

**“Workers United Will Never Be Defeated:” The Communicative Constitution of BAmazon  
on Twitter**

by

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## **Abstract**

A unionizing effort that has gained attention in recent years is that of Amazon warehouse workers organizing in Bessemer, AL, known as BAmazon. Using a qualitative content analysis of 100 tweets, this study investigates how BAmazon communicates unionization, and how BAmazon constitutes itself as an organization through Twitter. After using the 3C Method of context, class, and community (Schradie, 2021) and the Four Flows Model in the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective (McPhee & Zaug, 2009) to qualitatively code the data, themes of solidarity (between BAmazon members, and between BAmazon and the greater labor movement), tensions of power distribution (inequities and power-claiming), and action were uncovered. In combining the 3C Method and the Four Flows, new perspectives in the Four Flows are presented through highlighting strategies used by BAmazon in digital spaces, including persuasive tactics of calling individuals to action, power-claiming, and exposing powerful and corrupt organizations. Practical findings present further strategies for organizers to use Twitter, such as using pop culture references, sharing workers' experiences, and building organizational legitimacy through establishing and announcing networks of support.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CCO      Communicative Constitution of Organizations

RWDSU   Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union

BHM1    Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, AL

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Amazon Inc. was founded in 1994 and remains the largest e-commerce company on the planet with a revenue of over 386 billion USD in 2020 (Kohan, 2021). Many of Amazon's workers are located in the United States, meaning that it is considered to be Amazon's "biggest national market worldwide and is home to most of the company's infrastructure" (Boewe & Schulten, 2017, p. 43). But this success has come at a great cost of worker exploitation, a negative environmental impact, and political and surveillance power. Workers report having to urinate in bottles as break time is limited, experiencing extreme heat, and a poor handling of COVID-19 measures (Kelly, 2021). Due to these working conditions, in addition to low wages and benefits, workers all over the world have started organizing as a way of resisting Amazon's poor working conditions and treatment of their workers. As such, in 2020, warehouse employees in Bessemer started their unionizing effort with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) in resistance to the aforementioned issues present at Amazon. The union is also often referred to as BAmazon<sup>1</sup>. This unionization effort is unique as it gained great recognition by the public and the media and dealt as inspiration for other unionization efforts in the United States.

The methods operationalized to efficiently organize workers and create unions have drastically changed within the current digital age, as the public is faster to reach. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have become popular tools in the effort to unionize (Canella, 2017). BAmazon is no exception, having established a large platform with over 29K followers on Twitter alone in a time span from September 2020 to March 2023—this social

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<sup>1</sup> "BAmazon" will be used throughout this manuscript to refer to the RWDSU unionization efforts of the Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, AL. The acronym for the Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, AL is referred to as BHM1.

media presence is partially responsible for the recognition the BAmazon workers have received. Through these platforms, workers share their experiences and raise awareness regarding their current working conditions. This attention has cast awareness to the experiences of Amazon workers and their treatment, not only in Alabama, but worldwide. Despite the attention that BAmazon has received, it must be noted that as of 2023, it has not successfully unionized. Only one Amazon facility has successfully unionized thus far, that being JFK8 in Staten Island. In April 2022, warehouse workers in Staten Island, New York successfully voted to unionize, creating and joining the Amazon Labor Union (Palmer, 2022). Understanding the way such organizations represent themselves online is essential to grasp the present and future of labor organizing in the digital age, relevant to academics through the labor movement within academic spaces as well as the general labor movement as, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, “the number of wage and salary workers belonging to unions, at 14.3 million in 2022, increased by 273,000, or 1.9 percent, from 2021” (2023). In our digital age, we must understand how unions use social media as a tool and how we can learn from it.

What makes the BAmazon union a perfect site for examination is that it has garnered great attention from media outlets and the public specifically since the union is in resistance to Amazon, one of the largest and most powerful global organizations with a long history of anti-union sentiment. Furthermore, the historical context of its location in Bessemer, a suburb of Birmingham in Alabama, is marked by racist and anti-worker sentiments. These contexts are significant as they serve to create a power dynamic between one of the United States most powerful businesses, and a workforce that has historically faced marginalization.

This study makes a contribution to the field of organizational communication as most literature published on unions stems from fields such as political science, economics, and

sociology. From a communicative lens, this study applies and expands on the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective as it relates to labor organizing as well as extending the Four Flows School (McPhee & Zaug, 2009) with the 3C Method (Schradie, 2021). The Four Flows School within CCO, which consists of Four Flows of communication, suggests that it is through communicative acts that organizations are created. Specifically, the Four Flows Model will be applied to tweets shared by BAmazon, extending the model through highlighting the practices of labor organizers and how union efforts are constituted through social media. Additionally, the literature on unions in the digital age and how they communicate with other entities is vastly limited. However, unionizing and labor organizing in the digital age must be studied from a communicative perspective as organizations cannot exist without communicative processes that make up the structure of such organizations. The reason why such communicative processes must be studied is to create an understanding of what unionization looks like today to advance such efforts to organize for better working conditions and against worker exploitation. Further, practical implications on using digital media to nurture organizing and unionizing will be derived from the analysis of data, specifically targeting organizers and social media campaigns on union profiles. As well, as scholars of communication and academics, we must continuously reevaluate our place in labor and organizing.

Explicitly, this project will seek to cover the organizational representation on Twitter of BAmazon and how it is communicatively constituted. Thus, this project seeks to fill theoretical as well as practical gaps in the literature by answering the following questions to understand efforts to unionize using social media platforms from a communicative perspective: How does BAmazon communicate unionization through Twitter? How does BAmazon constitute itself as an organization through Twitter?

## **Overview of Thesis**

In chapter 2, I discuss the literature relevant to this study, which includes context to the historical background of Birmingham and Bessemer, AL, as well as contextual information to BAmazon. Then, I present the existing literature on how social media is used in activism and the relationship between unions and political knowledge. Finally, the theoretical framework used for this study, the Four Flows in CCO scholarship, is laid out.

In chapter 3, the methods used for this study are described. It is specified how data was collected. In addition, ethical concerns regarding data from Twitter is addressed. Then, the data analysis is described and the 3C Method of context class and community (Schradie, 2021) is introduced.

In chapter 4, I discuss my findings. The themes found in the data are solidarity, power, and action. The theme of solidarity has two subthemes: between workers and members, and between BAmazon and the labor movement. The theme of power has two subthemes as well: inequity and power-claiming. In addition, a tweet where an overlap of themes was analyzed is presented.

Lastly, in chapter 5, I will present the discussion of this study. Included are theoretical contributions to the Four Flows as it is extended by the 3C Method to allow for a critical analysis and this study extends the Four Flows perspective by analyzing union organizing on Twitter. Further, practical implications are presented, suggesting that unions should interact with each other online and create a network, and that unions should take advantage of tools on Twitter for engagement. To end, the limitations of this study are addressed.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As will be discussed in the following sections, the existing literature on communication research in regard to labor unions and organizing is very limited. To fill the gaps in such literature, this project seeks to first understand how the organizational process of labor unions is set up through the lens the Four Flows of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO; McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Thus, how unions negotiate membership will be studied through the case of union efforts at Amazon in Bessemer. But first, the context and state of unions and labor organizing in the United States, as well as background information on efforts to unionize Amazon workers must be established to understand the intricacies of what goes into joining the Amazon union in Bessemer.

### **Historical Context**

Birmingham, the so called ‘Iron City’ and ‘Pittsburgh of the South’ due to its history of mining for iron ore and limestone, is located north central Alabama (Lewis, 2017, para 1). Bessemer, a suburb of Birmingham, serves as the location of the Amazon warehouse known under the acronym BHM1. In June of 2018, Amazon announced it will build a \$325 million fulfillment center and stated that 1,500 to 3,000 workers were to be employed, “receiv[ing] full benefits by day one and an average wage of \$14.65 an hour” (Edgemon, 2018). As of February 2022, 6,100 workers were employed at BHM1 and about 85% of workers are Black (Selyukh, 2022; D’Innocenzio et al., 2022). The facility, also known as BHM1, opened on March 29, 2020 (Thornton, 2020). Since then, workers experienced low wages and benefits, unsafe working conditions, and unfair treatment like having to urinate in bottles due to short and limited breaks (Kelly, 2021). Later that year, in October of 2020, BHM1 workers announced they would be forming a union.

Even though the union drive at BHM1 has received a significant amount of media attention, Birmingham and its surrounding areas has a long history of unionism and worker resistance. According to Kelly (2008), the rise of the steel and textile industries in the late 1800s “created a distinct situation in which African American and white laborers sometimes found common ground in their protests against [...] working conditions” (para 1). Historically, this steel and mining industry also heavily benefitted from convict laborers, many of which were Black (Yaeger, 2022). Although there was a movement aimed to organize free miners, convict laborers were used to replace striking free laborers as a retaliation strategy (Blackmon, 2001). However, in the 1930’s, Black workers in the coal mines of Birmingham made up 60 percent of local union membership (Woodrum, 2007).

After World War II, with the decline in organized labor and wages, favorable conditions for corporations were created, resulting in them opening facilities in the South (Kelly, 2008), such as Amazon. Further, Birmingham was one of the major sites of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Martin Luther King Jr, “Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city on the United States” and that King was “in Birmingham because injustice is here” (King, 1963, para. 6; para. 3). Civil rights activists faced much violence and injustice by the Birmingham and Alabama government to disrupt the movement, such as by destroying community spaces and churches (United States Civil Rights Trail, n.d.). In addition, according to the United States Census, in 2021, 72.5% of Bessemer residents were Black or African American alone (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), and the median income from 2017-2021 was \$32,416 in 2021 dollars and 28.8% of Bessemer residents were in poverty (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), which may lead corporations to justify lower wages, especially as compared to other areas in the country with higher median incomes. Based on this racial history

and its long-lasting effects in Birmingham, in combination with Birmingham's labor history and the demographics of BHM1 workers, understanding the communication of BAmazon is valuable to recognize how workers, specifically Black workers, are resisting their working conditions.

### **Background to BAmazon**

Since its founding in 1994, Amazon had very low unionizing activity and the efforts that have been made were all declared unsuccessful, meaning that it has been “union-free in the US practically since its foundation” (Boewe & Schulten, 2017, p. 43). Examples of such efforts include efforts to unionize Amazon call center workers in Seattle through the Communication Workers of America (CWA), and technicians in Middletown, Delaware through the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW; Boewe & Schulten, 2017, p. 43). However, Amazon has often engaged in union busting activities (e.g., calling the police on union organizers, illegally firing workers engaged in organizing) to stop these union efforts early (O'Donovan, 2022). Likely due to union busting, Amazon has been union-free until 2022.

In late 2020, warehouse employees in Bessemer started their unionizing effort with the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to counter bad working conditions and benefits, such as having to urinate in bottles as break time is limited, experiencing extreme heat, and a poor handling of COVID-19 measures (Kelly, 2021). Specifically, they want “the right to collectively bargain over [their] working conditions including items such as safety standards, training, breaks, pay, benefits, and other important issues that would make [their] workplace better” (*Why form a union at Amazon?*, n.d., para 1). For example, regarding safety standards, the Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration (OSHA) announced in January of 2023 that inspections of warehouse facilities found that “workers [were] exposed to ergonomic hazards” resulting in over \$60 thousand worth of penalties (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). A

main reason for such efforts is that having a union contract that allows collective bargaining and negotiation is legally binding, meaning that more accountabilities will be placed on Amazon with the hope of improving conditions in the workplace. Based on what union advocates say, Amazon has never been held accountable; “see[ing] itself both intertwined with the government and above it” (Jaffe, 2021, pg. 33), suggesting Amazon believes that they will not face consequences to illegal union-busting tactics.

In an effort to organize workers and counter the working conditions Amazon put them in, workers reached out to the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) due to RWDSUs experience in the geographical area through past unionization efforts, for example in a poultry plant (Jaffe, 2021). The connection between the RWDSU and a union for Amazon workers comes from the RWDSUs commitment to fight for working people and social justice. Historically, the RWDSU have marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement and march with Black Lives Matter today (*Why RWDSU?*, n.d., para 1). Being committed to racial justice alongside labor justice is essential in this case as the majority of Amazon workers in Bessemer are Black Americans, and racial injustices shall not be cast aside during such unionization efforts. The RWDSU also holds “building coalitions with community organizations, communities of faiths, and [their] local neighborhood leaders” as an important step to “build upon the solidarity that created the labor movement” (*Why RWDSU?*, n.d., para 3). They further seek to spread the word of Amazon workers and motivate them to join the RWDSU through the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where many changes in labor have been encountered through surveillance and technology, for example human workers being replaced by robots and workers’ workplace activities being surveilled. Their ultimate goal is to “shift the balance of power from management to [their] members on the shop floor,” which can be accomplished by

having strong union contracts that give power back to the workers (*Why RWDSU?*, n.d., para 2). In addition, the RWDSU helped Amazon workers in Staten Island, NY successfully unionize (*Why RWDSU?*, n.d., para 4).

As of 2023, only one Amazon facility has been unionized and while there are many efforts to unionize further facilities worldwide (i.e., United States, Germany) many have been shut down and disturbed by the corporation. To do so, Amazon has employed myriad union-busting techniques to keep workers from supporting and joining such efforts. Specifically in the case of warehouse workers in Bessemer, Amazon started increasingly sharing anti-union messages with workers, such as through text messages, as well as signs and flyers throughout the facility, including bathroom stalls during the election to unionize in April of 2021 (Jaffe, 2021). This was reportedly not the first instance of sharing anti-union messages with workers, since it was previously reported that workers started receiving messages. While organizing, workers stand under constant surveillance by Amazon (Streitfeld, 2021). In addition, Amazon also hired several anti-union consultants with previous union-busting experience to help them develop anti-union tactics, spending \$4.3 million in 2021 and over \$14 million in 2022 (Jamieson, 2022; Jamieson, 2023).

As a result of Amazon's union busting tactics, an election for unionization that was held in April of 2021 was unsuccessful. The results showed that less than 30% of workers wanted to join the RWDSU, specifically a vote of 738 votes in favor of the union against 1,798 votes (Thornton, 2022a). Because of the union-busting tactics of Amazon, BAmazon appealed the election to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). As of late November of 2021, the Amazon union has been granted another chance of voting due to the recognition of Amazon's union busting tactics, which are considered illegal. In the second election on March 31, 2022,

Amazon workers in Bessemer again voted against unionizations. While votes to unionize were closer in number to votes against unionization, only 38.6% of eligible votes were cast (Thornton, 2022a). With allegations contesting the process of the election coming from both BAmazon and Amazon, it is unclear what the future of BAmazon is (Thornton, 2022b).

### **Unions and Political Knowledge**

Unions are inherently democratic organizations as they offer civic participation and engagement in democratic procedures such as honest and free elections, and filling leadership roles with their own members, resulting in them being sites for teaching members how to participate in democracy (Madland et al., 2020). Furthermore, unions allow workers to voice their grievances and demands in their workplace, and protect them from retaliation of their employer, enabling workers to take part in workplace democracy. Therefore, the relationship between workers organizing and management is not a ‘one versus the other’ relationship, rather, it is more complex. The overall goal of unions is for workers to have the ability to negotiate and work together with their management, therefore restructuring the power relations in organizations, especially in regard to decision making. According to Stohl & Cheney (2001), several paradoxes and tensions of employee participation and workplace participation are possible. One of the paradoxes of power, the paradox of homogeneity, is defined as “failing to see the value of resistance or oppositional voices; excessive valuing of agreement, cooperation, and consensus, while preaching diversity of opinion” (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 360). In cases of unionization, workers are oftentimes met with resistance from their employer through retaliation and union-busting, even when the employer emphasizes to care about employees deeply. For example, Amazon, which claims to “spend over \$1.2 billion to provide free skills training to

employees” and “offer[ing] comprehensive, highly competitive benefits that begin on day one” (Amazon, n.d.) – meanwhile workers are demanding better benefits.

Efforts to unionize are often interpreted as political movements due to the background of the labor movement and how prevalent a shared political identity and knowledge are among union members. As such, many unions create political awareness by informing their members by sending out newsletters or sharing information on social media networks (Francia, 2006, p. 26-28). Sharing political knowledge to union members is essential as voting for people who are in support of unions on a state-wide and on a national level are important. If people who support unions are voted into office, they will make unions more accessible to workers, if they keep their word. Union membership is linked to members’ participation in politics, including election turnout and political knowledge (Ahlquist, 2017). In comparison to non-union members, union members are also concluded to vote for candidates on the left of the political spectrum (Ahlquist, 2017). A study comparing the political knowledge of union members with that of non-union members showcased that informing union members leads to an increase in “civic engagement, affording more citizens a “voice” and ability to influence public policy” (Macdonald, 2019, p. 138). It is also mentioned that, through joining unions, individuals are introduced to political information, allowing for more informed voters. Such relationships of support between labor unions and political candidates may have greater influence on policy and legislation, which could restrict corporations in their union-busting abilities – including Amazon.

Aside from political knowledge on a state-wide and a national level, unions also increase political knowledge in the workplace. In the United States, workplace democracy “is on live support” (Logan, 2021, p. 38) due to union-busting campaigns employed by large and powerful corporations such as Amazon, which keep workers from organizing and joining unions. But

joining unions gives members political power in workplace democracy as they get to sit at the table with managers and executives to be involved in decision making processes in the organization. Through collective bargaining, workers are able to form their contracts and have a say in their wages, working conditions, health insurance, and benefits among other aspects. But if workers do not have such abilities, employers have the opportunity to base these contracts on their own terms, which may lead to exploitative and unsafe practices. In the effort to unionize warehouse workers at Amazon in Bessemer, through media attention, Amazon has the ability to inspire other workers to organize and begin unionizing, which will bring workplace democracy back to life in the United States (Logan, 2021).

### **Activism and Social Media Usage**

Social media has been a tool for advocating for necessary changes whether in the labor movement (i.e., worker demands; Canella, 2017) or other social movements (i.e., for reproductive rights, anti-racism, etc.). Given the increased awareness of unjust working conditions in an increasingly global capitalist market within a digital age it is vital to understand how efforts to unionize have been made through social media – messages shared by workers are foundational for understanding such efforts. According to Cammaerts (2015), “social movement[s are] a social process through which collective actors articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to identified problems by engaging in [...] collective actions” (p. 2). Based on this definition, unions can also be considered social movements due to their actions, such as striking, voicing demands and grievances, and actively uniting workers. Cammaerts contends that social media is used in two communicative action orientations: inward, relating to organization and coordination, and outward, relating to

recruitment and mobilization (p. 4). Further, social media allows activists to share “movement goals and frames more easily” (p.5).

As a tool, social media has been used successfully by many social movements such as the Arab Spring, Fridays for Future, and Black Lives Matter. Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a movement protesting wealth inequality and political corruption, heavily relied on social media as well through using platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and Facebook. The way in which social media was used in this instance allows for alternative settings of organizing that would not be possible through traditional mass media and multiplied and transformed the grounds of possibility for activism (DeLuca et al., 2012), as the amount of content and speed of posting allows for a more participatory citizenship. Movement activist use of social media also allows users to “contribut[e] to a new kind of crowdsourced citizen journalism,” allowing the movement to set an agenda instead of mainstream media from a wide range of sources (Veenstra et al., 2014, p. 70). However, the nature of social media also made it difficult for occupy activists to create boundaries as it “was indirectly shaped by the accessibility and visibility of the different conversation sites of the movement” (Kavada, 2015, p. 884). Therefore, social media creates platforms for citizen journalists and allows users to engage with information in a fast pace.

Though while social media is seen as accessible to activists, there are “deep digital activism inequalities between working-class and middle/upper-class groups” (Schradie, 2018, p. 51), as it requires additional digital labor, commitment, and upkeep with the newest digital technologies, creating a digital activism gap. Though this does not mean that digitally weak activists and movements are not active as much organizing and activism happens face-to-face, unseen on social media.

## **Theoretical Framework**

As mentioned previously, the Four Flows of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) by Robert McPhee will be used to understand the organizational process of modern-day labor unions. The CCO perspective asserts that, instead of viewing communication as something happening within an organization, organizations emerge through a communicative process and an “ongoing flow of interaction” (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1156). Specifically, McPhee’s Four Flows model assumes that, for an organization to emerge, four message flows are required: a) membership negotiation, b) organizational self-structuring, c) activity coordination, and d) institutional positioning (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). The four flows model argues that all of the flows have the ability to constitute an organization but that one flow by itself will not adequately do so (McPhee & Iverson, 2009), meaning that all flows must be present for an organization to be constituted. However, the four flows “can and nearly always do overlap” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, pg. 294).

The first flow, membership negotiation, includes the processes of socialization, shaping of member relations, identification, and spokespersonship. Here, individuals are integrated to become members of the organization, as established through communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Such membership is not fixed but is transformed and reproduced. Additionally, storytelling, introductions, initiations, and requests for information are strategies used by incoming, outgoing, and present organizational members in this flow (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). For unions to exist, workers must come together in an effort to organize, which requires workers to intentionally enter the union. To recruit workers, relationships between workers and the organization (i.e., the union) must be built, member relations created, and organizational boundaries crossed by entering or exiting the organization. Power-claiming, human agency, and

spokesmanship are further elements in membership negotiation, and reflected in union organizing.

Second, organizational self-structuring, is “any process that serves to steer the organization” (McPhee & Zaug, 2009, p. 36). As derived from Structuration Theory, the organization is seen as a system taking control of and influencing itself yet does not concern the act of work itself. Examples of communication in self-structuring include documents such as organizational charts and policies, as they arrange power, norms, language (i.e., jargon), commitments, etc. (McPhee & Zaug, 2009; MCPhee & Iverson, 2009). Besides documents, such as union authorization cards, organizational self-structuring is applicable to union organizing as the organization is viewed as a system. Elements such as explanations of power (i.e., as “members come to have more or less consensually and legitimately recognized powers” [McPhee & Iverson, 2009, p. 74]) and the organizational history, different stages of agency (i.e., the actions available to workers and the ways they are constrained), and groups of people who represent and refer to themselves as the organization, are seen in union organizing –specifically considering the power relations between union and management.

In the third flow, activity coordination, the purposes and roles of organizational members are defined. The division of labor (i.e., which responsibilities workers are assigned to) communicated through this flow includes managerial and worker interactions. Other processes included in this flow are solving organizational problems and support (McPhee & Zaug, 2009; MCPhee & Iverson, 2009). It is also defined as “the realm of emergence [...] of the slow sedimentation of organizational culture/knowledge” (McPhee & Iverson, 2009, p. 78). As workers come together, build solidarity, and are situated within the greater labor movement, an organizational identity and culture is built. In activity coordination, organizational members are

viewed as productive agents, and organizational goals are defined as a result of everyday actions taken within this flow. Yet, this flow does not suggest equality of power. As with labor organizing, union members have agency and, together, make decisions of what the union stands for, what its goals are, and which actions are to be taken.

Lastly, institutional positioning connects the organization and external entities through communication. This flow also includes “the development and maintenance of a ‘place’ in the inter-organizational or larger social system,” for example through public relations work (McPhee & Zaug, 2009, p. 40). In this flow, the external face of the organization is controlled and coordinated for legitimization and recognition, and environmental exploration is conducted to collect information about connections and competitors (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Through social media usage, unions place themselves within the greater labor movement, gaining legitimacy by having a voice and speaking up for their needs. Between interactions with individuals and other unions online, a support network is established and publicized, giving unions a further claim to legitimacy. Oftentimes, unions also identify individuals who are representative of the organization.

The four flows, though presented separately in this manuscript, interact and co-occur (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Because of their simplicity in explaining organizational construction, the four flows of CCO have been used to study CEOs’ use of social media, al-Qa’ida, and Dabiq (Girginova, 2015; Bean & Buikema, 2015; Bruscella & Bisel, 2018). However, they have also been criticized as too broad and insufficiently organizational (Bisel, 2010; Sillince, 2010, p. 133). Notably absent in CCO research has been a focus on union organizing—an emphasis that has the potential to expand the theory and contribute to organizational communication scholars’ understanding of how communication enables or restrains organizing. Because CCO scholarship

has not touched unionizing and communication research has not focused on organizational messages on Twitter regarding labor organizing, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1:** How does BAmazon communicate unionization through Twitter?

**RQ2:** How does BAmazon constitute itself as an organization through Twitter?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

To answer the research questions regarding BAmazon's use of Twitter in communicating its unionization effort and how Twitter is used to communicatively constitute themselves as an organization, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. Unlike quantitative content analysis, "data [in a qualitative content analysis] are presented in words and themes, which makes it possible to draw some interpretation of the results" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10). Based on personal communication with the National Director of Communications and Media Relations of RWDSU, Chelsea Connor, it is known that the account is run by the union (C. Connor, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Knowing who is in charge of the Twitter account is indicative of who has power to craft the message. Tweets were taken from the official BAmazon account using random date sampling. Then, tweets were organized in an excel sheet, analyzed, and qualitatively coded using inductive coding and deductive coding with the 3C Method (Schradié, 2021). This process is described in more detail below.

#### **Data Collection**

Original tweets and retweets shared by BAmazon were collected through random date sampling<sup>2</sup>. The randomizer allowed for 25 dates to be selected, so it was run multiple times until saturation was reached. In case of several tweets posted at one date, tweets were randomly selected depending on how many tweets were posted (e.g., if two tweets were posted only one was selected). One exception was Black Friday in 2022, a date that was randomly generated, where four tweets were selected to match the magnitude of tweeting that took place that day. If there wasn't a tweet for the selected dates, a tweet was taken from the closest date. The sample for this content analysis includes 100 Tweets out of approximately 755, shared by

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.random.org/calendar-dates/>

@BAmazonUnion from October 2020 to January 2023. At 100 tweets, data saturation was reached and “the data [...] provide[s] for and substantiate[s] meaningful and significant claims” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). In short, after the analysis of 100 tweets, the data provided support for recurring themes. As well, after 100 tweets were collected, further tweets were repetitive in messages and content.

Included were original tweets, retweets, and quoted tweets. Retweets and quoted tweets were not excluded as a way of seeing which content BAmazon chooses to share with its followers, but also to understand which entities BAmazon works with to have a surface insight into the network BAmazon is involved with, relating back to the community aspect of the 3C method and the CCO flow of institutional positioning. After tweets were collected through random sampling, the links to said tweets were organized by date and type of content (i.e., retweet or original tweet; video, quote tweet [retweets that include comments from users], text, visual). However, screenshots of tweets were not taken at the time of data collection.

Utilizing content made available on social media platforms such as Twitter may allow for unethical behavior and handling of data, challenges of consent load additional ethical bearings on researchers. However, as the content from BAmazon was publicly shared and the Twitter audience of BAmazon was oftentimes encouraged to share certain tweets and messages. In addition, this study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) which determined that a full review of this study was not required. While tweets and handles could have been anonymized, due to the advanced features on Twitter, the identity of Twitter users could easily be found out (Webb et al., 2017).

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data sampled from Twitter, I first read through all the tweets looking for patterns. Then I analyzed tweets using the 3C Method by Schradie (2021) to understand the underlying threads which connect elements of representation for the union and to analyze the power relations expressed in the data. Next, I analyzed the tweets using the Four Flows (McPhee & Iverson, 2009) to understand which tweets correlate with the four different flows and which overlap. Lastly, I critically interpreted the data, based on my previous analyses using the 3C Method and the Four Flows, to derive themes, which are discussed in the findings. The 3C method, and how it was used to code, is described next.

To answer how BAmazon communicates unionization through Twitter, I use open coding guided by the 3C method approach of context, class, and community, designed as an analytical lens for studying labor organizing in digital spaces (Schradie, 2021). First, context looks at “the type, location, and sector of work” as they must be considered to realize the effect of these aspects have on “labor organizing generally but also for digital unionizing” (Schradie, 2021, pg. 702). In coding tweets, context serves to identify and understand the prior and present conditions at Amazon, and why individuals seek unionizing out as an alternative to leaving their workplace. Second, class is used to analyze the power differences in “controlling the digital means of production” and the disempowerment of workers at work and online (Schradie, 2021, pg. 703). Tweets that describe class might be those that underline the power relationship between Amazon workers and management. The third and last aspect of the method, community, is essential in understanding the networks build by the union online and offline, and the institutions which are relevant to the unionization effort, such as the RWDSU and Amazon in the case of BAmazon. Since “the community factor is key in participatory labor organizing in general,” it will also

apply to digital unionizing as content of other entities may be shared and networks with other unions may be build online (Schradi, 2021, pg. 704).

To answer how BAmazon communicatively constitutes itself as an organization on Twitter, I also coded tweets using the Four Flows Model in CCO. This model asserts that organizations emerge through the four flows (i.e., membership negotiation, organizational self-structuring, activity coordination, institutional positioning). The flows happen simultaneously and are not mutually exclusive, hence why this study employs qualitative rather than quantitative coding methods. Tweets were categorized into which flow(s) they fit and further analyzed to understand how they do so. Specifically, it is of interest to see how the 3Cs of context, class, and community, and the Four Flows reflect each other. Lastly, careful and consistent qualitative analysis of the collected tweets highlighted themes in BAmazon's effort to unionize: solidarity, tensions of power distribution, and action. Connections of the themes to the 3C Method and Four Flows Model were explored.

## Chapter 4: Findings

After coding the data, three distinct themes emerged based on frequency and intersections of the Four Flows and the 3C Method: (1) solidarity, within the membership of BAmazon, and with organizations and individuals in the labor movement; (2) tensions of power distribution, represented by tweets highlighting the inequities between workers and management, and power-claiming of workers; and (3) action directed to members and potential members, and to individuals in the labor movement and community members. While all four flows are present in each theme, some receive stronger representation than others. Thus, the flows that were strongly supported by the data will be underlined within each theme.

### **Solidarity**

The most distinct theme found when analyzing the tweets was solidarity. In the language of unionism and labor organizing, solidarity is a way of expressing unity between individuals through common objectives and goals (Unger, 2014, para 5). Solidarity means mutual support, respect, and action. As stated by Harry Bridges, a former American union leader, “the most important word in the language of the working class is solidarity” (Sprang, n.d., para 3). Therefore, solidarity is an important aspect of community within the labor movement. Based on the role and importance of solidarity in the labor movement, it is no surprise that a theme of solidarity was visible when analyzing tweets shared by BAmazon. The theme of solidarity can be separated in two subthemes: (a) solidarity between BAmazon workers and members; and (b) solidarity between BAmazon and organizations and individuals in the labor movement and community.

### *Solidarity between BAmazon workers and members*

Solidarity between BAmazon workers and members was important to ensure a strong bond between members to retain membership and to recruit potential members. An original tweet shared by BAmazon states on January 29, 2022:

By standing together, we can make real change in our workplace! When we unionize, we can ensure job security and bargain for safe working conditions, fair wages, a fair paid time off structure, and so much more! #BAmazonUnion #UnionYes #1u

This tweet stresses the togetherness of members and what can be accomplished through a union. Solidarity represents common goals shared by members, in this case changes to job security, safety, and compensation. Not only does this tweet emphasize the importance of community but it also exemplifies class by expressing reasons why workers are organizing (e.g., fair wages). Similarly, a tweet shared by RWDSU on June 2, 2022, and retweeted by BAmazon expresses solidarity between members:

“I had to sit back and ask myself this question: what am I gonna do to improve the conditions we all work under to make things better for all of us?” - @ILavelleThomas on why he started organizing with @BAmazonUnion in Bessemer.

Through this tweet, a BAmazon member shared what made them join the organizing efforts of BAmazon. This tweet shows spokespersonship and gives agency to workers' experiences. It also furthers the shared goal and context of BAmazon members – improving working conditions and making things better – and gives reasons for other workers to reflect on their experiences and join the effort to organize. Additionally, this tweet exemplifies the aspect of community as it highlights individual and collective action to improve working conditions.

To create further solidarity between workers and motivate others to join, tweets strategically use community centered language and highlight the treatment of workers:

"We are not robots designed to only live to work. We work to live. We deserve to live, laugh, and love, and have a full, fulfilling life. We the workers deserve to be treated with dignity and respect." -Jennifer Bates, #BAmazonUnion leader, dropping the 🔪 #UnionYES #1u

Jennifer Bates, one of the organizers and spokespeople of BAmazon, is quoted in a tweet posted by the RWDSU on March 17, 2021. With this quote, Bates gives context to the current working conditions, and an analysis of power differences by emphasizing how workers are stripped of their humanity and seen by managements as robotic (Schradie, 2021). Furthermore, those conditions and power differences present clear reasons why workers are unionizing, and by extension why a community was formed around the efforts to form a union. With the tone of the quote, workers are given human agency as it simultaneously shows that management sees them as non-human actors but gives humanity back to the workers by using language of deservingness and what that entails (e.g., dignity, love, etc.; McPhee & Iverson, 2009). As discussed in Kane & Newman (2017), anti-union rhetoric frequently portrays union workers as “underserving of greater compensation, power or public support” (p. 998), further proving the importance and intention behind BAmazon framing workers as deserving.

To recruit membership, tweets outwardly telling workers to join the union and providing the tools to do so were often shared:

We, the workers at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama are fighting to join a #union. Join our fight visit <http://BAmazonUnion.org> now #Bamazonunion #1U #unionstrong

This tweet was the first shared by the @BAmazonUnion account on October 20, 2020, announcing the, at this time, almost three-year long fight to unionize workers at BHM1 in Bessemer. It features a video where a worker speaks about their negative experiences at BHM1 and reasons for workers to unionize, such as wanting safer working conditions, benefits, dignity, and respect (context). Both the video and the tweet conclude with motivating workers to join the union (membership negotiation).

Another tweet posted by BAmazon on November 16, 2020, accompanied by a graphic stating “workers united will never be defeated,” expresses that:

When workers stand together we win together! Coming together to fight for change at Amazon will result in a brighter future for all of us. #unionstrong

This tweet asserts that there is an aspect of community and collaboration that is essential in labor organizing, as is solidarity. It is clearly indicated in other tweets that BHM1 workers are not satisfied with the working conditions at Amazon and they are not given a voice to enact changes in their place of work (class). When paired with tweets that advocate for “coming together to fight,” it becomes clear that the proposed solution to improving working conditions is community, solidarity, and, by extension, unionizing. These tweets, therefore, communicate that a network of workers is needed to succeed in this fight, signaling the importance of community (Schradi, 2021). As members of the union are declared productive agents based on their collective role and place within the move to unionize and change working conditions, activity coordination of the union is hereby exemplified.

The communicated solidarity between members of BAmazon is representative of the membership negotiation flow. In the selected tweets, BAmazon establishes a relationship between the members and BAmazon by letting them speak as to why they joined the effort.

Further, a specific account of a member was shared, giving spokespersonship to the worker, an important aspect of membership negotiation which involves shifting which voices are heard (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). In the first tweet, BAmazon frames the member relations of standing together as a collective of people with a similar goal that is collectively enacted and formulated by membership. Their message also gives incentive for workers to enter the organization by displaying what can be achieved through collective action and solidarity. While solidarity between BAmazon workers and members is highly present in tweets, solidarity between BAmazon and the greater Labor Movement is also present.

### ***Solidarity between BAmazon and the greater Labor Movement***

While tweets showed solidarity among members of BAmazon, tweets also showed solidarity between BAmazon and organizations, individuals in the labor movement, and the local community. Solidarity also means community – that being one of the main codes of the 3C method in the tweets targeting solidarity from other unions and individuals to BAmazon workers. In the 3C method, community represents coalitions between organizations and support, just as the described tweets do. This community of supporters legitimizes BAmazon as an organization but also positions them in a greater network of unionism and labor organizing. A tweet retweeted by BAmazon and originally shared by AlphabetWorkers, the union of Google’s parent company Alphabet Inc.’s workers, on January 15, 2021, asserts:

Solidarity to all the Amazon fulfillment workers pushing for a union in Bessemer. Every tech worker—in the cafeterias, in the self-driving cars, in the offices, in the warehouses—deserves democracy & representation at work. We’re with you all the way.

While this tweet clearly states the word solidarity, the word itself is not the single determinant in showing solidarity. AlphabetWorkers clearly position themselves with BAmazon and against

Amazon, exclaiming they fully support the workers and creating a connection as both unions are for tech workers. Further, this tweet expresses a message of deservingness, acknowledging the humanity of workers and their goal of having a voice in negotiating their working conditions. Besides community, this tweet also gives an analysis of the power differences between management and workers, and recognizes the targeted disempowerment Amazon tries to employ toward its workers – therefore, class is included into their message. Another tweet, shared by uniglobalunion, a global union federation representing skills and service workers, on April 1, 2022, declares the following:

⚡”Whatever the final outcome in Bessemer, the close vote is a testament to the passion of the workers. It shows their ability to face down relentless union busting and the guts of the union to take on this difficult campaign...” @CHoffmanUNI @BamazonUnion

After BAmazon’s first union election in April 2021, there was a lot of uncertainty about the results as well as the future of the union. In an act of solidarity, this tweet showed continuous support from UNI Global Union leader Christy Hoffman and other unions. This message salutes organizers and members of BAmazon’s continuous efforts even through strong union-busting tactics employed by Amazon and the anti-union sentiment shared in the South. The importance and strength of BAmazon’s community is shared with this message by UNI Global Union.

A quote tweet shared by labor journalist and author Kim Kelly on June 18, 2022, as a response to the president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA Sara Nelson, states that:

It’s been amazing seeing these Alabama workers showing up for one another over the past year, from striking miners participating in solidarity actions with Birmingham Starbucks workers to RWDSU @BAmazonUnion folks showing up for weekly UMWA rallies. We love a crossover episode ❤️

The reference to “a crossover episode” is a humorous way to emphasize the interconnectedness of various labor efforts. While the labor movement in Alabama is strong and connected, the overall labor struggle creates community and solidarity between unions and supporters of the labor movement. Labor organizing creates a network, as described in this tweet, BAmazon is connected with the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) across Alabama (community; Schradie, 2020). Unlike the previous subtheme, where community was demonstrated through the membership negotiation among BAmazon workers, this subtheme extends membership to the labor movement more broadly. Although this type of communication may traditionally be considered institutional positioning, the emphasis on community indicates membership.

While many tweets in this theme depict the labor movement showing solidarity to BAmazon, BAmazon also explicitly shows solidarity to the greater labor movement:

We deserve:

☞ Better pay

☞ Job security

☞ Policy changes with our input

☞ A safer place to work

#BAmazonUnion workers are joining Amazon workers across the world in rising up to

#MakeAmazonPay!

This tweet was shared by BAmazon on November 25, 2022. BHM1 is not the only Amazon warehouse where workers are organizing union drives, such as in New York and internationally. Though such union drives may be done through different means (e.g., BAmazon is organizing with RWDSU while workers in New York created the Amazon Labor Union (ALU)), they have

a collective goal of getting a seat at the table with management and having their voices heard. Thus, the network of Amazon workers organizing is tight knit and supportive (community). Additionally, this tweet expresses demands from other Amazon union drives other than BAmazon through the #MakeAmazonPay campaign, showing that demands are collective as well (context).

As tweets of solidarity between BAmazon and other entities place the former into a greater network of unionism and labor organizing, their content is applicable to the flow of institutional positioning. In this flow, connections between organizations are built and legitimacy is established (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Clearly, through solidarity, other unions, organizations, and individuals show their support and coalition with another. In the selected tweets, both AlphabetWorkers and the General Secretary of UNI Global Union, representing the union, showing direct unity and mutual respect.

In response to the messages of solidarity expressing support toward BAmazon members, BAmazon thanked actors and allies to the labor movement on March 29, 2021:

Thank you to everyone around the country and the world who has stood in solidarity with us! 🙏 You have given us hope, strength, and the courage to fight for our union — and for racial and economic justice #UnionYes

By sharing a message of gratitude for solidarity, BAmazon cements the importance of support in their effort to unionize. Again, this tweet exemplifies the aspect of community, and how vital community is to the labor movement as it encourages organizers to continue their efforts, even when they are faced with injustices and union-busting strategies employed by Amazon. The tweet also connects to institutional positioning as it displays the received support and solidarity from other entities, nationally and globally (McPhee & Zaug, 2009).

## **Tensions of Power Distribution**

The second noticeable theme is tensions of power distribution, which can be divided into two subthemes: inequity and power-claiming. In the managerial capitalist system of today, “power is not generally coercive in modern organizations but represented by freely given consent, frequently to someone else’s benefit” (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 43-44). This idea of power is reflected in the shared tweets, where BAmazon highlights the unequal distribution of power and inequities between the management of Amazon and the workers, where Amazon’s actions are framed to be good for the organization, but according to workers in support of the union, only benefits management. Further, Amazon workers claim power through sharing tweets by emphasizing how they are taking back agency and reclaiming their voice. This theme also provides more nuance to understanding how power works in union organizing—shifting the perspective from one where Amazon and workers are pitted against each other to one where we understand the workers not completely powerless, yet, potentially influenced by union-busting tactics. Such tensions of power distribution between workers and management leads to the working conditions workers are resisting by unionizing.

### ***Inequity***

In the previous theme, solidarity is built, in part, by sharing accounts of the abysmal working conditions. In this section, accounts of inequity, meaning a lack of justice and fairness, and unjust power relationships between Amazon and workers gave legitimacy to the union drive by highlighting the need for working conditions to be changed, specifically with workers’ input. As mentioned previously, Amazon spent over \$14.2 million in 2022 on anti-union consultants to support Amazon’s union busting drive (Jamieson, 2023) as well as holding captive audience meetings to intimidate organizers and spread false information regarding unions. In a tweet

shared by the RWDSU on April 19, 2021, and retweeted by BAmazon, the impact of Amazon's union busting is described:

Amazon's anti-union campaign created an atmosphere of confusion, coercion, and fear of reprisal. That's why our union filed 23 Objections to the #BAmazonUnion election. "We won't rest until workers' voices are heard fairly under the law" -@sappelbaum #1u.

Here, the president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Stuart Appelbaum alludes to how Amazon, through its anti-union tactics, uses its power and resources to suppress workers into stopping the union drive, giving explanations of power as well as the organizational history, coinciding with organizational self-structuring (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). In this tweet, both context to working conditions and the disempowerment (class) of workers are displayed (Schradié, 2021). As a way of resisting this suppression, the RWDSU filed objections to the union election of BAmazon as Amazon's union busting inhibited this election. These objections act as ways for workers to reclaim their agency in elections and voice, which was constrained by Amazon's union-busting. Additionally, this tweet reifies the connection between BAmazon and RWDSU, and the support received, feeding into the flow of institutional positioning. Another original tweet by BAmazon from November 15, 2021, similarly, highlighting the power differences and injustices between Amazon and workers, reveals:

- ✘ Captive audience meetings
- ✘ Anti-union text messages
- ✘ Anti-union signs in the workplace

Sound familiar?

It's not just @amazon - this is the union busting playbook that companies use to silence workers. #UnionBustingIsDisgusting #BamazonUnion

BAmazon intentionally reveals the specific tactics used by Amazon to ensure the failure and dissolution of the union drive, such as captive audience meetings, where workers are subjected to anti-union messages. While captive audience meetings, and anti-union messages in text and sign form are not the only strategies used in union-busting, they are the most prevalent and used in the case of BAmazon. While highlighting the anti-union tactics experienced by Amazon workers in Bessemer, this tweet also declares these strategies as not unique to Amazon but used by many companies in the case of workers organizing to suppress their voices, further expressing how common such power differences and inequities between workers and management in organizations are. As with the previous tweet, again, this tweet analyzes the power differences, through class, and reveals present conditions at Amazon, giving context, as well as highlighting how workers' agency is constrained by Amazon (organizational self-structuring; Schradie, 2020; McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

Further, a tweet shared by RWDSU on December 7, 2022, and retweeted by BAmazon shares:

BAmazonUnion's Jennifer Bates - "@amazon is still using the same union busting playbook, nothing has changed!!!" On Bessemer's pending 2nd election.

#UNICommerceRise @CommerceUni @uniglobalunion #unionbusting #unionYES

Jennifer Bates, one of the more known organizers of BAmazon, is quoted exclaiming the lack of changes in Amazon's behavior toward organizing at BHM1, such as union-busting. It specifically showcases Amazon's unwillingness to come forward and work with workers regarding their demands to improve their working conditions, connecting to context and class, as the conditions at BHM1 have yet to change and Amazon continuously works on disempowering workers and organizers through union-busting strategies (Schradie, 2021). However, this tweet

also shows BAmazon workers' persistence and connection to the cause as they refuse to give up and work on a second election—contrasting the resistance of Amazon with the resilience of BAmazon. Not only is Jennifer Bates presented as a spokesman for BAmazon in this tweet, connecting to membership negotiation, but this tweet also engages in self-structuring as it explains the power of BAmazon through persisting even though they are met with union-busting strategies. The tweet further establishes the inequity in relation to Amazon, again giving legitimacy to BAmazon as it is clarified that workers must continue organizing as Amazon has yet to consider workers' demands.

In a quote tweet to a video posted by More Perfect Union on December 9, 2021, where labor journalist and author Kim Kelly interviewed BHM1 workers following the deaths of two workers, BAmazon emphasized a specific quote:

“You a body. Once that body's used up, they just bring someone else in to do the work.”

Amazon workers Isaiah Thomas and Perry Connelly speak out about recent worker deaths that occurred within hours of each other at the Bessemer warehouse.

#BAmazonUnion @GrimKim

Not only does this tweet further stress how dangerous, even fatal, the working conditions at BHM1 are and why they are unionizing (context), but by stating that workers are merely replicable and, in a sense, their humanity is stripped away, the disempowerment and power differences between workers and management is clear (class). As workers and union members speak out about the working conditions at BHM1, they become spokespeople for these groups (membership negotiation) and claim power as a collective. Similarly, the video in the quoted tweet emphasizes the lack of care management shows for their workers, as one of the deceased workers asked for time off but was told to go back to work (activity coordination).

Further tweets denote unsafe working conditions and a lack of care from management:

“I don’t know what I was breathing in for that long, and I don’t know if it’s still in the air at work today either. I feel very unsafe and I wish management would treat us like humans and care about our safety in a real way” - Amazon worker Isaiah Thomas

This tweet was shared by BAmazon on March 29, 2022. Following a malfunction of a compressor at BHM1, workers kept working per management’s request. Isaiah Thomas, another BHM1 worker and BAmazon member who acts as a spokesperson (membership negotiation), issues that workers experiences uncertainty regarding their health and safety following the incident (context), and expresses the discrepancies between worker wellbeing and management demands (class). Again, it is conveyed that workers feel dehumanized by the management as they fail to recognize concerns regarding workers’ health and safety. By openly discussing concerns of safety, health, and management interaction, BAmazon creates legitimacy of their cause (institutional positioning).

### ***Power-Claiming***

Through tweets addressing workers and the greater labor movement community, BAmazon claims its own power in relation to Amazon. The previous subtheme highlights how Amazon held power over BAmazon workers. In this subtheme, tweets underscore BAmazon’s agency in the greater context of their working conditions and in the unjust relationship with Amazon, including factors outside of unionism. Power-claiming gives workers a voice that has been suppressed for long. In an effort to resist typical union-busting rhetoric, BAmazon tweeted on October 21, 2021:

. #FactsMatter Let's be clear, we are the workers, we are THE UNION! #1U  
#BamazonUnion.

In union-busting language, unions are often framed as organizations that go into companies, recruit members, and don't give those members a voice but make decisions for them without considering the needs of workers, meaning that they are an entity separate from workers. In reality, as this tweet contends, workers are the union. Though there are organizers from RWDSU helping BAmazon workers to successfully organize, the workers themselves make decisions, agree on pressing issues, coordinate strikes and community events, and will be the ones sitting at the bargaining table. Through this tweet, BAmazon establishes that the workers are the union, resisting Amazon's union-busting rhetoric. As they are resisting this rhetoric, this tweet specifically emphasizes class through analyzing the power differences between Amazon and its' workers (class) as well as making a case regarding current conditions at Amazon (context; Schradie, 2020). By explaining who the union is, BAmazon refers to itself as an organization, coinciding with organizational self-structuring (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Additionally, with this tweet, BAmazon reclaims its power by correcting the language used by Amazon and reinstating that it is the workers who make up the union, legitimizing BAmazon as a trustworthy organization, relating to the flow of membership negotiation (McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

In another original tweet posted by BAmazon on June 18 after the Labor Notes Conference in 2022:

“When we're organizing in the south we have to fight racism, and sexism, and the local government that doesn't want to see working class people gain real power”

@BAmazonUnion OC member @ILavelleThomas speaking truth at @labornotes panel #AmazonWorkers in Motion. #LaborNotes2022

With this tweet, BAmazon maintains that their union drive is not just about having a voice in changing their working conditions, but it is about more than that. Within the context of the

Amazon warehouse being located in Alabama, BAmazon and the broader Alabama working class are facing barriers by the government in gaining power over their workplace according to this tweet. Similarly, race and gender identity present additional constraints workers face when organizing against management. The intersection of gender, race, and class in the American South demonstrate historical and contemporary marginalization, causing the power relations between workers and management we see today (context and class; Schradie, 2020).

Emphasizing the local government not wanting the working class to “gain real power” and resisting this effort, BAmazon makes a case for the working class to reclaim power and motivate people to organize and/or join their efforts (membership negotiation; McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

A social media campaign by BAmazon, where members are given a prompt of “I’m voting #UnionYES because” served to share reasons and demands made by workers with their faces to back them up. One of the tweets shared on March 22, 2022, states that:

“I’m voting #UnionYES because together we stand, divided we fall...” #BAmazonUnion

With these words, the BAmazon member emphasized the aspects of community and solidarity needed to successfully organize and gain a voice to fulfill union demands (community; Schradie, 2020). A clear reason for the member to vote yes on the union election is the belief that individual workers cannot enact changes, but that a collective of management and government recognized workers can (context). The tweet is also a clear demonstration of membership negotiation as the member explains why they entered the organization. Tying this further to the subtheme, this tweet exemplifies how joining a union might serve as a way for workers facing inequitable conditions to claim power and exercise agency.

The #MakeAmazonPay campaign is an international campaign to encourage Amazon workers and citizens to go on strike on Black Friday. A tweet shared by RWDSU on November 8 states:

Amazon can pay, but only will if we make them. On #BlackFriday, November 25, 2022, workers and activists organizing at Amazon across the world will come together to #MakeAmazonPay. Join us: <https://makeamazonpay.com> CC: @BAmazonUnion

The campaign aims for workers to showcase their collective power on notably one of the busiest days in the retail industry, whether online or in person, to make Amazon meet the demands of workers like paying fair wages (context). The tweet and the attached video state “Amazon can pay, but only will if we make them,” indicating that workers and citizens can reclaim their power and hold Amazon responsible, and that Amazon does have the resources to meet union demands but refuses to do so (class and community; Schradie, 2020). Participating in an international campaign, while showcasing solidarity with other organizations, also builds organizational legitimacy as there is a collective of workers and citizens with the same goals as BAmazon (institutional positioning; McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

A common inequity presented in tweets shared by BAmazon is in the interactions between workers as management, as the latter fails to take workers’ concerns regarding safety seriously. A tweet shared by RWDSU in April 2022 states:

"We do not work in a safe work environment, and every time we bring these issues up to management, we are not heard, which is why we’re fighting so hard for our union at Amazon" - @BAmazonUnion worker @ILavelleThomas on the release of the @AFLCIO 2022 Death on the Job report

One of the prominent issues BHM1 workers face is that management does not listen to their concerns and workers lack a voice when it comes to their working conditions, both showcasing present conditions and reasons to unionize (context) and the power differences between workers and management (class; Schradie, 2020). Though workers have felt disempowered, they are reclaiming power by “fighting so hard for [their] union at Amazon” (membership negotiation). In addition, BAmazon members are calling attention to issues they are facing as well as managerial interactions that may otherwise not be exposed to the public, rendering Amazon’s public image.

### **Action**

Especially in the beginning of BAmazon’s effort to organize Amazon workers to improve working conditions, the tweets shared by BAmazon emphasized three goals: that workers sign union membership cards, vote yes for a union election, and to vote yes during the union election. Building a membership base for the union is essential because, as expressed by BAmazon, “Let’s be clear, we are the workers, we are THE UNION!” But the theme of action is more than just asking individuals to do something. Instead, it is much more nuanced and highlights all aspects of the 3C method – context, class, and community (Schradie, 2021). An example of a tweet asking workers to become members was posted as an original tweet by BAmazon shared on October 29, 2020:

#Halloween is just around the corner, and we cannot fall for @Amazon’s tricks! The raise we received is thanks to your efforts & all of us coming together for change. RT now & urge our co-workers to sign a union authorization card today at <http://BamazonUnion.org>! #1U #union

Attached to this tweet is a graphic, reiterating the message of the tweet, as well as adding information stating that “it is against federal law to threaten, discipline, terminate, anyone for

signing a Union Authorization Card,” which highlights the strategies employed by Amazon to suppress the union drive, emphasizing class. Added is an image of a pumpkin with an upside-down arrow, appropriating and reclaiming the Amazon logo. This appropriated logo is more than an image – it emphasizes the dissatisfaction of workers and gives context to why workers are unionizing. Not only does this tweet call for workers to officially become members of the union by signing union authorization cards, but also ask workers to share the message with other members as a way of recruiting workers to join. Further, this tweet emphasized why workers should join – by pointing to the power imbalances between workers and management – as well as uplifting the workers by thanking their efforts, giving context and class (Schradie, 2021). This motivation for workers to sign union authorization cards is a direct link to the flow of membership negotiation, as the action of signing the card makes workers union members. As well, the self-structuring flow is present as explanations of power relations are given (McPhee & Zaug, 2009).

Another call to action from BAmazon to workers is the #UnionYes campaign. The initial tweet shared on February 8, 2021, is as follows:

Today’s the day that @BAmazonUnion ballots go out to workers! Let’s cheer on our union family in Bessemer, Alabama. Why did YOU vote #UnionYes? #1u #BAmazonUnion.

In an effort to empower workers to sign yes on the ballots in the union election, BAmazon asks its members to share the reasons why they joined the effort to organize workers. Many tweets following were shared with photos of workers that have joined BAmazon and their reasons why, giving context and encouraging community. BAmazon gives its members a face with this campaign, humanizing and giving agency to members, as well as legitimizing the organization

by showing that members stand behind the union. This tweet uses the rhetoric of a union family, further emphasizing the strong relationships built between members based on shared experiences. This tweet also emphasizes the community aspect of the union as reasons for membership are shared among members and the language of a family is used, emphasizing common reasons to join as well as common goals, further legitimizing the union drive. Through the spokespersonship and agency of members, as there are faces behind reasons to join the union, organizational self-structuring is present as well as membership negotiation through giving direct reasons for individuals to join the union (McPhee & Iverson, 2009).

With the intention to move BHM1 workers to collectively challenge Amazon and ensure that all workers are involved and have a voice, BAmazon tweets on October 28, 2022:

Join us. Let's get organized at BHM1 and hold Amazon accountable for their abuse of power! Start by coming to our next organizing committee meeting. Follow up with a committee member at the following email address to get an invite:

organize@bamazonunion.org #BAmazonUnion #1U

Again, with this tweet, BAmazon encourages spokespersonship of workers as well as collective action and accountability of Amazon through inviting BHM1 workers to join committee meetings, which give a platform for workers and a voice in the decision-making process of a union. This tweet emphasizes the aspects of context as it implies an 'abuse of power' of Amazon – a reason to organize and unionize, class as it analyzes the power differences and reclaims workers' power, and community as it calls upon the BHM1 community to join their efforts (Schradié, 2021). Similarly, it aligns with membership negotiation as it gives agency to workers by joining and being involved in committee meetings, activity coordination as it calls attention to

Amazon's misuse of power and the need for accountability, and institutional positioning as it establishes and maintains the position and place of BAmazon.

Further, in December of 2020, BAmazon tweeted an announcement to the (at the time) upcoming union election, calling for workers to recruit more members by signing union authorization cards:

We've filed for our #union election!!! This is an exciting step on our path to bringing a union voice to our workplace. Share this video with a co-worker today and tell them it's more important now than ever to sign a union authorization card:

With the tweet regarding the union election, BAmazon emphasizes the lack of voice workers currently have (class) and the online networks of workers to share their message (community). Further, membership negotiation is heavily portrayed as the tweet specifically calls for membership to be extended to other workers and union authorization cards act as physical examples of self-structuring as membership is formally documented.

Lastly, BAmazon's tweets are not limited to moving workers to act and unionize, but also place the union in a greater context of Alabama and the South. Shared on March 6, 2022, BAmazon tweeted:

We're standing at the foot of the bridge in #Selma today for the commemoration of #BloodySunday. Remembering our history is a stark reminder of the working conditions we have today at @amazon. We remain strong and together we are voting #UnionYES!

Here, a clear connection between current working conditions and the historical context of Alabama, that has in part led to those working conditions, is made, both emphasizing context and class (Schradié, 2021). Furthermore, it places BAmazon in a greater community of fighting for social and racial justice. BAmazon bridges the connection with their goal and that of the Civil

Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, proving that BAmazon acts beyond the boundaries of the labor movement, providing institutional positioning.

## **Overlap**

While the three themes of solidarity, power, and action were identified in the data, there are several tweets where all themes overlap. One of such tweets shared on September 29, 2022, states:

No matter what Union you're affiliated with, no matter what your job is, no matter where you are at. We the Amazon workers here in Bessemer will support you through thick and thin! 🍷🔥 Organize and fight back. "Us poor people haven't got a chance unless we organize"- Peter Seeger

This tweet encapsulates solidarity as it shows support with workers across the world, power as it highlights workers must fight back and reclaim power, and action as it tells workers to organize. Further, all 3Cs –context, class, community – are present as the tweet hints at reasons to organize, analyzes power differences, and establishes a network between workers (Schradie, 2021). Lastly, all four flows – membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, institutional positioning – are present as well. Membership negotiation is present as workers claim power through organizing, self-structuring as agency of workers is enabled through unionizing, activity coordination as the tweet frames goals and members as productive agents, and institutional positioning as it constructs a community of support in the labor movement and the general working class (McPhee & Zaug, 2009; MCPhee & Iverson, 2009).

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

The most distinct themes in tweets shared by BAmazon, uncovered using a qualitative content analysis, were solidarity, power, and action. Due to the nature of labor organizing and unions, the three themes reflect what is important in unionism. Solidarity between BAmazon workers establishes a strong relationship, maintaining and expanding membership, as well as showing support to members. Solidarity between BAmazon and other entities in the labor movement creates a network of support and legitimized BAmazon as it is recognized as an organization in the broader labor movement. In terms of power, the inequities between BAmazon and Amazon were highlighted, with a specific focus on union-busting tactics and resistance against the tactics. But BAmazon also claimed power as an organization – giving agency to workers in the greater context of their working conditions and in the unjust relationship with Amazon. Lastly, action specifically emphasizes the goals of BAmazon and calls members to action to spread BAmazon’s values and gain members. However, the themes are not mutually exclusive, they overlap in various ways. Based on the themes that arose and the findings of this study, this study also provides theoretical contributions and practical implications – however has limitations that will be discussed.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The value of combining the analytical tools of the 3C Method (Schradie, 2021) and the Four Flows Model (McPhee & Zaug, 2009) in this study is showcasing that they complement each other and the Four Flows model is extended with a critical perspective of digital union organizing. By using the 3C Method, certain elements of digital labor organizing were highlighted, specifically how BAmazon communicated unionization through Twitter. All three Cs – context, class, community – were present in tweets and give information needed to

understand the present conditions at Amazon, why workers are unionizing, and the network of other entities supporting the effort. The Four Flows Model is extended through this study as the question of how BAmazon constitutes itself as an organization through Twitter is answered and brings up new concerns within this model as practices of unions in digital spaces are uncovered, including persuasive tactics of calling individuals to action, power-claiming, and exposing powerful and corrupt organizations, such as Amazon.

Thus far, no communicative study on unions has utilized the perspective of the Four Flows. However, this perspective is an incredibly useful tool in analyzing how unions represent themselves and how they, as organizations, are communicatively constituted in the digital realm. Through their communication on Twitter, BAmazon was able to establish organizational legitimacy with the community of the labor movement, which is present in the flow of institutional positioning. In combining the two analytical tools, specifically the flow of institutional positioning and the 3C of community echo each other as they go to underline the importance of networks of support to organizations and unions, which give legitimacy to organizations and establishes support. For example, the tweet by AlphabetWorkers expresses the idea that workers in tech, which both AlphabetWorkers and BAmazon are, “deserve democracy & representation at work” and that they, AlphabetWorkers, are in solidarity with BAmazon. Again, this expression of deservingness and solidarity gives BAmazon legitimacy for their cause and support by their network.

Further, no study other than the original article where the 3C Method was introduced (Schradié, 2021) has used the 3C Method to analyze data. Therefore, this study is the first to use the 3C Method aside from Schradié and applying it to data from Twitter. The 3C Method allows for a critical analysis of data through making connections to context, class, and community, and,

as this study shows, uncovering issue of power. Further, the 3C method allowed for an analysis of power between Amazon and BAmazon, highlighting that BAmazon is creating legitimacy and reclaiming their power as a collective of employees. As aforementioned, Amazon created a power imbalance between workers and management with working conditions and low wages, as well as union-busting strategies once workers resisted these conditions. With the union drive, as RWDSU conveys, “Amazon can pay, but only will if we make them.” Here, it is addressed that Amazon does have the resources to pay livable wages but refuses to do so. However, with the collective powers of workers that make up a union, BAmazon can reclaim power in pressing Amazon to fulfill their demands.

Additionally, as the Four Flows are mainly used in an interpretive manner and have been criticized as too broad and insufficiently organizational (Bisel, 2010; Sillince, 2010, p. 133), using the 3C Method extends the Four Flows by adding a critical lens and an application to organizing. Without the 3C Method, analysis may not have been able to uncover the processes used to garner legitimacy nor disseminate the power relations between workers and management as the Four Flows perspective lacks this critical component. Following the death of two BHM1 workers, BAmazon featured a tweet quoting an employee saying:

“You a body. Once that body’s used up, they just bring someone else in to do the work.” In the analysis of this tweet, by using the 3C Method, the difference in class was uncovered as workers are stripped of their humanity by Amazon and seen as replaceable and replicable. Therefore, by uncovering the power relations between workers and management, the 3C Method allowed for and added a critical perspective to the Four Flows perspective.

## **Practical Implications**

Through a critical analysis to the tweets shared by BAmazon, practical findings are constructed as well. In the case of labor organizing and unionizing, there are questions of if and how organizers should use social media as a tool in organizing. BAmazon organizers used Twitter as a tool in organizing to gain momentum and traction to the cause of unionizing. Because of its use of social media, BAmazon established legitimacy to the organization by tweeting and retweeting content recognizing the workers' efforts in resisting Amazon's union busting strategies, their reasons for unionizing and gaining agency in doing so, as well as the solidarity and support shared between workers and between BAmazon and the greater labor movement. Additionally, campaigns such as #MakeAmazonPay and "I'm voting #UnionYES because" showcases legitimacy by demonstrating that BHM1 workers are not the only Amazon employees struggling and organizing and by showing the people behind membership. As Twitter serves as a digital representation of the organizing effort, it is vital to share content in line with the goals of the organizing effort, especially as it established connections between the effort and other entities of support, such as labor unions, allies, and key individuals in the greater labor movement. Therefore, unions should share social media content by other entities within the labor movement to create a network of online support and solidarity. Further, expressions of support toward a union should be shared by the union to create and reinforce their legitimacy. Further, unions should repeatedly share the inequity and working conditions they face to continuously remind their following and grow their case for organizational legitimacy.

Unions should also take advantage of the features on Twitter, such as retweets, quote tweets, visuals, and polls, and use them as tools for engaging with their network of unions and supporters of the labor movement. In addition, such tools can be used to respond to challengers

of the union and their employers to counter their talking points and point out the unequal power relationship between workers and management, such as union-busting techniques. These features may help to foster a feeling of solidarity among current and potential members, and by extension, workers facing unjust working conditions. These features, therefore, engage in membership negotiation, as they may motivate BHM1 workers to join BAmazon.

Lastly, unions should be intentional about which content to feature on their platforms. For example, workers' experiences should be shared by giving showing the people behind the experiences if it is safe to do so considering retaliation, as it gives agency to workers and legitimacy to the organization. Referring to the theme of action, tweets should not simply ask people to do something, but messages should be written in a way to create community, establish solidarity, and present reasons as to why individuals should do so. Additionally, organizers should take advantage of the online format and include references to current events and popular culture, as seen in the tweet referencing Halloween. Finally, Twitter can be used as a great tool for power-claiming, as organizers and union members have the opportunity to share how they reclaim their agency, as it was previously constrained by their employer, and resist the strategies used to break up organizing efforts. The benefits of power-claiming reach beyond those for BHM1 workers to workers in the Bessemer and Birmingham area in general. As the majority of BHM1 workers and residents in the area are Black, BAmazon's effort contributes to racial equity in the local, majorly Black, workforce, further demonstrating the importance of labor and union organizing in the South.

### **Limitations & Future Research**

While this inquiry analyzes some of the tweets and retweets shared by BAmazon, there are certain limitations to this study. As it did not analyze all tweets and interactions with the

tweets, the uncovered themes may be limited based on the sample. This, thus study may be extended using a mixed methods approach for a full analysis of all tweets, which could reveal further themes. An analysis of the interactions with tweets may also give a perspective on the reach of the tweets and what users are saying in response to the tweets, giving insight of how the union effort is perceived and supported. From that data, further inferences can be made about the organizational legitimacy of BAmazon as well as how solidarity is reflected in the frequency of the responses.

Following, this study is purely analyzing online organizing as presented on Twitter. Future studies may include interviews with BAmazon members and organizers to further understand the organizing process of this union as well as the relationships and shared experiences of workers. Finally, the work of BAmazon continues, however as of January 2023, no further tweets were shared. Based on upcoming union activity, research on BAmazon may take different directions.

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