

## ABSTRACT

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In 2014, the Blue Lives Matter website *bluelivesmatter.blue* was founded as an alternative news site. The site attracted a community of online users to engage in online discussion surrounding matters concerning police officers' lives. Yet, less attention has been on how this website acts as a space of social action where groups draw and negotiate group boundaries. In this study, I use qualitative content analysis to examine the online commentary relating to Black Lives Matter (BLM) on the Blue Lives Matter website. I argue that the professed beliefs about BLM are overarching moral and rationality frames that structure the racial and political beliefs of the Blue participants. Internet participants position the Blue as morally and intellectually differentiated or elevated from those who associate with BLM. Echoing the historical constructions of race and images of racialized groups, these comments present a case of the racialization and essentialization of racial and political others through expressive internet discourse. Moreover, I argue that commenters' language use signals a "Blue" vs. "Black" group boundary.

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Blue Lives Matter? An Analysis of Blue Lives Matter News Comments

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Yuanyuan Liu, the author to this master's thesis, is a current graduate student in Sociology at North Carolina State University. Her general interest is in the broad area of racial inequality, social psychology and sociolinguistics. This study examines the user comments on a Blue Lives Matter news site, and concludes that Blue commenters' online racially charged expressions demarcate the stark boundary between the Black and the Blue.

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## *Introduction*

In recent decades, the internet has become increasingly important in people's social life. The new digital media offers the benefit of relatively open access and wide geographic reach compared to the traditional media outlets. This new media outlet offers opportunities where users share and discuss content that is posted online, creating communities of "like" users and social networks that transcend time-space limit. With this special property, the internet provides a new platform for personalized racial expression, a pattern that is different from what is present in public discourse and day-to-day interactions (Loke, 2012). At present, while open expression of prejudicial racial ideology has receded to private settings, and the public holds a general tendency to avoid racial talk as open racism became a taboo after the Civil Rights era (Feagin, 2010; Bush, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), racial discourse still inundates the digital space. The internet, as a new form of information media, plays a curious role of offering an expressive platform for tabooed racial discourse. Under such circumstances, new forms of internet-based social activism emerged (Hara and Huang, 2011), and the internet becomes a central stage where public debate over social issues unfolds.

The Black Lives Matter campaign (BLM) is a product of this age. The internet-originated campaign gained traction as contemporary cases involving police shootings of black persons stirred public awareness to the systemic racial problems existing in the U.S. Without an existing, formal institutional structure, BLM represents a new form of social movement that is marked by a decentralized political campaign and (largely) internet based, personalized participation. While some academic scholars focused work on BLM (e.g., Mundt, Ross and Burnett, 2018; Carney, 2016), little work has examined the counterframes and public resistance to BLM such as All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter, both of which emerged on social media after BLM gained traction. With this in mind, this thesis examines Blue Lives Matter discourse with a specific focus on online users' comments about BLM news stories.

In this study, I analyze online comments on a Blue Lives Matter website's news segment relating to BLM topics. Specifically, I focus on how participants engage with other commenters based on the content of their expression, and, on the other hand, the internet user comments as a part of general discourse surrounding BLM. The task of this thesis is twofold: (1) I view commenting as a part of the social action of drawing group boundaries; and (2) I focus on the

content of the online expressions. Specifically, I outline different racial and political beliefs, themes and racial images that the commenters on a Blue Lives Matter news site present.

I examine language use as a form of social action. Specifically, commenters' language use signals a "Blue" vs. "Black" group boundary. Blue Lives Matter is a counterframe against BLM that emerged on some social media platforms briefly after BLM gained traction, appealing to the wellness of the police officers and to a flat-line "equality and justice for all." Online conflict, disagreement, and agreement on this site reflect certain Blue social voices that align with the white racial frame (Feagin, 2009). Moreover, the Blue participants' online discourse signals their belongingness to an ideological community that stands in firm contrast to BLM and the liberal orientation for distributive and racial justice. What creates such a boundary are overarching moral and rationality frames that structure the participants' racial and political beliefs. Participants use moral and rationality frames to position the Blue as morally and intellectually differentiated or elevated from those who associate with BLM. Echoing the historical constructions of race and images of racialized groups, these comments present a case of the racialization and essentialization of racial and political others through expressive internet discourse.

### *New Media and Changing Pattern of Political Participation*

To understand internet based political and racial discourse, it is important to examine the broader context of new media and internet-based political participation. Some analysts have said that the internet creates a new platform for social struggles (Chaisukkosol, 2010), serves communicative functions for social movement organizations (Stein, 2009), and facilitates transnational coordination (Aunio & Staggenbort, 2011) and the mobilization of the general public (Hestres, 2014). Research in the new media as a political platform often have an instrumental approach to social media activism (Gerbaudo & Trere 2015). In such discussions, due to the overall emphasis on *how* activism is achieved through the internet instead of *what* activists express on the internet, the mechanisms of internet-based activism is better addressed than the actual internet content. Specifically, how individuals express, negotiate, and refine their ideological positions is less examined. The technological advancement and the emergence of new media in recent decades, however, marks more than a shift in the avenue through which social movements are achieved. It, more fundamentally, affects how people participate in the

political discussion and how they express their views. To illustrate this change, a contextualized view on political participation is needed.

According to Bennett (2012), the rise of the new media allows for a new pattern of political participation from formal identification to personalized politics: personalized forms of political expression (through different avenues including social media) against a number of emotional targets such as race and political identification. Political participation in the age of new media, in a sense, is often reduced to personal expressions in various online forums. With the aid of the internet, joining a formal organization is no longer the only means to engage in a political dialogue. Internet users use the internet as a platform to engage in a form of highly personalized political participation. This personalized form of political participation is marked by two general patterns. First, personalized political expressions online are often heavy in emotional expression and reference to personal freedom. Second, little evidence or reason sway such political emotional orientation. Accompanying this trend is a political disconnection manifested in discursive style. For example, the political *left* discursively leans towards a pursuit of reason, deliberation, and civility, while the political *right* adopts personally ingrained aversion to dialogue of change. Above all, as the internet gains an increasingly important role in people's lives, the center stage for political participation shifts from formal participation in institutionalized activism (e.g., unionization) to the informal content sharing and commenting on the internet.

Moreover, such a shift towards a personalized form of political participation is embedded in a particular historical period of enabling conditions. During the historic period of globalization of trade where privatization and market forces infiltrated every aspect of personal life, abstract liberal ideals (i.e., the ideological force of equal opportunity, individualism, and the emphasis on personal choice) became pervasive. The general rightward shift of both political parties and the demise of social democrats leave a lot of voters with diminishing voting choice and hence sway toward other forms of political participation. Further, consumer practices become intertwined with political activities as people engage in political consumerism, pursuing political goals when engaging in consumer behavior (e.g., boycotting, intervening in corporate behavior, etc.). Consequently, the traditional *collective action* associated with ordered organization structure, organizational resources, and the formation of collective identities is shifting towards a form of *connected action* based on individual actions such as content sharing on the internet (Bennett and

Segeberg, 2012). Political participation today is often marked by individuals expressing their ideas on social media. This participation is individualized relative to joining formal organizations and engaging in collective action. Such individual participation, collectively, forms a community of connected action that is marked by unorganized, personal political participation.

Although the internet has become a center stage for individualized political expressions, the most prominent contemporary social movement organizations are not heavily engaged in online communications (Stein, 2009). As social movement organizations often fail to utilize the internet, individuals are left on their own engaging in political talk over the internet. In this sense, internet political participation is mostly a decentralized, personalized effort. This trend has troubling implications: As political participation becomes more decentralized, the collective efficacy that contributes to some successful social movements in the past might not be achieved today. Many factors contribute to such collective efficacy (e.g., resources, organizational efficacy, etc.), but I focus specifically on collective identity here. In the past, social movement organizations often promoted social change through creating collective efficacy among their members that centers around collective identities and common goals. Such collective identities are also strengthened by the activists' active political participation into the movement of their concern. Within the new political dynamic brought forth by the new media, however, this form of collective identity is called into question. If internet users are shifting away from the traditional model of collective action and, instead, are moving toward individualized internet political expressions, are people still forming cohesive collective identities through their political participation? More importantly, as political participation is becoming increasingly individualized today, is collective identity still a core motivator for political actions?

In this thesis, I argue that collective identity remains relevant to the "Blue" internet participants' political participation. Whether such collective identity can contribute to the collective efficacy that translates into a political movement, however, is beyond the scope of this study. I argue that although the Blue participants engaged in *personalized* expressions (i.e., commenting) on BLM related issues, their expressions exemplify a *collective* racial and political identity marked by shared racial and political meanings, and the negative representation of (BLM) others and the unmarked, positive (Blue) self. In this way, participants' expression, content sharing and argumentation surrounding BLM-related issues are not individual actions. Rather, they are personalized expressions of a collective Blue (racial and political) identity.

Through actively expressing opinions about BLM related issues, the Blue participants also outline and reproduce the group boundary between the Black and the Blue. In the following sections, I will further discuss this position.

### *The Outlining of Political Boundaries*

Aside from the internet, the BLM campaign is also embedded in an increasingly divided political landscape. Overall, there is an increase in partisan polarization in American politics, both in policy positions and in ideological divide of the parties (Layman, 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Bartels, 2000). Although there is a clear increase in partisan divergence for the political elites, it is not so clear whether public opinion shows a similar tendency. In fact, there is a curious divide between an increasing alignment in partisan voting behavior (i.e., that individuals who identify themselves with the Republican party are more likely to vote for a Republican political candidate and vice versa) and an absence of polarization in public attitudes to political issues across different social groupings, except for some *takeoff issues* (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2005; DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson, 1996; Evans, 2009). Such takeoff issues include police violence (Reinka and Leach, 2017); affirmative action (Harrison et al. 2006) and gun control (Pearson-Merkowitz and Dyck, 2017). This seeming contradiction between the overall lack of change in attitudinal divide and the increasing partisan polarization (especially in particular political issues) raises a real question: What happened?

A deeper look into the issue suggests a few mechanisms. First, the elite political actors' (e.g., the congress) better strategies in the sorting of political labels and defining partisan boundaries sharpened the divide (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Second, as mentioned in the previous section, the emergence of the internet and social media has led to a contemporary shift in political participation from involvement in the organized political culture of representative democracy to a personalized, individual experience-based participatory politics (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Third, the increased ease in the selective consumption of internet content contributes to the divide through users' self-selection. With an easy click, internet users can pick and choose the type of information they prefer to consume. This ease of self-selection, coupled with the overall digital political segregation and various media outlets' tendencies to selective coverage, contribute to an overall attitudinal divide in big social issues (Prior, 2013; Baum and

Groeling, 2008; Baum and Groeling, 2009). Moreover, online algorithms provide an extra filtering mechanism for viewers to selectively review partisan news content with ease (Levendusky, 2013). In other words, a better sorting mechanism both from the top-down (i.e., from the elite political actors' end) and from the bottom-up (i.e., as individuals sort themselves into partisanship through selective consumption) contribute to the public divide in takeoff issues. In this sense, *the public is increasingly sorted but, overall, not necessarily more attitudinally divided* (Clayton, 2016). Takeoff issues—issues that the public is most divided about (e.g., abortion, gun ownership and immigration, etc.)—help to sort the public into partisan camps of battling political values. In this context, BLM and police violence is a topic of attitudinal division that sorts people into different ideological camps.

The partisan divide is not only influencing people's political decisions such as voting, but the behaviors and attitudes in other non-political arenas. Given the absence of significant change in attitudinal divide on the grand picture of political issues (e.g., in terms of the American's beliefs in free market, national spending, infrastructure, etc.), it appears that the “cultural wars” over some important contemporary public issues shows a case closer to an eruption of vigorous moral and political emotions pertaining to existing group-based politics than an actual increase in attitudinal division (Lyengar and Westwood, 2015). As Lyengar and Westwood contend, partisanship serves as a strong cue for non-political behavior, and there is a hostile feeling for the opposing party ingrained into the mind of the voters who are strongly political. Studying discourses on public issue opens up an avenue not only to understand the polarized political ideologies, but also the “emotional wall” (Hochschild, 2016) that contours the partisan boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, blocks people from “crossing the wall,” and motivates political behavior. The discussion surrounding BLM and police brutality is a site where such political boundaries arise.

### *The Origins: Whose Lives Matter?*

Black Lives Matter (BLM) was not born out of a social vacuum. Fermented by longstanding, historically constructed, institutionalized racial inequality, large scale public debate was catalyzed by a series of police shootings (Talor, 2016). In this sense, although institutionalized racial inequality sets the stage on which BLM debate takes place, it was the high-profile police shooting cases that instigated a public debate over race.

Big social events instigate public discussion in digital space. Moreover, in the broad political context, issues that stir public debate set a stage for political contestation and division. Chancer (2005) argues that high-profile crimes (e.g., the O. J. Simpson case) simultaneously stimulate discussions of issues pertaining to the case and of broader social causes. In other words, discussion surrounding high-profile crime cases does not focus solely on the detail of the cases. Rather, people extend high-profile cases to encompass broader social claims, and such cases open up a stage upon which people battle over their ideological positions. In Simpson's case, for example, the public positions were divided based on the connected issues of domestic violence and police misconduct. In similar ways, heated public discussions were generated surrounding the cases of police shooting of young black men including Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, among others. And the focus of public discussion about police shooting ranges from the specifics of police misconduct in particular cases to racial profiling in general.

Many Twitter (social media site) users raised concerns about police violence, an issue blacks have long been facing, through hashtagging (with #blacklivesmatter). Soon after, Black Lives Matter (BLM) became a social movement that gained much public attention for its claims about systemic racism and its anti-racist agendas. Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter, on the other hand, emerged on social media as counterframes to BLM, advocating for the police officers and for "equality and fairness for all." In this sense, the public's "siding" on the issue of police shootings and racial justice represents a contestation between black-centered and white-centered racial frames. In this context, "Blue Lives Matter" represents a pushback against the imagined breach of the white racial order. And the Black and the Blue division is not only a political one, but a contestation of two conflicting racial frames where the former sees racial injustice as police shoot black persons, while the latter sees none. Further, this contention between two disparate racial frames contributes to the deepened political divide. Big social events such as police shootings, therefore, introduce public discussion and open up potential avenues of social change but also provide stages for combating ideologies and the outlining of (racial and political ideology based) group boundaries. The internet is a stage where such public discussion unfolds. Here I am going to examine the dynamic between BLM and its counterparts, Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter. This study, therefore, is dedicated to examining the user-generated discourse about BLM in a Blue Lives Matter news site, a Blue ideological enclave.

### *Race, Racial Frames, and Race talk*

Before discussing “racial talk” and BLM discourse in particular, race, racial meanings, and racial discourse need to be carefully defined. According to Hughey (2015), what we call “race” is not a concrete entity. When we measure the “effect of race” on, say, police violence, it is not a static entity (i.e., a concrete entity with ontological “essence”) that produces a difference in how police behave. Rather, it is a process of racial domination unfolding in inequalities between police and minority group members. “Race” is the result of an ongoing, multidimensional practice that produces and maintains racial inequality. It operates to produce white dominance economically, culturally, and politically. In other words, race is a social construction with consequences.

As a system, race includes cognitive frames through which people, events, and social conditions are perceived. One such frame, which Feagin (2013) calls the “white racial frame,” includes “...deep emotions, visual images, and the accented sound of spoken language” (13). It is, in other words, a way to cognitively organize the social world into racialized terms. In such ways, contrary to the neoconservative “colorblind” conception, one can hardly “unsee” color, just as one cannot undo an ingrained worldview. According to Feagin (2010), the white racial frame presupposes European moral and civilizational superiority, and the normality of white experience. It also entails blindness to racial inequality and the racialized nature of our social experience. Such cultural blindness to the racialized nature of the social world, or color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), forms today’s dominant racial ideology.

The racialized worldview shifts forms. Throughout U.S. history, the meaning of race changed (Omi and Winant, 2014) in response to political forces. The racialized controlling images (Collins, 2004; Collins, 1991) that connects blackness to gender are also part of this racialized worldview. Accordingly, black men are connected with the contradictory images of hypermasculinity, dangerousness and boyish dependence. Black women, on the other hand, are painted as figures of wildness, promiscuity, fertility and as the antithesis of ideal femininity. Such meanings and images attached to race, on the other hand, impact racialized targets’ experience (Windsor et al., 2012; Bridges, Crutchfield and Simpson, 1987). Ultimately, race entails a form of racialized group positioning based on racial categories (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Blumer, 1958). Racial meanings, in this sense, maintain and reproduce racial group boundaries.

Today's populist rhetoric of post-racialism and racial progress results a white-centered racial frame that de-racializes experience. While race and racial inequality are obscured, what enters this racialized cognitive framework is that nonwhites, blacks in particular, are criminal threats to social order (Anderson, 2010). Racial discourse manifesting in media and interactional settings, in turn, is an important site for the reproduction of the white racial frame. Racial discourse is not only a reflection or expression of the dominant racial order and racial ideology, but is itself a part of the racial order upon which social practices, interactions, values and people's worldviews are organized. Through affirming the dominant white racial frame in daily racial discourse, people interactionally reproduce racial ideologies, reinforce racialized group boundaries, and, ultimately, maintain the racial order on a daily basis.

Although the online discussions in this study include many racist accounts, I argue that the study of racial discourse should not be limited to an analysis of explicit racist (or more precisely, racially prejudicial) content. The reason is two-fold. First, racism today is more covert than in the past. Racial discourse has shifted from the overt racist ideology in the pre-Civil Rights era—when racial hierarchy was both legally and practically permissible—to a post-Civil Rights form that is expressed in coded language that can appear to be “colorblind” (Sears, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Another reason for looking beyond explicit expressions of racial animosity is that racism can be an unconscious bias rather than a conscious achievement (Correll et al., 2017). If racist ideologies are a part of the manifest symbolic structure of a racialized worldview, implicit racial biases are the cognitive part of this worldview.

The internet is a site where both explicit racism and covert racism unfold since it stands as an ambiguous social space that shares the characteristics of both public and private space (Steinfeldt et al., 2010; Hughey, 2012). It provides a stage for people who share similar ideological positions to create ideological communities that transcend the limits of time and space. Moreover, the internet allows online users to engage in both explicitly racist and covert race talk because of its semi-anonymous nature (which insulates people from possible sanctions). People with narrow ideological positions, with the aid of the internet, can also find communities of “like” individuals (Dowd, 2012). In this sense, the internet provides communities and outlet for race talk that avoid sanctions that might be otherwise salient.

It is therefore important to engage in a critical look at such online ideological communities. Through self-selection, people with similar ideological orientations orient

themselves to certain online space. People's interactions in such ideological enclaves, further, reinforce and reproduce their shared ideologies and beliefs. Specifically, in this study, I focus on the way Blue Lives Matter online commenters address their ideological counterpart, Black Lives Matter. With the aid of the internet, the Blue commenters engage in explicit and implicit race talk in an anonymous manner. Moreover, such race talk is informed by the broader cultural discourse and historical images of the racialized others. Through engaging in online discussion on BLM, these Blue commenters reproduce existing racial ideologies and white-centered racial order.

### Method and Limitations

In this study, I analyze the comments for news articles found on the website [bluelivesmatter.blue](https://defensemaven.io/bluelivesmatter/) that pertain to the topic "Black Lives Matter" (URL changed into <https://defensemaven.io/bluelivesmatter/> for reason unknown). Blue Lives Matter appeared after the emergence of BLM, and was founded in 2014 by active, former, and retired law enforcement officers and their family members as an alternative news source about law enforcement "from a law enforcement perspective" ("About Blue Lives Matter", 2017). Indeed, the website features news stories on current issues and events, such as "Concealed Carry Hero Shoots Man Attacking Starbucks Barista" "Magistrates Refuse To Sign Warrants For Armed Robbers, Rapists, Citing Racism," and "Protesters Demand Professor's Termination For Saying 'Accusers Sometimes Lie'" (Blue Lives Matter News; Oct, 2018). This site provides a platform for discussion. A membership pass for this site costs five dollars per month. As of 2018, the website claims a member count of 94,000.

Among the 88 news articles under the Black Lives Matter topic, I randomly selected a total of 33 articles (through systematic sampling), and there are a total of 1626 user comments for these articles. The analysis follows the logic of Timmerman and Tavory's (2012) abductive approach to grounded theory. Theory construction with an abductive, grounded approach, in Timmerman and Tavory's terms, is neither "theoretical atheist or avowed monotheist, but informed theoretical agnostics" (4). It entails a reflexive practice that derives theory from the data and confirms the theory with the data. To achieve this analytical task, I started the project with coding and memo-ing the first 17 articles and 650 comments. As I categorized the codes in to 7 main categories, I did a literature review, and from there I started another phase of coding

with 16 articles and 976 comments. I derive my analysis from the theoretical categories thereafter.

There are a few limitations to this study. First, internet news comments, in terms of interactional style, are asynchronous and expressive. This steered the study in a content-oriented rather than a process-oriented direction. Because people used the site to pose views that were not necessarily construed in response to those of others, I focused on expressive context rather than the negotiation and co-construction of meanings. In other words, I treated the site as an *expressive* space rather than a *communicative* space. The goal for this study, therefore, is not to unpack an interactive process, but to examine boundary-making accomplished through participants' expressions. My analytical task, therefore, is to unpack the ideologies hidden in the semantics of comments posted to the Blue Lives Matter news site.

Second, given the nature of the coding process, some of the expressions are lifted from their discursive context during the analysis. While this limitation makes it difficult to examine the accurate meaning of each comment, precise meanings of each expression are not the chief focus of this study. The focus of this study, instead, is the common discursive patterns in the commenters' expressions on this website. Also, due to the iterative nature of the coding process, it is possible that some comments were coded multiple times. Also, some comments were coded under multiple themes. Therefore, there are overlaps between and among the themes which, again, would influence coverage. However, my purpose in this study is to present a case based on the common patterns of expressions on the website and in doing so, I connect commenters' speech with broader patterns of racial and political participation in the new media.

### *Results*

The commenters on this site created a boundary between Blue and Black communities in two ways: (1) by constructing implicit morality and rationality frames that positioned BLM as inferior. This involved race talk that quoted negative racial images and racial meanings (e.g. blackness is associated with criminality. And (2) through positioning in alignment with the Blue, and dissociation with the Black. The examples presented here are reproduced verbatim, with some bracketed language included for context.

Open racism is common on this site. Specifically, racial slurs and derogatory language directed at black people is, although not universal, at least mostly permissible. The virulence of

these expressions, on the one hand, reflects commenters' strong racialized and political feelings about the topics. This virulence also reflects the asymmetric power relation between the authors of online comments and the readers. Protected by anonymity, commenters engage in an expressive act rather than a communicative one. That is, commenters' power position determines that they not only have agency over what is expressed, but how it is expressed.

Because of the asynchronous nature of online comments, the interactive style in these comment exchanges is different from interpersonal exchanges. I argue that these exchanges are shaped by the positional character of participants' racial and political identities. The comment exchanges delineate a boundary maintenance practice marking sameness vs. difference and inclusion vs. exclusion. In the following sections, I discuss the general pattern of language use in which participants align themselves with a Blue ingroup position vis-a-vis BLM others.

### Language Use as Social Action: Race Talk

#### *Implicit and Explicit Agreement*

Agreement among the online participants is common. By agreeing with others' positions, participants do not simply signal personal agreement with messages provided by others. This agreement can also express belongingness, solidarity, and similarity. Below are three examples. Note that the examples are organized in interactional threads (where one commenter posts in response to a previous post):

A: [Allowing the BLM individual into the panel for selecting the next police chief is a]

Stupid idea. Kind of like letting the inmates run the asylum, or the prison.

B: So, like an atheist picking the next Pope, ISIS members the next President or

Kim-Jong-Un the next humanitarian award winner, this makes sense how???

C: When are you going to declares these Gutter Rats domestic Terrorists???

D: AGREE. THEY SHOULD ALL BE IN GITMO.

E: These people are terrorist and should be arrested now. What are they waiting for?

These people are wackos and should go to jail

listen to the language

the justice is put them in jail

F: Beautiful. The school system has been infected with white lies for decades.

G: Can't get any more racist than this!

True fact!

The three examples above illustrate how commenters align with the positions, ideologies or sentiments expressed in a previous comment. Such agreements are not merely interactional, personal agreements. Commenters are not only agreeing with the content of previous posts, but voicing alliance with the evaluative stance presented by previous commenter(s) and to the existing, negative racial discourse in the U.S. Such submission to the underlying ideological position transcends a simple agreement; It expresses “resonance” with strong anti-BLM sentiment. Such resonance is evident in violent threats, vulgar language and racial slurs. With such posts, participants voice alignment with political and racial positions that are charged with deep-seated political and racial feelings. This position, ultimately, is the Blue (racial and political position).

### *Insults and Name-calling*

Disagreements often take the form of insult and name-calling. This was true of comments on news articles and on posts made by other commenters. Some examples are presented below:

H: BLM, a bunch of Racist ugly POS morons.

I: Do you live under a rock or do you not have a television.... They (BLM) are hardly a group trying to compete for the Pulitzer Peace Prize.... They are loud, obnoxious, violent, and full of anger and hate. They are also violent and look to cause mayhem. They are disgusting!

J: You keep talking, but not providing proof. Akin to pissing in the wind.

I: Obviously you think they (BLM) are just like the " Girl Scouts" so have a great evening

and stay as delusional as you are.

The virulent language illustrates the expressive, non-communicative nature of the speech available on this site. Such derogatory discourse positions the commenter in opposition to BLM and related groups. This is a boundary-defining act demarcating the Blue “us” in opposition to the Black “them.” Moreover, derogatory language against others not only positions oneself in alignment with the Blue collective identity, it also delegitimizes others’ viewpoints. This resembles what one might see in a war setting where nationalist sentiments lead to dehumanization of the opposing side. Name-calling and negative framing of a collective enemy emerges, in this sense, both to justify and to sustain the enemy status of the national others. Similarly, name-calling and insults are explicit ways through which the Blue participants outline the Blue and Black group boundary, and maintain the othered status of the Black. In this sense, it is overly simplistic to argue that racial slurs indicate Blue participants’ racist ideologies. Rather, name-calling helps to outline and maintain group boundary between the Black and the Blue.

Although name-calling and certain racial slurs are permissible, other forms of virulent language are not. I unpack this division in the following section.

### *Dissociation*

Mutual agreement and disagreement implies an underlying division of acceptable vs. unacceptable views and Blue vs. Black positions. Dissociation, on the other hand, occurs when commenters highlight the unacceptable speech *within* their own group.

L: Should have fired her nigger ass

M: Disgusting comment

L: Actually you are a disgusting comment. She is a troublemaker and should be fired.

N: Don't be part of the problem. [*commenter L*] should be banned from commenting.

The thread above was sparked by a story alleging that a Starbucks employee spit into a police officer’s drink. While many forms of insults and name-calling are generally permissible, certain racial slurs, as the n-word in the example above, are policed by other participants in the comment board. Participants who use overtly racist terms risk being sanctioned by others on the website. Less crude and overt racial frames and themes were permissible or, in some cases, celebrated. This pattern mirrors much race talk today: while color-blindness and post-raciality characterize

the prevalent form of racial discourse, overtly racist language is taboo. In this sense, there is an underlying post-racial moral order that not only governs the commenters' discussion of the BLM racialized others (which I will discuss in the following sections), but an order that also governs the race talk within their own group.

Explicit or implicit agreeing and explicit disagreement (insults and name calling) mark the two ways the Blue spelled out group positions and drew group boundaries. More specifically, the Blue commenters aligned with other Blue participants and established Blue positionality (the content of which will be discussed in the following sections) that is not only different, but superior to the Black. In such ways, commenters constructed a boundary between the two groups. Boundary maintenance through language use, however, was not the only aspect of the racial and political discourse on this site. With different forms of language use (discussed above), the Blue participants engaged in a political and racial discussion that reflected a Blue understanding of BLM.

In the following section I examine this Blue positionality through analyzing the content of the commenters' expressions. I outline two overarching frames that underlay participants' expressions. The overarching moral and rationality frames, I argue, reflect conceptual models that online participants employed when evaluating and interpreting racial and political others and their behaviors. I found that governing the evaluative themes of the racial and political others marked by their common BLM affiliation are implicit hierarchical frameworks of morality and rationality. Although these are two separate analytical categories, in practice, they are often inseparable frames that commenters employed to outline not only group difference, but a moral and rational order in which the Black.

### Content Analysis: The Moral Frame

Blue participants implicitly assert a moral hierarchy in many of these comments. BLM is almost exclusively identified as black-only movement that values black lives over others. Comments about BLM and BLM-related protests involve anti-black images tracing back to the slavery period. Many also reflect concerns with order vs. chaos, justice vs. injustice, and good vs. bad character. In commenting on BLM subjects, participants implicitly rely on these qualities to rank groups and members of the different groups into a moral hierarchy. In the following

section, I will show how Blue participants' comments positioned BLM, blacks, and/or activists as morally inferior or reprehensible.

### *Justice and Order Is Threatened*

Overall, the Black vs. Blue theme is central to many participants' racial and political rhetoric about BLM. Central to this theme is an assertion of justice and order juxtaposed to its opposite, exemplified by BLM and its supporters.

Just let them keep spilling their filth, hate, stupidity, bullying, rioting, destruction and disturbances and some day some innocent people (let's hope and pray they aren't children) will be killed from their acts of violence and you will never see them organize again when the new president comes into office.

I have buried my friends. I have held their loved ones in my arms and felt their hot tears fall and mingle with my own upon my chest. I have watched parents wither away and die from their heartbreak. I have heard the thunder of the 21 gun Salute and the mournful sound of Taps as another uniform clad body is laid to rest more times than I can bear to remember, and to think that you will honor the organization that calls for more deaths and celebrates them is not only disgusting and repulsive, but reveals how you mock the values of human kindness, compassion and honor.

These comments were made in response to two separate news stories on BLM. Most of the comments expressed a polarized, group-based politics in which those who support minority or liberal politics are cast as racial and political "others." Such essentialized group difference, combined with different group narratives, sharply distinguishes people affiliated with the Black and the Blue communities. Members of the Blue community possess the qualities of kindness, compassion and honor—qualities under threat by the criminal BLM.

Many Blue commenters impugned the morality of BLM and its supporters in other ways:

The slow improvement of race relations in America has been stopped by BLM. And the white liberals are trying to do good, but they actually crush black people.

Cops ain't gonna do nuthin. B L M we do what we want ...

Justice prevails. As for him (a public defender whose position was terminated, who allegedly claim that it was for his political position) blaming Trump, it's pure idiotic. The moron deserved to be fired.

Other content on the website further questioned the morality of BLM and its supporters. News items told of occasions when a police officer's drink was spat into at a coffee shop; when police officers' families were harassed by BLM protesters; and when airline workers wore BLM buttons on their uniforms. In these narratives, BLM is everywhere, threatening order and decency in the nation as a whole.

Many commenters' vulgar expressions can appear irrational. However, the commenters are reacting to portrayed threats in the articles on the BlueLivesMatter website. This sense of attack and threat is important in understanding the anger evident in Blue comments. The anger was expressed in response to perceived threats to public safety and political stability. The content of the website tells a story about who is committing unjustifiable action and spreading ideological threats to "our" security, values, and sense of justice. Such perceived threats, again, are not limited to the physical; mainly they are ideological threats to moral values embraced by the Blue community.

#### *Flat-line Equality and Post-raciality*

Some Blue commenters argue that BLM promotes a form of racial separatism. This rhetoric drew on colorblind ideology. In this view, BLM was seen as threatening the fairness and equality that are parts of U.S. democracy. BLM was perceived as arguing that *only* black lives matter. In other words, BLM fails to accept the American values of equality and solidarity. Blue commenters insisted that we (Americans, presumably), as a collective, are fundamentally equal in *both* rights and experience, and *should* concern ourselves with fairness and love for all.

BLM rhetoric was thus discredited because it was defined as making racially exclusive claims for justice. Below is an example of a comment condemning BLM while acknowledging the positive value of racial equality:

Give me a break. I have some great friends, and former officers I worked with (and depended on for back up (Thanks Joe) who were black. They were not "niggers", but great Americans, just happen to have a darker skin tone. As far as BLM is concerned, they are a bunch of paid rabble, who have no real purpose other than to disrupt the lives of the decent Americans who abide by the law, show each other respect, say hello or how ya doing when passing them. They are a hate group. Just don't put anyone with a black skin tone into that group. Same with Hispanics, Asians, East Indians, even some Arab friends of mine (who happen to be Christian).

The comment above illustrates a general trend of race talk that indicates a legalistic, formal definition of race (Gotanda, 1991). Here, race is a neutral, apolitical and ahistorical description of the difference in skin tone. In this view, racial equality is achieved when everyone is treated equally, "regardless of skin tone." This imagined equality, although innocuous on its face ignores how history of racial inequality impacts today's unequal racial outcomes. It assumes a world of equal rights, access, and experience without consideration of the historical impact of racism. BLM and those who pursue racial justice and equality "for black lives" are thus promoting racially exclusionary benefits.

Many of the all-lives-matter claims critiqued Black Lives Matter for pursuing racially specific interests. These critical comments tended to assume no racial differences in circumstances or experience. For example:

"White cop shot a black peep". [people]

That makes it racist? That's all? Because the guy running away was black? Again, that doesn't make it racism you idiot.

I am so over this Racist BLM!

When do Real Americans get our reparations for being subjected to decades of victim-minded whining?

NO. They do NOT. They are just like all of us. Not special. THEY JUST NEED to learn to live by the same rules AND laws as the rest of us.

The Only Blacks Matter group is Racist.

Many Blue commenters accused BLM of being a racist organization. Such accusations rested on the assumptions that in today's world there is racial equality in experience, circumstances, and rights, and that anti-black racism is a thing of the past. Given that we live in a post-racial world, in the Blue view, people who appeal for preferential treatment are pursuing a racist agenda. Moreover, it is also racist, in a post-racial world, to impose racial meaning on non-racial issues, such as police shootings of criminals. This view allowed Blue commenters to position themselves as the equality-loving group opposed to the black supremacist politics of BLM. Blue commenters embraced an individualistic abstract liberal ideal (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) of equal access, fairness, and meritocratic competition in the U.S. The structural-political nature of racial inequality was thus obscured. Within the abstract liberal framework, the importance of individual "talent" is magnified, social relations are imagined to be friendly competition, and the sociohistorical nature of social life is lost. In this view, racism can only be a matter of the individual, since a structural analysis of race and racial relations is simply out of frame. To summarize, there are two general elements to this post-racial theme: (1) racial progress has occurred, but BLM and its liberal allies make things appear worse; and (2) we should be all-loving and cooperative, but BLM promotes division and strife.

#### *Those People Are Dangerous and/or Criminals*

Many Blue commenters linked protesters, BLM, and blacks in general to crime and violence, thus implying their moral inferiority. BLM activists were also cast as opponents of the morally superior forces of social order. As two commenters said:

Praying for the officers.

Well, I hope that these idiots realize that what they call "Their peeps" [inmates, put in the context of the news article] are also in grave danger of being harmed as well, so we better

not be hearing any "Boo-hoos" when that happens! Yet we know that they will be the first to do so because they are criminals as well!!

Politics is power, this is about Black Radicals and Criminals getting back power in the Hood.

To do that one has to keep the Cops at Bay. That's the point.

Black Lives Matter has one goal and one goal only. To make the thug and criminal lifestyle risk and consequence free for black males.

The first comment above was in response to BLM's alleged support for a "prison riot" in Delaware. The second comment was in regard to a BLM-affiliated black individual being included on a panel that "will help select the new Dallas Police Chief." Both comments locate Black and Blue on opposite sides of a criminal divide. Blackness, in particular, is associated with a historically constructed imagery of criminality and dangerousness.

Indeed, a key idea shared by many Blue commenters (regarding protests and activism associated with the liberal politics) is that protesters and activists are violent and threaten public order and safety. Any progress-related disruption thus comes to be seen as criminal. Some examples are shown below:

OUR CONSTITUTION GIVES US THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST.. THE KEY WORD THERE IS PEACEFUL.. IF IT GOES BEYOND PEACEFUL YOU ARE FAIR GAME FOR ARREST BY THE POLICE OFFICERS..

Rather they are part of these violent protest or not their philosophy condones violence and these violent protesters don't need much to go crazy. BLM should be very vocal in their non support of these type actions. When you wanna be a leader you need to lead.

The protesters in this country run this damn country, they stop traffic, assault people, assault and insult the police. The country has lost its values and let about 15 percent of the people rule the streets....so sick of these protests and this bullshit. The police aren't

allowed to even do their jobs but these assholes will sure call for their help if something happens to one of them or their family members.

These comments were made in response to news stories about BLM protests. We see here that BLM activism is associated with violence, disruption, and criminality. Implicit in such rhetoric is the idea that BLM protesters are antagonistic to the positive moral value of peace and order.

Another recurring theme in Blue comments on BLM-related groups is black-on-black crime. The claim is that BLM-affiliated “whiners” are blaming whites, law enforcement agents, and institutions for the crimes happening in “their own communities.” Following this logic, BLM supporters are fundamentally mistaken about where to place the blame for crime in their communities. This rhetoric underscores the theme of black dangerousness and criminality. Below are two examples of comments citing black-on-black crime.

Even black thugs who murder other black thugs and innocent people of any skin tone get police protection. Even when they kill a cop. These punks are hypocrites of the lowest order. If black lives matter why are there so many blacks murdered, by blacks, in Chicago and Baltimore, or any other metropolis EVERY week?

The officer should be decorated for taking a dangerous criminal off the street. If BLM really cared about black lives, they'd be in Chicago trying to end the DAILY bloodbath.

Calling out black-on-black crimes diverts attention from the subject of police violence. Such rhetoric challenges the honesty of BLM activists (why would they care so much about police shooting when they do it more to their fellow people?). It also shifts moral responsibility for harm to black people from the police to the black community itself.

Blue commenters, in pointing to black-on-black crime, are leveling several charges in an apparent attempt to discredit BLM: (1) Black communities have a unique issue of crime, which, comparatively, is a more severe issue than police shooting; and (2) BLM is not truly concerned about black lives because they failed to solve black-on-black crimes. It follows that BLM seeks political gain, not justice or equality. In this way, invoking black-on-black crime questions BLM's moral standing.

The criminality/dangerousness attributed to BLM and BLM-related figures reflects a curious parallel to the negative image of blackness. BLM activism is seen as reflecting criminality and dangerousness, qualities that morally discredit BLM. In other words, the criminality/dangerousness theme shows the Blue commenters' fundamental rejection of BLM: Not only is BLM violent and/or criminal, even its claims are morally dubious and contradictory. Blue discourse thus sets BLM apart from respectable society and politics.

### *Dependence and Individual Responsibility*

The charge of free-loading, dependent blackness is also leveled against BLM. By evoking the "laziness" stereotype of blackness, Blue commenters further impugn the character of BLM activists. Such characterizations again lower the moral status of BLM. Three comments are examples of this theme:

F;'U;'C;'K black lives matter. No more food stamps for you lazy f;'u;'c;'k;'s when Trump is president in January!!!!!!

I'm surprised blacklivesmatter doesn't pull out and take a break for a bit. Let these coddled white Nazifa anarchists fill up the prisons. If African Americans have any ambition, now is the time to focus on work/family/school, while these white [white] children fall to the wayside.

Look at the crowds of anarchists. NO ASIANS.

Where are the Asians? Working, studying, taking care of their families and thinking, "damn, those white kids are crazy!"

Fuck BLM: they need to worry about getting JOB instead.

Such comments seek to delegitimize BLM by casting its proponents as lazy and dependent. Based on a hidden moral code of the achievement ideology, Blue commenters find BLM suspect. Racist images of lazy blacks reinforce this strategy for discrediting BLM. By positioning BLM and BLM-affiliated people as corrupted, Blue commenters establish a boundary between the Blue us and Black others. Invoking the historically constructed negative imagery of blackness,

on one hand, essentializes BLM activism as a monolithic, imaginary character. On the other, it relegates this imaginary character to a low place in society's moral hierarchy.

### *Content Analysis: Rationality Frame*

Another frame in the data is about rationality. Whereas the moral justice frame positioned BLM at the bottom of a moral hierarchy, the rationality frame positioned BLM as inferior intellectually. Blue commenters thus drew a boundary between BLM-affiliated people and themselves on a spectrum of sanity vs. insanity and rationality vs. irrationality.

### *BLM and liberal Politics are Insane*

Blue commenters often accused BLM activists and their liberal supporters as out of control or insane. By implication, BLM's activism, critiques and protests need not be taken seriously. Below are two examples of comments employing the irrationality vs. rationality theme:

They continually exhibit terrorist behavior. They are and have been out of control. Nothing to debate here. They protest law abiding officers by breaking the law.

Sad, Dallas joins the pantheon of failed liberal city states. Every single metro area operated by the mentally ill liberal democrats for the last 4 generations is self destructing. America we are already in the second revolution the left are revolting against anything and everything that is sound, sane or in any way resembling sanity or reality.

The two examples above were in response to news stories about BLM protests. These comments treat liberal activism as destructive of normative social order. The assumption here is that the normative social (and racial) order is rational by default. To challenge it is thus irrational.

In the Blue view, the criminal justice system that formally grants equal rights to all is a just social order, and a rational one. To challenge such an order is, therefore, fundamentally irrational and dysfunctional. In this sense, challenges from morally inferior and criminal others are even less legitimate. Here again, Black others are positioned in opposition to the moral, sane, and rational Blue.

### *BLM Hates Us*

Some Blue commenters accused BLM not only of irrationality but of instigating animosity. Some examples are shown below:

What truth that they are a racist hate group..... Is that their benefit to society? What else have they ever accomplished? Nothing! They are a disgusting racist hate group.

Alexander is president and founder of the Next Generation Action Network! That's the AI Sharpton, "What do we want? Dead Cops! When Do We Want it? Now!" network that resulted in two New York City policemen killed and in five officers killed in Dallas.

**BRAIN DEAD!**

Here, BLM is depicted as a group united by hatred. BLM activists are not only irrational but driven by irrational emotions. In this way, Blue commenters discredit BLM's claims to be seeking justice. The Blue community is also positioned as under attack and by forces that threaten sanity and civilization.

The Blue Lives Matter news site provides a channel for individualized political expression and for the creation of virtual community in which participants with similar racial and political views congregate, forging a shared identity of "blueness." This identity is asserted through aggressive and reactionary responses to the perceived threat (threats to the moral justice values and to a rational order that BLM represents) faced by the Blue community. Commenters' expressions are also informed by the broader political and cultural system of racist meanings. In this community, the boundary between the Black and the Blue is clearly demarcated by claims that BLM activists are criminal, irrational, morally inferior, lazy and stupid. The Blue identity is thus established by racializing the Black other using old and new racist tools on the internet platform.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Overall, the comments on the Blue Lives Matter site express themes that portray BLM and the racial politics they represent as irrational, immoral and unjust. Blue commenters define a morally and rationally compromised BLM, and implicitly position themselves on a higher moral

and rational ground than those others. In this way, Blue commenters draw boundaries between the Black and the Blue. Further, Blue positionality is established by invoking historically constructed meanings attached to blackness—what Collins (2004) calls controlling images.

Despite claims to post-raciality, Blue commenters embrace a racialized worldview. The Blue us and the Black others occupy different worlds of morality and rationality, according to this view. Cameron and Panovic (2014) argue that “...in producing one representation rather than another, a language-user is also constructing a particular version of reality” (9). This is what Blue commenters are doing in their online community. They are collectively reproducing a white-centered social order. In this sense, race talk is powerful; it is, in part, through the repeated reference and use of these racialized beliefs and images that racial inequality is kept alive.

Moreover, the virulence of the language on this site suggests not only an ideological divide, but an attitudinal/affective divide between the political and racial lines. This deep-rooted division is documented and discussed by some sociologists. Feagin (2006) uses the term “white racial alexithymia” to denote the condition in which whites, living in a historically constructed and institutionally maintained racist society, are unable to fathom, both intellectually and emotionally, the suffering experienced by people in oppressed racial groups. Hochschild (2016) observed a similar “emotional wall” between the political *left* and the *right*.

It would be a mistake to treat Blue comments as individualistic expressions of political or racial prejudice, ideology, values or ideals. The Blue commenters’ seemingly individualistic expressions, tied to historical racial and political meanings, are fundamentally group based. Blumer (1958) points out that racial prejudice entails group positions, rather than cognitive or psychological bias that is fundamentally individual based. Racial prejudice, according to Blumer, is a norm and imperative that shapes how people think about and act toward racialized others. It entails group position because, fundamentally, racial prejudice is formed based on a collective, racial identity in contrast to the racial others. It is this assertion of (superior) group position that is evident in Blue commenters’ discourse.

Blumer argues that the sense of group position of racial prejudice is a generalized understanding of the racialized others as an abstract group. These understandings are influenced by events of great public importance, potentially including major protests. This seems to be occurring in the case of BLM, Blue communities are defining themselves in opposition to the image they have created of BLM through a white racial frame. In this case, conflict based on

language expressions establishes the boundaries of a conservative, white racial and political position. We thus see how racial language defines and strengthens group boundaries, making it even harder to overcome the conflicts those boundaries create.

This study shows how Blue participants engage in boundary work through online expressions. However, it has two major limitations. First, the internet-mediated online commenting lacks social and interactional context. It is difficult to understand how commenters' social circumstances and other dimensions of their identities impact their racial and political views. Second, online commenting marks a form of *expressive* rather than *communicative* interaction. Lacking a critical view into how people interactively negotiate the racial and political meaning and construct their Blue identity, this study does not address the process-oriented Blue identity construction in people's daily interactions. Participant observation and interview research can offer additional insights into how this Blue ideological enclave is created and maintained. Further, the emotive boundary that is implied by the Blue commenters' virulent remarks is a starting point for future work focusing on feelings and emotions based on (racial or political) group boundaries.

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