas.

There are two additional factors that might have an influence on how the audience chooses to decode a certain message- the medium in which it is presented, and the personal characteristics of each audience member.

The medium can have an impact on how a message is decoded because it adds a layer to both the construction of the message by the sender, and the deconstruction by the receiver. This layer adds a new element of meaning making, as the form and method used to communicate information has a significant impact on the messages they deliver (McLuhan *et al.*, 1967).

As for the second factor, one's personal characteristics changes the way they receive a message, since their pre-conceived notions and personal experiences alter the ways they view the world. As depicted with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler *et al.*, 1926), audiences often consume media in relation to their cultural and social setting, as well as personal needs.

Although these are two examples of the many other theories that could be applied to this research study, we chose not to address them in order to stick with theories more pertinent to the research questions. This study is more interested in the different decoding types, and the responses that follow, rather than the reasons for why a participant decodes a certain way.

As for the analytical framework of this research, we looked at three different characteristics of opinion leaders as our grounds for evaluating professional athletes as opinion leaders: a special influence on others' awareness, opinions and behaviour surrounding an issue; the use of

mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication; and a lack of professional background or training as communicators (Jungnickel, 2018).

The special influence on others refers to the unique leadership qualities that opinion leaders often possess. This means that they have the ability to diffuse specific information or opinions in a way that gains the trust of their followers and changes the way they think or act.

In the case of this research study, the opinion leaders use a mediated form of interpersonal communication, which means that the communication is carried out with the use of an information communication technology, rather than face-to-face. The interpersonal element refers to the use of a platform that is not a standard one-on-one or small group chat, but rather speaks to a larger audience or group all at the same time. The mediated form of communication observed in this project is social media, or more specifically, Twitter.

Finally, the lack of professional background or experience in a communications role or career refers to the informal influence that opinion leaders have, separate from special organizations and institutions with corporate interests. Not being associated with possible conflicts of interest allows for a higher level of trust between leader and follower. This is why this study looks at professional athletes who use Twitter as their platform of choice when advocating about BLM. Twitter is a more informal communication medium than interviews or press releases, and while the more recognized athletes may receive media training, they are not formally educated as communications professionals with experience in journalism.

Chapter 2: Collecting audience opinion on #BLM tweets by professional athletes

For this research project, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data about how audiences respond to #BLM tweets by professional athletes. Fourteen interviews were conducted, and the findings were organized into an analysis grid that was created based on the

analytical and theoretical frameworks mentioned previously. Once organized, the grid was analyzed to summarize the repetition of different statements that aligned with a certain result, and some direct quotes pulled from the interviewees were explained in more detail.

Data Collection

In order to establish a comprehensive view of the topic, our qualitative study will rely on semi-structured interviews (Galletta, 2012). This is a method of interview that creates a situation in which a relatively free conversation occurs, based on some specific topics pre-determined by the researcher. It allows for participants to reflect and explain their own personal experiences and opinions related to the topic that is being discussed (Tjora, 2018). The nature of a semi-structured interview allows for participants to have part control of the tone and direction of the conversation, which helped in drawing out authentic and genuine opinions from the volunteers.

This method also allows participants to guide the conversation themselves with greater flexibility and latitude in interpreting messages and discussing ideas and perceptions. Additionally, since the research questions address audience response to the #BLM phenomenon, it was considered a more efficient way of answering those questions than by sampling audiences. Interviews are useful for extensively explaining a participant's experiences at both a factual and meaning-making level, allowing for a deeper understanding of how they perceive certain things and why they perceive them that way. Furthermore, one-on-one interviews allow for more flexibility in structure and direction than other methods, like for example a questionnaire or survey (Tjora, 2018).

The semi-structured interviews (Tjora, 2018) were made up of a series of questions (attached in Appendix 1) that were inspired by the themes pulled out of the literature review. These open-ended questions that sometimes require further inquiry (Galletta, 2012) provided an

effective way of studying a phenomenon that is open-ended and does not have a concrete right or wrong answer.

The semi-structured interviews began with questions about the participants' interest and following of athletes and the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, the questions shifted towards the professional athletes speaking about #BLM on Twitter. The conversation surrounded their response to this type of activism, whether or not they have been influenced by it, and whether or not they are in favour of this type of action. Finally, the last couple of questions brought into consideration the concept of an "opinion leader" and how they are perceived by the volunteers.

While there were 13 set questions for this interview, there were some follow-up questions that were asked in correlation with the direction that the conversation took. These open questions were adapted based on the previous responses of the participants. As thematic patterns emerged and were explored throughout the interviews, it became important to stay attentive to these patterns, without slanting the questioning in pursuit of confirming evidence (Galletta, 2012). Throughout the interview, some thoughts or opinions from the participants were repeated or reiterated in order to confirm that what was being said was properly understood and noted. While the interviews were audio-recorded, notes were also being taken throughout to keep track of big ideas and messages shared by the participants. The notes summarized their ideas and kept track of some verbatim opinions that were referred to during the analysis of the interviews. This log was useful in remembering the tone of the conversation and interviews, as well as specific quotes by the participants.

Upon completion of the fourteen interviews, the information that was shared by the participants was summarized and categorized into a pre-conceived analysis grid that focuses on three main topics: (1) type of reading, (2) trait of opinion leaders and (3), general thoughts on the

issue. Each possible reading or trait of an opinion leader had several statements written that lined up with its distinct characteristics, and by summarizing the beliefs of the participants into these statements, conclusions were made about which of the readings or traits were dominant. The statements in this grid (Appendix B) were created based off of the literature review, prior to the interviews taking place, and were checked off each time the participant's interview responses were applicable to one of these pre-conceived statements. Once the grid was completed, we kept track of the number of times a specific opinion or idea was shared by several of the participants. This serves as a preliminary basis for discovering which beliefs or opinions were most popularly shared across the different interview participants.

The notes and audio recordings of the interviews were looked at and listened to again, in order to pull out specific quotes and word-for-word ideas that were expressed verbally by the participants about the topics. This qualitative analysis provided a more contextual basis for the findings and helped explain the precise quotes and thoughts shared by the participants. This consisted of a systematic collection of the thematic patterns pulled from the data that then required a further interpretation of the results in the scope of the research questions. These ideas built up the supporting evidence for the findings considered in the discussion. Together, these two different methods of examining the data stemming from interviews provided a comprehensive perspective of how the participants in this study feel about professional athletes' use of Twitter for the #BLM movement.

Sampling criteria

The fourteen participants were selected using Convenience Sampling, which refers to employing a sample of those who are available at the time (Baxter *et al.*, 2015). Rather than selecting participants from the population at large, the participants are selected from a convenient subset of the population and as such, were limited to those who respect the following criteria:

- An interest in professional sports²
- An interest in current events/politics
- English-speaking
- Geographically located throughout Canada
- Twitter users who follow three or more athletes or sports accounts
- Age 18+

The criteria have been chosen for several reasons. The interests in professional sports and current events/politics are important to ensure that those being interviewed have prior interest about what is currently happening in terms of professional athletes and the Black Lives Matter movement. The participants were English speaking because most professional athletes post their social media messages in English, even if they are French speaking. The #BLM movement emerged in the USA, making the movement's first language English.

Using Convenience Sampling is not always the most effective technique, as it runs the risk of the collected information not being truly representative of the entire population (Baxter *et al.*, 2015). However, it was the most accessible one for this particular study, and still a method that strikes a balance between rigor and practicality. For the selection of participants, an online poster was created and circulated on social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn) to raise awareness of the study and search for interested parties. It was initially posted on all four platforms on my personal accounts on May 11, 2021 and recirculated on a weekly basis throughout the month of May. The private settings of my accounts unfortunately limited the reach of who was able to see the posts. Additionally, the poster was also printed out and

² To clarify this criterion, "an interest" refers to any general involvement or in either topic, meaning they follow professional athletes and have an opinion about them. There is no minimum level of interest, because this could limit the outreach of the collected data and possibly skew the results.

displayed at the University of Ottawa's Minto Complex and Lees Avenue Dome, where Geegees athletes frequent for training and practices.

The online posters were circulated over the course of one month, during which participants were selected on a first-come, first-serve basis. The participants either replied to the posting directly, or reached out via email. From there, the interviews were scheduled using Zoom. The recruitment period was restricted due to a lack of time and resources. This is also the reason why there were only 14 participants, instead of the desired 15. One volunteer had to withdraw from the interview due to a scheduling conflict, and there was not ample time to find a replacement.

The Convenience Sampling approach faced several limitations- the biggest one being that it caused the findings to be barely generalizable to the target population, since the participants were not an accurate representation of the population as a whole. This leads to a possible bias in the results and an under-representation of certain subgroups and over-representation of others. This means that the findings cannot be applied to populations that have different demographics or characteristics than those interviewed in this project. In a larger study, some methods to avoid these limitations include a repeat study with different participants, or a cross validation to compare results and data.

One of the challenges of this recruitment method was the fact that it occurred virtually. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the in-person posters became redundant, and the virtual recruitment made it more difficult to reach participants outside immediate social circles. While there were multiple shares and views of the poster, there was less active engagement and follow-through from those who viewed it. Social media recruitment proved to not be the most effective way to gather interest for participation in a virtual study because it lacked the in-person

interaction that might encourage others to get involved. It is common to scroll through social media without interacting or engaging with the posts on the feed.

In the interest of finding the appropriate number of participants in a restricted span of time, the criteria also had to be expanded to include those who follow general sports associations or leagues on Twitter, rather than solely athletes. This did not have a noticeable impact on the responses to the questions, since the sports leagues' Twitter accounts often repost and retweet tweets from professional athletes, and the participants were consulting similar content regardless of how it appeared on their feed. It did, however, allow for a couple more of the participants to be considered for this study.

The research tools used for this methodology were the list of set interview questions attached in Appendix A and the analysis grid in Appendix B. The interview questions served as a tool to informally guide the conversation in more flexible way, while still staying on topic throughout. One adjustment observed was that the interviews ended up being a little shorter than initially expected. While the expectation was that they would last 30-40 minutes, they were instead closer to 15-25. This did not seem to be limiting in any way, since a sufficient amount of data was still collected and all of the questions were properly responded to.

Chapter 3: Deciphering the results from the interviews

This chapter discusses the findings pulled from the semi-structured interviews by explaining the analysis grid and the results derived from it. The results were organized based on the main themes of the research questions: the type of reading, and the traits of opinion leaders.

Interview analysis grid

The analysis grid was made up of 41 statements created before the interviews, that were related to the research questions. Each of these statements were drafted based off of the literature review to provide possible ideas that lined up with the different closed responses to the research

questions. For example, to respond to RQ2, there were several statements that aligned with the dominant reading, several statements that aligned with the negotiated reading, and several statements that aligned with the oppositional reading. Similarly, to respond to RQ3 and RQ4, there were some statements that backed up each of the three traits of opinion leaders used for this study. The solidifying of the statements before the interviews were conducted was an approach taken in order to mitigate inevitable biases that come from a researcher interpreting evidence.

These statements were separated in the analysis grid by theme related to the research questions: type of reading, support and influence, and general statements. Based on the responses of the semi-structured interviews, a note was made each time a participant's response was applicable to one of these pre-conceived statements. This was used to keep track of which views were most commonly shared amongst the participants, and the various statements and occurrence of each idea expressed can be found in Appendix 2C.

Type of reading

The first section of the analysis grid responded to RQ2, and focused on the type of reading that these participants made towards professional athletes' support for #BLM on Twitter. Under the dominant reading portion of these statements, the most commonly shared statements were *I have retweeted a #BLM post by a pro athlete*, which was reported by 12 of the 14 participants, or 86%, *I have liked a #BLM post by a pro athlete*, with 13 of the 14 participants, or 93%, and finally a unanimous *I think pro athletes speaking up about #BLM demonstrates a positive side of pro athletes*, a belief shared by 100% of the participants interviewed.

Overall, the participants noticed that the sports accounts and players that they follow on Twitter often post content unrelated to sports. While this is sometimes personal content and stories or anecdotes relevant to their personal lives, 11 of the 14 participants mentioned that the content they see is often related to political and social events or activism. The athletes speak

sometimes about their personal involvement in specific charities, community outreaches or organizations. For example, Participant 7 mentioned how professional footballer Marcus Rashford speaks about his contribution to FareShare³, a charity that seeks to fight hunger in vulnerable communities (Figure 4 in Appendix).

Figure 4: Marcus Rashford's tweet about FareShare



SOURCE : Rashford, M. [@MarcusRashford]. (2021). *'Fareshare has shared the equivalent of 128.5 million meals in the year since March 23 last year – or four every second and more than double the number in the previous 12 months'*. [Thumbnail with link attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MarcusRashford/status/1379705304015855617>

Aside from the #BLM movement, some other movements that are often addressed by professional athletes on Twitter are mental health, pride, or women in sport. The interviewees noted that most professional athletes tend to speak about anything that their fans are interested in, which brings the risk of them only voicing what is popular or trending at the time, rather than

³ <https://fareshare.org.uk/marcus-rashford/>

them genuinely believing in the movement. This is why this study chooses to highlight the #BLM movement, which has been prevalent on Twitter lately.

When asked to name some professional athletes who have been notably active in the #BLM movement on Twitter, the most common names included LeBron James (Figure 5), Naomi Osaka, Colin Kaepernick, Jaylen Brown, Serena Williams and Venus Williams. Many people also mentioned the Toronto Raptors basketball team (Figure 6) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) in general (Figure 7), as being well-known advocates for the #BLM movement.

Figure 6: LeBron James' tweet about #BLM



Figure 5: Toronto Raptors' tweet about #BLM



Figure 7: NBA's tweet about #BLM



Fig. 5 SOURCE: James, L. (@KingJames). (2020). Really proud to welcome all these leaders to the cause. Thank you for giving this your passion, leadership and massive show of support. We're just getting started! As mama always told me, "Don't talk about it, be about it." #BlackLivesMatter #MoreThanAVote. [Image attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/KingJames/status/1273299813191184384>

Fig. 6 SOURCE: Toronto Raptors (@Raptors). (2020). #BlackLivesMatter [Image attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Raptors/status/1288605700629962752>

Fig. 7 SOURCE: NBA (@NBA). (2020). The truth is #Black Lives Matter. [Image attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/NBA/status/1279399562369736704>

These athletes and associations were active in the movement by protesting, donating, kneeling and speaking out, even amidst potential risks to their career from taking a public stance on a political movement. While they have a lot more to lose than the average person by speaking out, the younger generation of professional athletes seem to be more willing to speak out, which builds up their credibility as players and advocates. To better illustrate this, Participant 6 said: “I’d say that the newer generation of players [are more vocal about #BLM]. The older players in the NBA who have been around for 10 plus years, have been active in supporting it, but the new players have been all over it. There are so many new players who have been building up their credibility in the league by making themselves known outside the court” (Participant 6).

Based on the general remarks of the interviews seen in Appendix 2C, the participants of this study admitted to being inspired by the professional athletes to take action in support of the #BLM movement. Most of this support has been over social media, including retweeting, liking, and sometimes writing posts about the movement, but some of it has been offline, through protests, signing petitions, or donating. Most of the interviewees actively retweet, like and share posts about #BLM tweeted by the professional athletes they follow on Twitter. They also admitted to being supportive of athletes using their large platforms and outreach to back up this movement, and encouraging more athletes to speak up about #BLM on Twitter. This hashtag is a powerful tool for action and has allowed for the athletes to connect better with their followers, lessening the barrier between celebrity and fan. The non-black participants acknowledged their own privilege of being able to share posts by others to help give underrepresented voices a platform to speak on, saying that “it’s not my place to talk about it, but instead to help others’ voices be heard” (Participant 1). While some of the interviewees have protested and donated to the #BLM movement, these actions were not inspired specifically by professional athletes. One

interview participant shared that “if a professional athlete tweets about a topic that I agree with, I’ll like and share it... so they inspire me to take smaller actions, which is how everything starts in the first place” (Participant 2).

Under the negotiated reading portion of the statements, the most commonly shared ones were *I have fact-checked something about #BLM posted by a pro athlete*, which was said by 13 of the 14 participants, or 93%, and *I started looking more into the #BLM movement because of a post shared by a pro athlete*, which was said by 12 of the 14 participants, or 86%.

Most of the participants stated that they get their #BLM information from social media for a number of reasons. Social media is quicker and more accurate for this type of reporting than news media, it often shares videos and pictures that the mainstream news may not want to, and there is less bias in social media reporting. However, this social media information, specifically when it comes from professional athletes, is only a starting point before looking for more information. There is an agreement that as a community, there is a shared social responsibility to educate oneself, fact check and read academic articles with a critical lens, especially if it is about information that may be shocking or polarizing. When it comes to social movements like #BLM, followers are generally more attentive to the truthfulness of the information.

Under the oppositional reading, almost none of the pre-conceived statements in the grid related to this type of reading were mentioned by the interview participants, indicating a lack of identification with this type of reading. The only one that came up was *I think professional athletes might tweet about #BLM for “show” or monetary gain*, which was a common thought for 6 of the 14 participants, 43%. This idea will be considered in the discussion section. Since most participants did not seem to agree with the statements aligned with oppositional reading, an assumption is made that this reading is less relevant for the analysis.

For the types of reading section of the analysis grid, the type of reading that aligned most closely with what the participants communicated was a negotiated reading, with an averaged 57% of agreed-upon statements. This was followed closely by a dominant reading with 50% of agreed-upon statements, and a negotiated reading was the least popular of the three, with only 21% of agreed-upon statements. Overall, the general conclusion is that most people either agree or partly agree with the ways that professional athletes use Twitter for social media advocacy. This is a positive indication about how audiences perceive professional athletes' use of the platform for social movements.

Traits of athletes as opinion leaders on Twitter

The analysis answers RQ3 by revealing that professional athletes have a couple of traits often found in opinion leaders in a digital environment (Jungnickel, 2018), based on the influence and impression they have on other people. This gives them the privilege to drum up more support than the average person because they are well-respected by society and sometimes, “their opinions [themselves have the potential to] become news” (Participant 9).

The analytical framework for this project was based off of three distinct traits associated with being an opinion leader: a special influence on others' awareness, opinions and behaviour surrounding an issue, through mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication and a lack of professional background or training as communicators (Jungnickel, 2018).

Under the special influence portion of the analysis grid, the most commonly shared statements were: *I think professional athletes know what they're talking about when they tweet about #BLM*, which was said by 13 of the 14 participants, or 93%, and *I trust what pro athletes share about #BLM if it's fact checked*, which was said by all 14 participants. More than half of the participants, 8 of the 14, or 57%, also agreed with the statement *I'm more aware and open-*

*mind*ed about #BLM because of a professional athlete's tweet. As an opinion leader, one should be well-informed about specific issues.

The interviewees agreed that they are likely to support professional athletes' political voices when it comes to #BLM. "Sports are more than just the games- they transcend everything. They're built off the history and the lives of the players involved, which is why we care about the athlete's life, both in their struggles and their accomplishments" (Participant 1). To silence an athlete's voice removes what makes them who they are as role models and leaders. Many followers have stronger positive feelings towards the players the more they get to know them and what they stand for, especially those who have been consistently vocal and active in these types of movements.

One participant said that "I want to know their political views" (Participant 10), because that is how they know who to keep supporting and following, and who to dismiss. If someone's favourite athlete is speaking about a specific topic, it can convince them to look more into the topic. This opinion leadership comes with a higher level of responsibility to vet the information they are sharing, be careful not to spread misinformation, and make intelligent statements based on critical research. "Even if you've never thought about #BLM, but you're a diehard sports fan and your favourite athlete is very vocal about it, then your opinion is likely to be shaped by them" (Participant 10). For this reason, respondents stressed that it is very important for professional athletes to watch what they say on their platforms- "the emphasis should be on who is or is not a *responsible* opinion leader" (Participant 6).

Under the mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication portion of the analysis grid, 100% of the participants believed that *Twitter has been a good platform for professional athletes to speak about #BLM and I like when professional athletes share their personal stories*

about #BLM on Twitter. Another 8 of the 14 participants, or 57%, agreed that *I have learned something about #BLM because of what a professional athlete has shared on Twitter.* Twitter has been an appropriate platform for this kind of support because it has a large outreach in a quick turnaround time. It also gives anyone the opportunity to speak out, and reduces the barrier between celebrity and fan.

To respond to RQ4, the participants agreed on a few characteristics that make online opinion leaders appear more trustworthy, such as the ability to use the platform well. For example, Twitter as a written medium requires the skills to accurately express oneself in the written word in a concise and coherent way (Ivanov, 2015; 2019). This helps in making the speaker come off as more professional and well-versed on the topics at hand. These are traits that give them credibility and encourage followers to listen to what they say more deeply and loyally. Someone who is knowledgeable about a certain cause or topic, and can express this in a clear and concise way is more likely to get their message heard and believed, over someone who is unprepared and clumsy.

Social media advocacy and information dissemination on the internet do have an impact in terms of educating others, organizing protests and donations, and raising awareness, but publishing tweets is only a starting point for support. While these tweets have a large outreach that makes the content both accessible and publicly available, professional athletes need to follow up with actions that demonstrate how they are making their support for #BLM a priority beyond just the performative⁴ actions seen on social media.

⁴Performative: made or done for show (as to bolster one's own image or make a positive impression on others) "Performative." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performative>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2021.

Finally, under the lack of professional background or training as a communicator portion of the analysis grid, all 14 of the participants agreed on the following statement: *I trust information about #BLM more from someone who is directly impacted by hate or racism, rather than from journalists*. Similarly, 13 out of the 14 participants, or 93%, agreed with the following two statements: *I prefer genuine messages from professional athletes rather than ones written by their PR or communications people* and *I am more likely to trust what professional athletes share about #BLM if they have experienced the hate or racism themselves*. Another popular statement was *I would better trust Tweets from a professional athlete on #BLM if they had journalistic or media training*. However, while 11 of the 14 participants agreed with this, the majority also made a point of clarifying exactly what media training would entail, and what type of media training would actually cause them to trust the Tweets less. While the question of whether or not an opinion leader has had media training might be better answered by the opinion leaders themselves, the analysis of the respondents' answers revolves around whether or not the respondents see a communications background as a positive trait. The interview responses demonstrate that someone without a communications background usually correlates with them having real life experience and expert power instead. The results of the interviews show that the interviewees place a larger importance on the lived experiences of their opinion leaders over potential formal training. The impact of potential media training and communications experience is discussed further in the Discussion.

For the interviewees, it is also admirably perceived for opinion leaders to be able to form their own opinions instead of jumping on the bandwagon about whatever is current and trending. Based on the data, they need to have a willingness to understand the situation, be able to admit that they were wrong, and be open to changing, growing and learning. Similarly, those who have

not experienced whatever topic they are speaking about cannot take credit for something they have not gone through, and should instead share their platforms with experts who can help back up truths and share informed opinions.

The interview participants believe that professional athletes should be able to speak out on any domain that they have experienced, been educated on, affected by, or have background in. One's voice and social media can not be limited just because of what they do as a career. "Athletes are already commodified- they're literally bought, sold and traded. Taking away their voices takes away their rights to be vocal about their own opinions" (Participant 10). Regardless of if someone is a professional athlete, any firsthand experience someone goes through lets them learn and grow a set of knowledge or perspectives about said experience. This gives them the credibility that allows permission for them to speak from experience about what they know. Sharing this personal part of their lives allows people to see "what's behind the basketball" (Participant 6).

Overall, of the three distinct traits, the most important one for the participants when trusting an opinion leader was the lack of professional background or training as a communicator, with an averaged 76% of agreed-upon statements. The second most important trait or characteristic was the use of mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication, with 51% of agreed-upon statements, and lastly, the special influence on others' awareness, behaviours and opinions had 50% of agreed-upon statements. This means that the capacity professional athletes have to influence their followers is not reliant solely on their special influence alone. Instead, it requires the combination of the other traits as well.

The last section of the analysis grid had a few overarching statements to collect a high-level understanding of how the participants generally felt about professional athletes advocating for

the #BLM movement on Twitter, in order to respond to RQ1. All 14 participants agreed on the following statements: *I think professional athletes tweeting about #BLM has a real impact*, and *I enjoy seeing professional athletes speak out about #BLM on their Twitter accounts*. Similarly, 11 of the 14 participants, or 70%, concluded that *I trust in professional athletes' advocacy for #BLM if their actions match their words*. This is discussed further in the next section.

Chapter 4: Audience response to professional athletes' Twitter support for #BLM

This chapter discusses the responses shared by the participants, and seeks to find the reasons behind them. For the most part, the participants agreed that professional athletes should play a role in advocating for social movements, especially when they have access to such large platforms. It is also important for the participants that the athletes truly believe in, or have experienced, the causes they support, rather than just speaking out because it is what is popular or trending at the time. Additional outcomes were that media training is sometimes, but not always, a positive factor, consistency is key, and knowing how to use the platform effectively makes a big difference.

The role of professional athletes in social movements

In answering Research Question 1, which seeks to learn how audiences feel about professional athletes using Twitter to advocate for BLM, based on the findings of the interviews, when public figures such as professional athletes have an appropriate platform, such as Twitter, that can help get an important message out, they have the responsibility to do so. The use of this platform spreads a message largely, which creates a shared awareness between audiences that has a potential to build towards real change. Professional athletes especially have a different type of abilities when it comes to sparking this.

Fans look up to professional athletes, and seeing them getting involved in social movement is beyond just politics. It can also inspire others to want to get informed and involved as well. In society, athletes are seen as role models and their fans, especially the younger generation, often try to mimic their behaviour and act the same way. While some audiences are unwilling to change their beliefs, more people becoming educated on current events such as systemic racism and everyday ingrained microaggressions helps to open the conversation and bring awareness to the situation.

One concern, however, is that this type of social support can be played into for big corporations and leagues because the movement is popular and trending and they want to be a part of the conversation. While the intention is often genuine and the efforts valiant, audiences want to make sure the support is authentic. One way of making sure of this is verifying that the athletes are supporting the causes through concrete action outside social media, like donating, protesting and using their resources to help affected communities. It is also important to monitor that they are consistent and dedicated to the cause over a long period of time, rather than just while it is making headlines.

Media training requirement

Given RQ 3 and RQ4, which contemplate the characteristics of opinion leaders that audiences see in professional athletes, the question of media training was brought up during the interviews, in order to gauge whether or not the participants thought it would be a useful requirement for professional athletes using their platforms to speak about #BLM. This was greeted with mixed reactions and different explanations for being for or against media training. Firstly, media training was received positively because it could help athletes better know how to communicate their thoughts on #BLM. Being well spoken and with a clear understanding of the stance helps reduce the possibility of the media twisting their words and intent. “Any words and

angles can be misheard and misread, so it is important that [the athletes] know how to communicate and share their ideas without being boxed into saying things a certain way” (Participant 11).

On the other side, however, media training might train the athletes into avoiding saying anything controversial and instead saying what the public wants to hear. This could bring mediated and controlled responses instead of genuine beliefs, and it could also teach athletes how to divert from, or avoid, certain questions. One participant said that “my first instinct is that media training is bad because it can almost be a slippery slope to censorship; trying to propagate or convey a certain way that the league wants their players to be seen” (Participant 12). This risk of censorship can reduce the players to being more robotic and unauthentic with the information they share. There is also a potential of them hiding their true beliefs, and media training might impede fans from getting a true sense of what the athletes stand for.

When it comes to supporting social movements, everyone has a role to play. Professional athletes are no different, especially since the impact that they have on their followers is so unique and widespread. The specific fanbase of athletes tends to become emotionally attached to the teams and players they follow, meaning they are more open to listening to what the athletes have to say. This willingness to listen is often the first step in inspiring open-mindedness and encouraging the potential for change. Because of this reach, professional athletes have the responsibility to take advantage of this platform and share their beliefs on sensitive or controversial topics.

Characteristics for trusting online opinion leaders

In response to RQ4, there are some characteristics that make followers more likely to trust a professional athlete’s stance on #BLM, like for example, firsthand experience of racism and a tie related to what they speak about. Having experienced the racism themselves gives the

athletes expert power when it comes to sharing their thoughts about it. It is also important that they make concrete actions that back up what they say, while staying true to their beliefs and maintaining a continued level of support. Continually speaking about the topic every chance they get is important to help establish their intentions and separate them from those who only participate on a performative basis.

Another important leadership characteristic of an opinion leader is a consistency in posting, being educated and informed on the topic, and following up on their words with demonstratable actions. This supports the initial findings of Katz and Lazarsfeld on opinion leaders. It is also important for athletes as opinion leaders to have a couple of technical abilities: to be well spoken, able to communicate ideas coherently, and knowledgeable about the right language to talk about issues, something “indicative of people who have spent time to learn more about the movement” (Participant 14). Those who lack this ability often appear less prepared and their words do not have the same impact. The vocabulary that athletes use when speaking about #BLM also makes a difference in their credibility. There is a certain rhetoric that sounds very performative, a “regurgitation of corporate language” that implies that athletes are speaking through their training (Participant 14), rather than from the heart. A better use of the proper terminology and phrasing indicates an attempt to research and better understand the phenomenon before speaking out publicly about it.

Black professional athletes as recognized opinion leaders

By again looking at how the audience feels about professional athletes as opinion leaders, it is important to acknowledge that black persons with successful athletic careers only use certain types of platforms to express themselves on; sports and entertainment being a couple of them. “This is what sports [and being an athlete is meant for]: they do all these crazy athletic endeavors to get to these heights, and once they get there, it’s time to use their voices” (Participant 11).

They do not always have that many other environments where they hold the microphone, so once they finally reach those targets, the athletes should use it to their advantage. This is when they have the responsibility to advocate, represent the community, and speak on behalf of people who do not know how to speak on the topic properly, or do not have the same occasions to.

It is almost more important for the athletes that came from disadvantaged communities to have the opportunity to speak out on what they have overcome to get to where they are now. They are the people who lived and grew up in a society that was pitted against them for the colour of their skin, and their perseverance and dedication to their sport is something to be celebrated. They have outlasted the challenges, and as such, deserve to represent their communities by advocating for the movements like #BLM that directly affect them.

As #BLM is a movement that prioritizes the sharing of individuals' personal anecdotes and stories, this is the perfect opportunity for black athletes to share their own. Since they already hold the attention of their fans, participating in this movement not only gets their stories shared to a larger audience, but also brings this audience to the movement. The connection between the athletes and their fans becomes strengthened and the support for the movement has the potential to grow even more.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the ways that fans respond to professional athletes using Twitter to support the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, through the Encoding-Decoding theory and the Two Step Flow Theory's re-imagined definition of digital opinion leaders.

After conducting 14 semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data collected from the participants, the conclusion is that followers do support professional athletes' activism about the

#BLM movement on Twitter. All of the interviewees unanimously agreed that this is a positive use of professional athletes' social media outreach and that they enjoy seeing this kind of support being shared on such a large scale.

While it is agreed upon that this is a positive action for the movement, the full impact of the action is questionable. Speaking out about an important cause on social media is a way of spreading awareness and educating others on it, but this alone is not enough to lead to any specific measures. It is a good place to start, as long as more action follows it. This desired action is concrete, measurable support that is seen off the internet and instead, in real life. Some examples of action that needs to follow the social media support is being present at protests, strikes and demonstrations, showing that their advocacy is more than just surface level. The athletes should also show support financially, by donating to those impacted by discrimination and injustices, and funding charities and support groups that cater to disadvantaged individuals. By following their words with action, the professional athletes can separate themselves from those who are only posting on Twitter because it is trendy and popular. It proves that they are truly dedicated to the cause and its resolution.

Based on the responses of the interview participants, audiences engage in an overlapping of negotiated and dominant readings of the tweets shared by professional athletes. A negotiated decoding of a message is when the audience chooses to accept some elements of the messaging, and reject others. This is a reoccurring theme in the responses of the interviewees for a number of reasons. Nearly all of the participants shared that the #BLM tweets by professional athletes have been a great starting point for introducing them to the #BLM movement, but alone are not enough to take what the athletes say at face value. Instead, audiences admitted to challenging the #BLM tweets they read by professional athletes by fact-checking the information shared

themselves. They have looked for other sources, both academic and journalistic, to help reinforce what the professional athletes are saying, and they have investigated different resources about the movement. Using their own personal research has led to some participants writing their own #BLM posts, inspired by professional athletes, but topped off with their own responsible fact-checking. For this reluctance to blindly follow what professional athletes say on Twitter, most audiences choose, to some extent, a negotiated decoding of the messages.

A dominant decoding of a message is when the audience positively receives the messaging with very few discrepancies from what was intended by the sender. This was also seen through the responses of the interviewees based on the actions they took on Twitter in reply to the messaging shared by the athletes. However, the social media support by athletes was not enough to inspire many people to take concrete actions out of Twitter, such as donating to a #BLM fund, attending a protest or changing their mind on certain aspects of the movement.

In fact, there was a slight occurrence of an oppositional decoding as well. In the oppositional decoding, the audience receives and rejects the message that was intended by the sender. While most of the #BLM messaging shared by the professional athletes was accepted rather than rejected, there was one commonly shared concern between the participants. This was the concern that professional athletes are only tweeting to create a positive appearance and image for themselves and indulge in monetary or reputational gain. This concern does not encompass all athletes, but instead is applied on a case to case, or athlete to athlete basis. Fortunately, it can be avoided when athletes' involvement in a cause goes beyond simply tweeting about it.

Participants agreed that the measurable actions of the athletes (donating, protesting, consistent involvement) are enough to prove that their social media advocacy comes from genuine intentions, thus removing the oppositional reading of the original message.

The most well-received characteristic of a professional athlete as an opinion leader is that they lack a professional background or training as a communicator. Without specialized education teaching athletes to speak in a certain way or from a certain angle, the messages that the athletes share are likely to be more genuine and from the heart. Their information is usually backed up by firsthand experience and knowledge on the #BLM movement, meaning they have been directly impacted by it and possess the “expert knowledge” necessary to speak on it from a position of credibility. Through the perspective of the interviewees, while personal experience and expert knowledge or not interchangeable traits, they are correlated and directly impact one another. The acquisition of firsthand experiences helps to make up the level of expert knowledge that an individual possesses on a topic- meaning if they lived through an event, then they also hold a unique comprehension of the event and related elements.

It is interesting to consider that the lack of this professional communication skill may help in characterising what an opinion leader on Twitter is, rather than its possession. Based on the findings of this research, this can be assumed because the participants shared that they prefer the natural and candid views of their digital opinion leaders, over curated and polished ones. In fact, most participants expressed that the news coming from journalists is often biased and represents the views of large corporations or stakeholders, rather than genuine thoughts from individuals. Because of this, there is a preference for online opinion leaders to not have any professional background or training as a communicator, to ensure that their messages are not slanted to satisfy a certain demographic or audience.

The interviews demonstrated that experiencing an injustice or phenomenon oneself was the most important trait in ensuring the credibility of an opinion leader, especially when it comes to a phenomenon like #BLM. Being able to share personal anecdotes and stories helps humanize

the professional athletes and makes them more relatable to the audiences, taking advantage of their reach beyond the sports environment. This raw and emotional connection strengthens the relationship between athlete and fan, and creates a bond that reinforces the trust between them. This type of connection would not be possible if professional athletes received professional training, as the training would take away some of the authenticity of how they share their messages.

Another important characteristic for audiences to support professional athletes' advocacy of #BLM on Twitter is the use of mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication. Twitter has been an appropriate platform for professional athletes to speak about #BLM because it allows for a short, concise message that has been fine-tuned to get the point across. It is a platform that reaches millions of people and has the potential to share messages outside immediate circles by retweeting and sharing posts. As a microblog platform, it has been a space for professional athletes to share their own personal stories and experiences with #BLM, making them more approachable and accessible, reducing the barrier between celebrity and fan. Similarly, many sports fans feel closer and more connected to professional athletes who share their opinions and thoughts about #BLM on Twitter.

While professional athletes hold this influence on others, most agree that they are only impacted by the thoughts of the athletes if they are backed up with facts and research. This adds a dimension to the characteristic of an opinion leader that requires the athletes to do their due diligence in researching and fact-checking any information they speak about before sharing it with their large following. Overall, their special influence on others comes with a special responsibility to make sure that what they share is accurate and backed up by proof.

The biggest criticism of professional athletes as opinion leaders is if their Twitter support for the #BLM movement starts and ends with sending out a tweet. At risk of their advocacy appearing shallow, surface-level and performative, it is imperative that they follow up on what they share online with real, concrete actions. These actions can begin with speaking out on the movement online and at every opportunity they have- including in interviews, on the courts and in public spaces. Some athletes and associations have continued their vocal support offline by wearing customized jerseys and uniforms that write out messages like “Black Lives Matter”, “Say their names” or “I can’t breathe”. Some other actions have been the NBA strike or taking a knee during televised sports games. These actions are considerable in opening up the conversation and creating discourse about the movement, but, on their own, are not enough. An opinion leader on Twitter without any real concrete action to back up their words is just someone who speaks in order to maintain their popularity on a trending topic, rather than someone who believes strongly in making a difference.

Conversely, some of the actions that go beyond simply sparking discourse, are when professional athletes are physically present at protests and demonstrations. Their presence speaks volumes, in particular because they potentially risk their reputation and career by being there. As national level leaders whom people already identify with, they have a lot more to lose than the average person by speaking out. Yet some athletes were showing up and showing their sincere support for the cause, an action that is indicative of a true leader, and exemplifies the way that their support helps to strengthen and shape real change.

Another important action for professional athletes to take is financially supporting the movement and related causes such as bail funds. They should use their privilege and resources as celebrities to help contribute in a concrete way beyond just posting online in solidarity. This

could include donating to activism funds, supporting black businesses or giving back to the community with time, money and effort. According to the interviewees, as prime examples of people who have struggled from socio-economic injustices, the athletes should do what is within their power to provide for underprivileged communities- whether it be by investing in sports facilities, schools or nutrition and health resources.

Limitations and next steps

One limitation to this research study was that due to the nature of the phenomenon studied, there was a possibility that the interview participants could have been censoring their own opinions on racism in order to cater to the politically correct viewpoint. Some of the opinions that were shared might have been said to protect themselves from looking closeminded or ignorant to the situation, instead of sharing their genuine thoughts about athletes tweeting about #BLM on Twitter. It can be very tricky to assess if the interviewees are giving candid responses and telling the truth about how they feel, especially over a Zoom audio call. Several measures were put into place in order to try to ensure honest and open answers. Firstly, the consent form shared with each participant guaranteed full anonymity and confidentiality in regard to their responses. Ideally, knowing that they would not be connected to their opinions would help the participants feel comfortable being honest with what they chose to share.

Secondly, the questions were not shared with the participants ahead of time. This was to prevent the possibility of them preparing their exact responses. Instead, natural and candid answers were received from each participant based on their instantaneous thoughts rather than scripted ones.

A major limitation for this research project is the fact that the findings are barely generalizable. The diversity of the participants was limited, due to time and resources and this being a small-scale research study. While some came from different backgrounds and ethnicities,

all of the participants shared left-wing ideologies and generally shared the same overarching beliefs. Because the sample size was small and specific to English-speaking Canadians in their 20s, the results of this research project can not be applied to a wider spectrum and larger group of peoples.

An interesting next step for this research would be to expand it to include more groups of people from different races and ages and political alignments. Having more diverse participants might bring more diverse results, and more controversial opinions. This would be important to get a more global perspective of the situation, rather than a snapshot of the thoughts of a certain group.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, the results help in measuring the impact of sport and professional athletes on social media in changing views or stances on political movements. It aids in identifying the reach of Twitter and to what extent this platform can contribute to or impact social injustices. The patterns discovered through the analysis of the interviews give a lens to how audiences react to different kinds of opinion leaders, more specifically, professional athletes.

The findings suggested that while Twitter activism on #BLM by professional athletes is generally approved of, there is much more to it. Tweeting alone is not enough to make a difference to a systemic issue, but it is a good medium for spreading awareness and education on the topic. The results also confirmed that an active audience is necessary for the Twitter advocacy to have a genuine impact, categorizing this activism as a collaborative achievement. Understanding the need for a reactive following is crucial to knowing how to best interact with one's platform.

The #BLM movement is one that has been present for nearly a decade, and has yet to achieve the progress it is striving for. Understanding the ways that audiences respond to professional athletes speaking about #BLM on Twitter has a noticeable effect on streamlining the efforts of those involved and maximizing the potential of this political action. Following a certain Twitter account does not guarantee commitment to it, which is why it is important to understand the degree and type of support that the followers have for these professional athletes. The results of this research are valuable in discovering how useful social media activism can be for movements like #BLM.

Social media activism has proven very constructive for movements like #BLM, especially since the nature of this movement is very community and public-based. It is a movement that becomes stronger the more people get involved with it, and one that thrives off of shared experiences and overt awareness of the phenomenon. The support that audiences have for these professional athletes on Twitter is positive, but also holds the athletes themselves accountable to prove that the support is more than just performative. The audience members and fans are committed to the movement, as long as the athletes themselves can exemplify that they are as well and that their intentions are genuine.

Knowing that professional athletes are perceived as opinion leaders by the general public is a useful tool for promoting participation in movements like #BLM. It is beneficial to have them as spokespeople for causes that are near and dear to their hearts, and that they can speak about from experience. Because of their large and diverse fanbase, knowing that their audiences look up to them and respect what they have to say opens a world of opportunities for them to continue advocating for important human rights causes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

This is the list of the 13 questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews.

1. Which professional athletes or associations do you follow on Twitter?
2. Which sports associations or leagues do you follow regularly?
3. Do these accounts post content unrelated to sports?
4. Where do you get most of your information about Black Lives Matter from?
5. Can you name any professional athletes who have been active in the Black Lives Matter movement?
6. How do you feel about this support for the BLM movement?
7. Have professional athletes inspired you to take any action toward the BLM movement?
(Positive or negative) (Likes, retweets, donations, protests, seeking more information...)
8. Do you believe that they should publicly support BLM? Why or why not?
9. Are you likely to support athletes' political voices? Why? Which ones?
10. Aside from sports, what other domains do you believe athletes should support? Why?
11. Given a basic definition of an opinion leader (someone who receives information from a source and then spreads it to their own followers), do you believe professional athletes can be considered opinion leaders? Why or why not?
12. What would make you more likely to trust a professional athletes' stance on BLM?
13. To you, what makes an opinion leader trustworthy?

Negotiated Reading	I have fact-checked something posted by a pro athlete.		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	I have written a #BLM post because of a pro athlete.	X								X				X	X		
	I started looking more into the BLM movement because of a post shared by a pro athlete.		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	I challenge the BLM Tweets I have read by pro athletes (partially disagree)		X		X										X		
Oppositional Reading	I have unfollowed/deleted a pro athlete because of a BLM post																
	I have muted a pro athlete because of a BLM post																
	I have stopped being a fan of an athlete or team because of something they posted about BLM																
	My opinion for BLM has changed negatively because of something a pro athlete has tweeted.																
	Reading a BLM tweet by a pro athlete has made me question pro athletes' roles in politics																

	athletes speak out about BLM on their Twitter													
	I am indifferent to seeing pro athletes speak out about BLM on their Twitter													

* = Yes, but needs to be fact checked

Appendix 2C: Interview grid summaries

This table contains the summaries of the analysis grids used to analyze the interview portion of this research. The statements are in the first column. The second column displays how many of the 14 participants agreed or said something to reflect each statement. The third column gives the percentage of this.

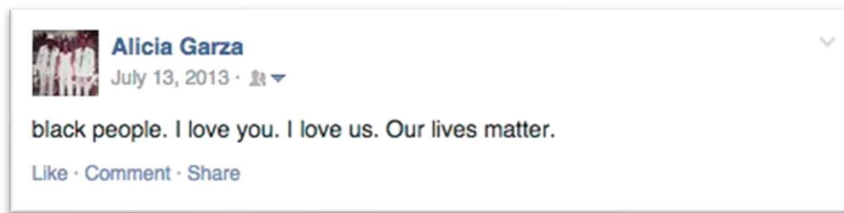
For the numbers and percentages in bold, this represents the overall agreed upon statements for each reading, compared to the potential number of agreed upon statements for each reading. For example, under Dominant Reading, there are 8 statements and the potential for 14 participants to agree with each ($8 \times 14 = 112$). However, only 56 of these statements were checked off out of the possible 112, giving the 56/112 fraction, or 50%.

	/14	%
Dominant reading	56/112	50
I have donated to a BLM fund because of a post shared by a pro athlete.	2	14
I have protested because of a post shared by a pro athlete.	1	7
I have retweeted a #BLM post by a pro athlete.	12	86
I have liked a #BLM post by a pro athlete	13	93
I have changed my mind on BLM because of what a pro athlete tweeted	1	7
I automatically believe what pro athletes tweet about BLM	0	0
I think more athletes should speak up on Twitter about BLM	13	93
I think pro athletes speaking up about BLM demonstrates a positive side of pro athletes	14	100
Negotiated reading	32/56	57
I have fact-checked something posted by a pro athlete.	13	93
I have written a #BLM post because of a pro athlete.	4	29
I started looking more into the BLM movement because of a post shared by a pro athlete.	12	86
I challenge the BLM Tweets I have read by pro athletes (partially disagree)	3	21
Oppositional reading	6/84	7
I have unfollowed/deleted a pro athlete because of a BLM post	0	0
I have muted a pro athlete because of a BLM post	0	0
I have stopped being a fan of an athlete or team because of something they posted about BLM	0	0
My opinion for BLM has changed negatively because of something a pro athlete has tweeted.	0	0
Reading a BLM tweet by a pro athlete has made me question pro athletes' roles in politics	0	0
I think Pro athletes tweet about BLM for "show" or monetary gain	6	43
Special influence on others' awareness, behaviours and opinions	42/84	50
I think pro athletes know what they're talking about when they tweet about BLM	13	93
I trust what pro athletes share about BLM if it's fact checked	14	100
I am influenced by what pro athletes share about BLM	4	29
I am not influenced by what pro athletes share about BLM	0	0
I've supported BLM because I saw a pro athlete Tweet about it	3	21

I'm more aware and open-minded about BLM because of a pro athlete's Tweet	8	57
Through mediated or non-mediated interpersonal communication	43/84	51
I turn to pro athletes on Twitter for information about BLM	4	29
Their number of followers affects how much I trust the athlete and their thoughts on BLM	0	0
I have learned something about BLM because of what a pro athlete shared on Twitter	8	57
Twitter has been a good platform for pro athletes to speak about BLM	14	100
I like when pro athletes share their personal stories about BLM on Twitter.	14	100
I feel closer/more connected to pro athletes when they share their opinions on BLM on Twitter.	3	21
A lack of professional background or training as a communicator	53/70	76
I prefer genuine messages from pro athletes than ones written by their PR people	13	93
I would better trust Tweets from a pro athlete on BLM if they had journalistic training.	11*	79
I trust information about BLM from a journalist more than from a pro athlete.	2	14
I am more likely to trust what pro athletes share about BLM if they have experienced racism/hate	13	93
I trust information about BLM more from someone who is directly impacted by hate/racism, than from journalists.	14	100
General statements		
I think pro athletes Tweeting about BLM has a real impact	14	100
I don't think pro athletes Tweeting about BLM has any real impact	0	0
I trust in pro athletes' advocacy for BLM if their actions match their words.	11	79
I enjoy seeing pro athletes speak out about BLM on their Twitter	14	100
I do not enjoy seeing pro athletes speak out about BLM on their Twitter	0	0
I am indifferent to seeing pro athletes speak out about BLM on their Twitter	0	0

Figure 1: Alicia Garza's Facebook post

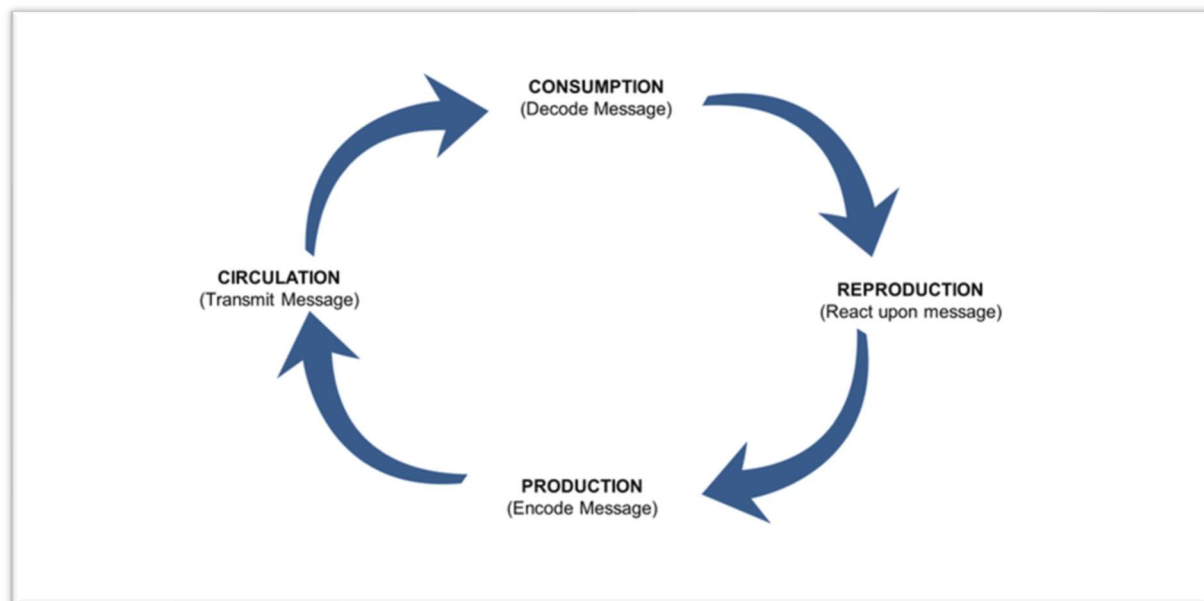
The Facebook post that sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement



SOURCE : Robinson, W. (2016). 'We believe that all lives matter,' co-founder of Black Lives Matter tells F&M audience. Retrieved from https://www.pennlive.com/news/2016/03/we_believe_that_all_lives_matt.html

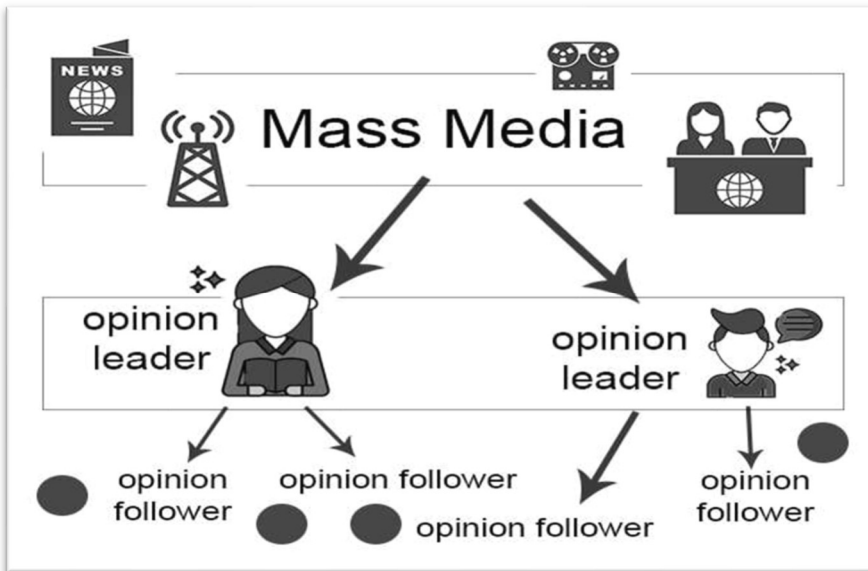
Figure 2: Encoding-Decoding Theory

Four Stages of Encoding/Decoding Communication



SOURCE: *Beyond the Right of Access: A Critique of the Legalist Approach to Dissemination of Climate Change Information in Kenya* - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Four-Stages-of-Encoding-Decoding-Communication_fig1_340148715 [accessed 27 Aug, 2021]

Figure 3: Two-Step Flow Theory
Steps of the Two-Step Flow Theory process



SOURCE: "Two Step Flow Theory of Communication: Definition and Analysis." (2021). Retrieved from <https://media-studies.com/two-step-flow/>

Figure 4: Marcus Rashford's tweet about FareShare
Professional footballer Marcus Rashford tweeting about the charity he regularly supports.



SOURCE : Rashford, M. [@MarcusRashford]. (2021). 'Fareshare has shared the equivalent of 128.5 million meals in the year since March 23 last year – or four every second and more than double the number in the previous 12 months'. [Thumbnail with link attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MarcusRashford/status/1379705304015855617>

Figure 5 : LeBron James' tweet about #BLM

One of LeBron James' many twitter posts speaking about the Black Lives Matter movement.



SOURCE: James, L. (@KingJames). (2020). Really proud to welcome all these leaders to the cause. Thank you for giving this your passion, leadership and massive show of support. We're just getting started! As mama always told me, "Don't talk about it, be about it."

#BlackLivesMatter #MoreThanAVote. [Image attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/KingJames/status/1273299813191184384>

Figure 6 : Toronto Raptor’s tweet about #BLM

One of the Toronto Raptor’s basketball team’s tweets about the Black Lives Matter movement. These images include quotes from some of the players that speak about Breonna Taylor, the changes the team hopes to instill, and their personal feelings about the cause.



SOURCE: Toronto Raptors [@Raptors]. (2020). #BlackLivesMatter [Image attached]. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Raptors/status/1288605700629962752>

Figure 7 : National Basketball Association (NBA)'s tweet about #BLM
One of the NBA's tweets speaking about and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.



SOURCE: NBA [@NBA]. (2020). *The truth is #Black Lives Matter*. [Image attached]. [Tweet].
Twitter. <https://twitter.com/NBA/status/1279399562369736704>