**Reactionary Attitudes: Strawson, Twitter, and the Black Lives Matter Movement**

**Introduction**

On 25 May 2020, Officer Derek Chauvin asphyxiated George Floyd in Minneapolis — a murder that was captured in a confronting nine-minute bystander video that set off a firestorm of activity on online social networks, in the streets of the United States, and even worldwide. These protests captured the collective rage, dissatisfaction, and resentment personally and vicariously experienced towards the widespread systematic injustice and mistreatment of African Americans by police and vigilantes. The scale of these protests, both online and in the streets, has been estimated to have far exceeded the civil rights marches of the 1960s (Buchanan et al. 2020). Considering the widespread extent of these protests, our research aims to analyse conflictual intergroup moral dynamics in terms of the reactive attitudes expressed by distinct online communities on Twitter. This paper examines the extent to which the Strawsonian (1962) reactive attitudes framework is applicable to the Twitter discourse around the Black Lives Matter protests reignited by the murder of George Floyd. In particular, we argue that the Strawsonian framework is inadequate to understand a range of prevalent attitudes expressed in this discourse — attitudes that we call *reactionary* as opposed to merely *reactive*.

To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to examine the applicability of Strawson’s reactive-attitude framework to either social media or digital activism. We apply two different research methods to identify the dominant communities involved in the Twitter discourse and to interpret our findings in relation to theories of moral responsibility. The first part of the paper employs empirical computer science methods including social network analysis, the Leiden community detection algorithm, and classification algorithms to identify the most prominent online communities engaged with the Black Lives Matter movement. In Section 1, we identify four distinct communities: (I) the Activist community, which includes a diverse collection of grass-roots activists of predominantly African-American background; (II) the Progressive community, which involves a number of high-profile, typically left-leaning politicians and media outlets that explicitly support and endorse the Black Lives Matter movement; (III) the Reactionary community, which contains a close-knit collection of Republican figures and politicians, anti-Black Lives Matter counter-protesters, and supporters of the police; and (IV) the Booster community, which contains a heterogeneous group of signal boosters whose primary function in the Twitter Black Lives Matter discourse is retweeting, link-sharing, and fundraising.

In the second part of our paper, we interpret these findings in the context of the Strawsonian framework to examine the applicability of this theory in realistic, non-ideal contexts of structural oppression and injustice. Section 2 outlines Strawson’s argument in “Freedom and Resentment” (1962) and highlights the contours of relevant secondary literature. Since its publication, Strawson’s landmark paper has played an important role in shifting mainstream moral responsibility scholarship away from the traditional issues of blame, punishment, and moral condemnation towards distinctly interpersonal attitudes and reactions that we are naturally committed to in everyday relationships. Strawson terms these *reactive attitudes* and emphasises the particular importance of resentment, moral indignation, and self-obligation in regulating moral demands in social relationships. InSection 3, we analyse the Black Lives Matter protests through this framework. Although sentiments such as resentment and indignation can be located, other attitudes such as contempt and counter-indignation do not find a place in Strawson’s original theory. Indeed, his framework delineates the reactive attitudes shown by (i) the accusing party who has experienced moral injury, (ii) those who vicariously join in on behalf of the accusing party, and (iii) the accused party at fault. However, the framework lacks a category for those who vicariously support the *accused* party, as exemplified by the Reactionary community and their All Lives Matter counter-discourse. Counter-indignation is a key moral responsibility practice that has received little academic attention. Thus, in Section 4 we isolate and examine the two factors of (a) online social networks and (b) colour-blind ideology, both of which facilitate counter-indignation and constitute challenges to Strawson’s theory of moral responsibility. We argue that the reactive-attitude framework should be expanded to better account for the observed dynamics, namely through the inclusion of counter-indignation as a key reactionary attitude.

# 1. Community Clustering: Empirical Methods and Findings

This section explains the methods used to locate the Twitter communities driving the online Black Lives Matter discourse and our relevant findings.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although existing work in experimental moral philosophy has tended to use methods derived from social and personality psychology (Alfano et al. 2022), our research introduces social and semantic network analysis into the conversation. This allows for a data-driven examination of the Black Lives Matter Twitter discourse, which in turn, informs our theoretical discussion of Strawson’s reactive-attitudes framework.

Twitter is a microblogging platform consisting of a tremendous number of individual users (averaging 206 million daily monetisable[[2]](#footnote-2) users in 2021 (Spangler 2021)) connected to each other in complex, often asymmetric, network structures. Hence, we looked for closely interconnected individuals, defined by the extent to which they retweeted other users without additional commentary. This signals engagement with the original tweet content, but more specifically an endorsement of the original tweet’s message (Metaxas et al. 2014). We filtered out quote tweets which have a greater likelihood of containing more complicated dynamics (such as explicit criticism of the original tweet). We thus created a retweet network and analysed the network for highly connected community clusters, detailed as follows.

To begin, we queried the Twitter Streaming Application Programming Interface (API) with Black Lives Matter related keywords, hashtags, and short expressions such as #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter in the time period between January and July 2020. The resulting dataset contained around 4.6 million original tweets from 13 January to 18 July 2020, and around 94.5 million retweets from 18 January to 23 July 2020. The tweets were generated by around 2 million distinct authors; after the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, the number of daily tweets increased exponentially from around 255k to 4.35M. We then constructed a weighted retweet network (Sullivan et al. 2018) to depict the relationship between the tweet authors (the nodes). The weight of an edge between two nodes represents the number of times a Twitter user retweeted another author. Taking the largest connected component of this retweet network (involving around 689k nodes and 13M edges), we used the network analysis tool *igraph* and the Leiden community detection algorithm to detect community clusters. In these clusters, nodes of the same community are highly connected and frequently retweet each other over nodes in other communities (Traag, Waltman, and Eck 2019). We found four key communities, for which we manually examined the 100 most influential tweet authors. Our results found the following characteristics.

1. **Activists:** This community contains a diverse number of individual grassroots activists many of whom were of African-American background. As core advocates of Black Lives Matter, they often explicitly endorsed the movement by placing #BlackLivesMatter in their Twitter biography.
2. **Progressives:** This cluster contains a variety of high-level politicians and organisations that generally support the Black Lives Matter movement, such as well-known Democratic politicians, liberal media outlets (e.g., ABC, NBC, CBS), and legal aid organisations (e.g., American Civil Liberties Union).
3. **Reactionaries:** This community contains a large proportion of conservative, Republican figures and politicians (e.g., Donald Trump), anti-Black Lives Matter supporters, right-wing news outlets, advocates of the police, and supporters of conspiratorial, offensive, or racist views.
4. **Boosters:** This community includes a heterogeneous group of signal boosters whose primary form of interaction in the Twitter Black Lives Matter discourse is link-sharing, retweeting, and fundraising. A large component of this Booster group are K-pop fans, which reflects the interaction of the famous South Korean pop group Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS) with the Black Lives Matter movement. BTS donated $1 million to the Black Lives Matter foundation and encouraged their fans to match this amount.

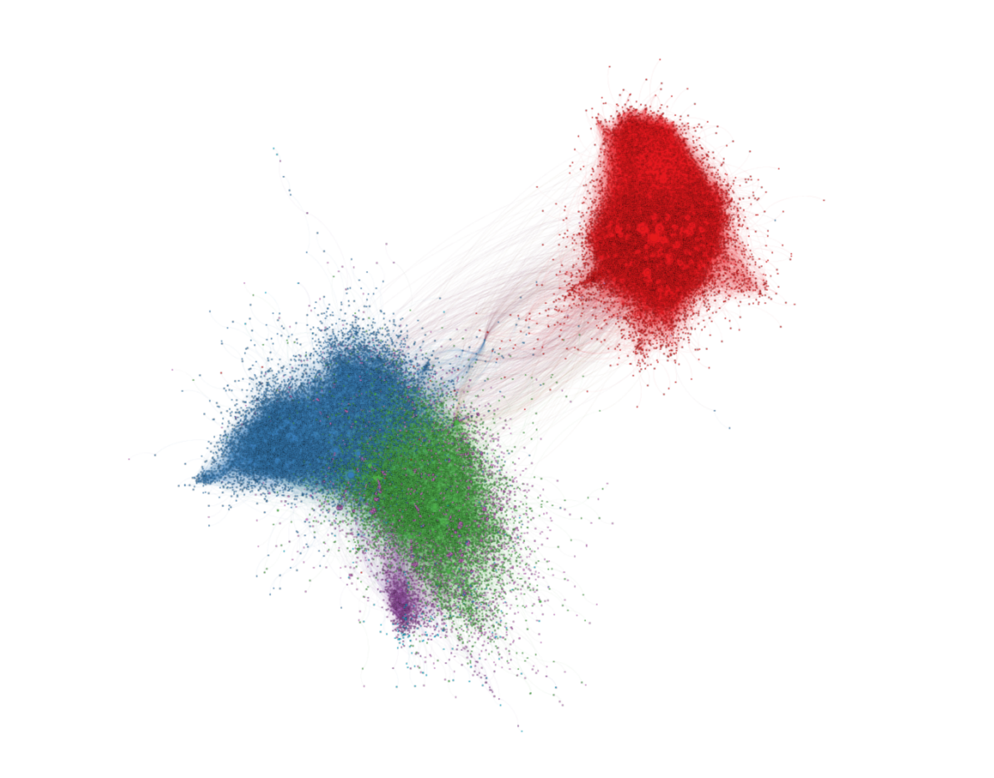
We found that these four clusters are polarised, with Activists, Progressives, and Boosters communicating proximally on the one side and Reactionaries on the other. Following the murder of George Floyd there was steep increase in the volume of tweets generated, first by the Activists, then among the Progressives and Boosters, and finally among the Reactionaries.

Figure 1 (from Alfano et al. 2022 forthcoming): Retweet network. Green: Activists, Blue: Progressives, Purple: Boosters, Red: Reactionaries.

As a caveat, there is a difference between online sentiments expressed about Black Lives Matter and offline actions. Offline actions include activities out of self-obligation, participation in street protests, and changes to law enforcement practices by politicians. Thus, attitudes within the Twitter discourse do not necessarily reflect the state of the broader Black Lives Matter movement at large. For example, Democratic politicians that signal their support of Black Lives Matter online, may in fact be simultaneously increasing police funding. Nevertheless, we maintain that there is often an overlap between online sentiments about a social issue and offline actions, which makes the Twitter discourse a valuable case study for moral responsibility practices.

# 2. A Strawsonian Analysis: Theoretical Method

Given the results of our community detection and social network analysis, our primary aim is to interpret the Activist, Progressive, Reactionary and Booster communities in relation to contemporary philosophical theories of moral condemnation and responsibility. Our research asks the following question: to what extent is Strawson’s theory of reactive attitudes applicable to the communities involved in the Black Lives Matter discourse on Twitter, and how might it be modified and expanded to better account for the observed dynamics? We thus examine whether the interaction between the four communities reflects the manifestation of personal attitudes of resentment, moral indignation, and self-obligation, as proposed in Strawson’s theory of reactive attitudes.

## 2.1. Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment”

In his landmark essay, Strawson argues that discussions of moral responsibility are traditionally limited to the practices and attitudes of punishment, blame, moral condemnation, and approval. These practices are used to regulate social behaviour, but they imply a detachment from the action or agent at hand. In contrast, Strawson emphasises the importance of *reactive attitudes* as essential and inextricable elements in holding others morally responsible (Thompson 2017). These are defined as the “attitudes and reactions of offended parties and beneficiaries; of such things as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings” (Strawson 2008, 5). Strawson’s theory of moral responsibility is thus one that is deeply interpersonal. It is concerned with reactivefeelings and attitudes that we are naturally committed to in everyday relations with others such as our friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. These are underpinned by a general expectation of good will on the part of others to ourselves, or at least, a lack of animosity or indifference.

Strawson details three key reactive attitudes that individuals are prone to: resentment, indignation, and self-obligation. *Resentment* is a first-personal reactive attitude experienced by the offended party in response to injury or indifference. It can therefore signify that moral wrong-doing has occurred and motivates the offending party to recognise the harm they have caused. Next, Strawson proposes the second core reactive attitude of *indignation* which is a vicarious moral sentiment experienced on behalf of another. In this situation, kindred agents place expectations upon an offending party in the interest of the offended party. Lastly, Strawson highlights *self-obligation* as the demands that one places upon one’s own self for others. This involves self-directed sentiments such as feelings of obligation, guilt, shame, or remorse. The natural expression of this self-obligation includes confession, apology, making amends, and self-directed reproach. Notably, the function of resentment and indignation is only fulfilled if the wrongdoer recognises, understands, and accepts their misbehaviour through these self-directed reactive attitudes, at which point forgiveness and restoration of a positive relationship become possible and reasonable (Thompson 2017).

Strawson’s proposal has inspired an abundance of scholarship in the last sixty years. In addition, recent philosophical work has increasingly recognised the impact of societal inequality, oppression, and power imbalances on an agent’s moral responsibility capacities.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hutchinson et al. (2018, 1), for example, argue that traditional Strawsonian literature “assumes an overly idealized conception of agents and of our practices. The situational features of those holding and being held responsible have been underanalyzed.” Indeed, moral responsibility practices undeniably unfold in complex social contexts underpinned by identities constructed and determined by markers such as race, gender, and class (Hutchinson et al. 2018). These social asymmetries have historically received insufficient attention in the literature on moral responsibility. The emerging line of philosophical research therefore asks: what hierarchies of power do moral agents exist in and how does this affect their moral responsibility practices? Which individuals and groups are privileged by economic structures, legal and political institutions, and cultural biases? Attending to the unequalising effects of social power affirms that moral responsibility is interpersonal in the narrow Strawsonian sense. But more accurately, the reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, and self-obligation are inherently social. That is, idealized interpersonal relations play out in complex, non-ideal social contexts marked by power imbalances, racism, and structural injustice.

## 2.2. Explanatory Elements: Oppression and Moralisation

In the case of Black Lives Matter and the Twitter discourse, social and technological forces have interacted to make the moral dynamics between the four Twitter communities more complex and asymmetrical. This section draws on recent literature to define several issues relevant to our discussion, namely oppression, stereotyping, and the moralisation of issues on social networks. The definition of oppression that we use is articulated by Ann Cudd, who argues that oppression is as “an institutionally structured, unjust harm perpetrated on groups by other groups through direct and indirect material and psychological forces” (Cudd (2006, 28). Notably, Cudd’s philosophical and psychological account of oppression highlights the role of social institutions[[4]](#footnote-4) in constraining and shaping human behaviour, and she argues that under oppression, certain groups are subject to unjust social constraints and harms. In Cudd’s account, violence plays the most central role in causing and maintaining oppression: “Violence is the most forceful and direct way to affect persons’ options” (86). Through violence and threat of violence, the oppressed group is disabled and impoverished, whilst the oppressor is empowered or indirectly privileged (86). However, psychological forces such as stereotypical beliefs also maintain oppression. Stereotypes are generalisations, typically made based on physical features, that associate groups or individuals with certain attributes (69). Despite being learnt through our social environments, the entrenchment and internalisation of pernicious stereotypes serves to degrade and stigmatize the target social group (Hutchison et al. 2018; 17). In the context of Black Lives Matter, the most problematic stereotype has represented Black people, especially young Black men, as criminals (Welch 2007; 276). This stereotype has been institutionalised, manifesting itself in racial profiling by law enforcement officials and the general public (Laurencin and Walker 2020). Notably, the result of oppression and stereotyping on moral responsibility is unequal across societal groups. For example, being raised in a cultural context that is highly aware of anti-racist concerns will result in an agent being more sensitive to these moral concerns, whilst being raised in a racist culture will likely facilitate ignorance towards these moral concerns (Vargas in Hutchison et al. 2018; 7-8).

However, technological forces such as the moralisation of issues in social networks have also interacted to distort how we hold each other responsible. Previous studies into protests have defined moralisation as the phenomenon where an issue shifts from mere personal preference (for example mere approval or disapproval) to an issue of right or wrong (Mooijman et al. 2018). When an issue becomes moralised, people’s attitudes become more fixed. Individuals will hold a strong moral conviction with the sentiment that something “must” or “should” occur (Mooijman et al. 2018; Skitka et al. 2005). Such moralisation is typically associated with moral terms such as “unfairness” and “injustice” and social or political developments such as corrupt politicians or police violence. A study by Brady et al. (2017) finds that in social media networks, the presence of moral-emotional words increases the diffusion of a message by 20% for each additional word. Furthermore, the presence of moral-emotional language increases the diffusion of these moral and political ideas *within* liberal and conservative groups, but not between them (Brady et al. 2017). This highlights how Black Lives Matter, as a highly loaded emotional and moral issue, has become a divisive issue marked by group polarisation.

# 3. Black Lives Matter Protests through Strawson’s Reactive-Attitude Framework

Applying Strawson’s reactive-attitude framework to the Black Lives Matter movement allows us to investigate the applicability of this framework to a contemporary issue explicitly concerned with social oppression, power asymmetry, and structural racism. This section will therefore compare where the Twitter discourse has aligned with the expected Strawsonian view and where it has departed. Attributing the reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, and self-obligation to a complex group of individual tweet authors will necessarily mean that the resulting conclusions only capture the high-level, prevailing attitudes of distinct Twitter communities.[[5]](#footnote-5) That said, there are a number of general insights that can be gained through conceptually considering the broader contexts of the Activist, Progressive, Booster, and Reactionary communities that we have identified.

In order to identify and characterise the reactive attitudes exhibited by each group, we used the following methods and criteria. First, a retweet network was constructed to identify the four communities of Activists, Progressives, Boosters, and Reactionaries (Section 1). As revealed in Figure 1 from our previous studies (Alfano et al. 2022 forthcoming), the Reactionaries primarily interacted only within their community whilst the Activists, Progressives, and Boosters interacted frequently. Second, we characterised each of the communities by manually inspecting the top 100 most-engaged nodes of each group (Section 1). Lastly, we conducted a Strawsonian analysis based upon an examination of (i) emoji and hashtag usage, (ii) interactive patterns between communities, and (iii) an analysis of dominant narratives and findings from the literature (e.g., Carney 2016; Langford and Speight 2015; Schwartz & Jahn 2020; Edwards et al. 2019).

Regarding the first criteria (i) of emoji and hashtag use, we drew upon our previous work which calculated the conditional probability of group membership based on the emoji and hashtags used by each community (Alfano et al. 2022 forthcoming, Figure 2). Here, we examined the most popular emoji and hashtags used by each community and found that taken together, emoji and hashtags were roughly as informative as text in determining community membership. We used this to support our arguments on the predominant concerns and expressions of each group. For example, the probability of belonging to the Reactionary community conditional on the use of a US Flag emoji (​​🇺🇸) was 87% (Alfano et al. 2022 forthcoming)). Similarly, the use of the Angry ‘pouting’ (😡) and ‘rolling eyes’ (🙄) emoji and #BackTheBlue, #Trump2020, and #AllLivesMatter hashtags were significantly more likely to be used by members of the Reactionaries.

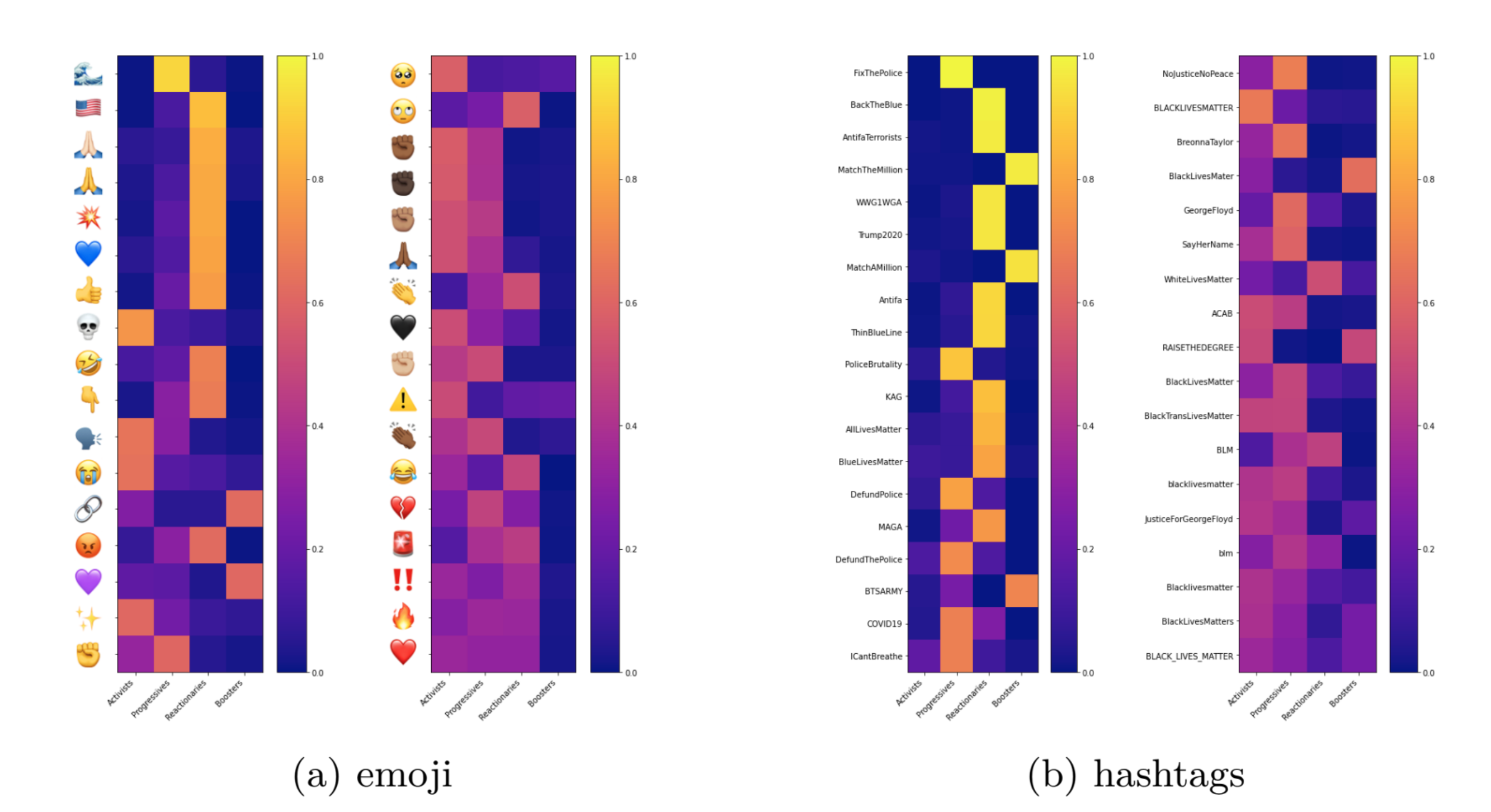


Figure 2 (from Alfano et al. 2022 forthcoming): Conditional probability of community membership based on emoji (2a) and hashtag (2b) usage for top 15 most popular in each community.

Strawsonian attitudes of resentment, indignation, and self-obligation were attributed based on the most popular hashtags and emojis used which was then cross-referenced against dominant narratives and recent findings in the literature. Interactive patterns (ii) between communities also informed our analysis. For example, a closely linked retweet network (Figure 1) and reproduction of Activist hashtags by the Progressive and Booster communities was indicative of group allyship. Lastly, we analysed the relevant literature (iii) and located the Strawsonian roles (of accuser, accused, and those who join in on behalf of the accuser) to differentiate between individuals who have themselves experienced police violence or racism and those who have aligned with the movement for another group’s benefit.

## 3.1. Activist Community

Let us turn first to the reason for the Black Lives Matter movement itself, and by extension, some of the sentiments of the Black Lives Matter activists. On July 13, 2013, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was first posted on Twitter by three African-American women, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi (Carney 2016). The hashtag was crafted to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman for fatally shooting Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, African-American teenager (Tillery 2019). The protest message gained support as advocates invoked it to “express their complex emotions in response to several high-profile cases where unarmed African men and women died at the hands of police officers” and vigilantes (Tillery 2019, 297). These complex emotions have included a mixture of outrage and anger, sadness, despair, fear, and shock.

Despite the complexity of emotions regarding these incidents, the Strawsonian reactive attitudes of resentment and indignation can be identified within the Activist group. However, if the core moral wrongdoing is characterised as police brutality alone, then a smaller proportion of Activists will be categorised as experiencing resentment (and a greater proportion categorised as experiencing vicarious indignation). In contrast, if moral wrongdoing is defined as systemic inequality against African-American people more broadly, then more Activists will be classed as showing first-personal resentment. Indeed, as Flanagan (2017, xi) writes, resentment names the first-personal anger when wrongdoing is “done to *me*”, whereas “indignation is a kind of moral anger at wrongdoing to some group to which I belong or to a group which I do not belong but am an ally”. In the Black Lives Matter discourse, the primary moral harm that Activists point to is police and vigilante violence against unarmed Black people alongside a lack of police accountability in the judicial system. This is reflected in the motivating incidents that have mobilised the Black Lives Matter movement, such as the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Breonna Taylor (Moody-Ramirez and Cole 2018). Following this conception of moral wrongdoing, we find that a small proportion of Black protesters, who have personally been subject to police violence, experience resentment targeted at harm done to them. In contrast, the greater proportion of Black Lives Matter activists can be seen as expressing moral indignation towards the police, the carceral state, and judicial systems *on behalf* of others within their group who have been subject to violence.

However, the Black Lives Matter movement can also be contextualised more broadly as a campaign against systemic racism towards African-American people. This broader approach has been captured in previous studies in the literature (e.g., Szetela 2019; Taylor 2016; García and Sharif 2015) and by the Black Lives Matter organisation. On their website, the Black Lives Matter organisation[[6]](#footnote-6) explains:

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black Lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity… #BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. (Black Lives Matter in Langford and Speight 2015, 86-87).

Here, a far greater proportion of Black protesters can be interpreted as experiencing resentment from first-personal injury or injustice, including police violence, racially-based powerlessness and marginalisation, and a denial of basic rights. The term “Lives” in Black Lives Matter does not only address physical bodily existence, but also the diverse elements that constitute and contribute to these lives, including Black emotions, hopes and dreams, and voices (Langford and Speight 2015). Similarly, in a Twitter study of 161 Black Lives Matter social media accounts, Mundt et al. (2018, 4) identified 4 general issue groups: 32% of accounts focused on issues relating to the systemic oppression of Black people, 8% emphasised issues concerning criminal justice and police brutality, 9% discussed affirmation and empowerment of Black people, whilst 19% highlighted a combination of these issues or related focus areas such as capitalism, colonialism, feminism, and community empowerment. This reveals that depending on which issue is defined as the core moral wrongdoing, different Strawsonian reactive attitudes will arise.

This ambiguity of categorisation itself is not a weakness of Strawson’s framework, as it speaks to the multi-faceted nature of systemic problems such as police brutality. Indeed, police violence does not occur in a vacuum but is rather supported by social issues such as systematic over-imprisonment of Black people, economic marginalisation, and social stigma and racism that excludes Black people from employment, housing, and education opportunities (Taylor 2016). Therefore, we argue that the sentiments of the Activist community can be seen to *generally* align with the reactive attitude of resentment, which arises in response to personal experiences of police violence or racism.

Additionally, the *target group* of Activists’ resentment is sometimes intentionally left indeterminate. This can be ascertained from physical protest signs at Black Lives Matter protests. For example, protest signs that state “Stop killing us” (Politi 2020), “Our Black children need their future” (Borresen and McGoniagal 2020), and “We have suffered enough” (Borresen and McGoniagal 2020) reflect that the recipient of Activists’ reactive attitudes span a wide number of categories. This includes the policing system most importantly, but also communities that support the police and White Americans who knowingly or unknowingly benefit from structural racism. Notably, the Activist community does not single out the Reactionary community alone as morally blameworthy. Instead, it engages with a broader target group, which includes any person or institution that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuates systematic violence and racism.

## 3.2. Progressive and Booster Communities

Next, we argue that Strawsonian indignation is the most distinct and visible reactive attitude exhibited by the Progressive and Booster communities. In reality, these reactive attitudes will not be so well-defined and overlap will occur between the reactive attitude categories. For example, the Activists, Progressives, and Boosters may each express the general emotions of resentment, indignation, and self-obligation at varying times. Nevertheless, we emphasise the importance of the Strawsonian roles (of accuser, accused, and those who join in on behalf of the accuser) for distinguishing between the reactive attitude categories. Strawsonian indignation demarcates a role for those who join in on behalf of the accuser. It is an essentially vicarious attitude, and a moral reaction where “one’s own interest and dignity are not involved” (Strawson 2008, 15). This reactive attitude is where Strawson’s framework is most effective in analysing the Black Lives Matter Twitter discourse as it distinguishes between individuals who have themselves experienced police violence or systematic racism, and individuals who aligned themselves with the movement to fight injustice and inequality for another group’s benefit.

In the Twitter discourse, we argue that both the Progressives and Boosters aligned themselves with the Black Lives Matter movement as ‘allies’. Brown and Ostrove (2013, 2211) define allies as individuals who “work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of non-dominant groups”. Progressive and Booster allyship is reflected through the reproduction of Activist hashtags (e.g., #JusticeForFloyd, #BlackLivesMatter, and #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor) and emoji (e.g., the “raised fist” ✊✊🏻✊🏼✊🏽✊🏾✊🏿, the “exclamation mark” ❗, and the “police siren” 🚨). Additionally, the closely linked retweet network between the Activist, Progressive, and Booster communities suggests the emergence of parallel and intergroup conversations about racism and police violence. Although most individuals in these two groups have not experienced the police brutality or historical inequality that Black communities have encountered, the overwhelming allied support for the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates a Strawsonian attitude of moral indignation on behalf of another. It also reflects the norm of social responsibility, which states that we will help those that need assistance or those who have faced injustice, even if there is no expectation of reciprocal altruism (Jhangiani et al. 2022).

Furthermore, many Progressives can be seen to show self-obligation through redirecting attention to the Activist community (e.g., through frequent use of the down-pointing finger emoji 👇🏻, which points literally at the tweet being quoted when viewed in the Twitter interface, suggesting that Progressives are seeking less to demand recognition for themselves and more for others). In contrast, the Boosters show self-obligation through their strong usage of fundraising hashtags (#MatchTheMillion; #MatchAMillion) and the link emoji 🔗 (associated with links to websites for petitions or fundraising).

However, allyship in the Black Lives Matter movement has been met with both praise and suspicion — sentiments which coalesce around Strawson’s reactive attitude of self-obligation. Suspicion can arise when a dominant group, such as White allies, support the cause of another group. Due to lower personal interest in the issue in comparison to the core marginalised group, allies can sometimes be seen as hijacking a cause for their own group or personal interests (e.g., Sobande 2022; Wellman 2022). This issue of hijacking is more prominent for White allies who already experience societal privilege rather than co-racial allies, as it may replicate a power hierarchy where White interests take precedence over those of other racial groups. An essential element of allyship is therefore a willingness to place demands upon oneself for other members of the moral community. Self-obligatory action to help dismantle systems of oppression involves the sharing of power with the subordinated group (Clark 2019; Brown and Ostrove 2013). Previous research has revealed that other self-addressed behaviours and attitudes include educating oneself about police violence and the historical treatment of African-Americans in the United States, recognising the privilege and power conferred by White identity, including non-dominant voices in decision-making, and intervening in social settings when discriminatory behaviour occurs (Melaku et al. 2020; Clark 2019).

The degree to which this self-obligation has occurred is itself criticisable. In relation to the K-pop sub-community of Boosters, for example, Lee and Kao (2021, 71) argue that although most K-pop fans “approved of and agreed with their favourite artists’ support for the BLM movement, others were disappointed that K-pop artists were slow to champion, or did not express even greater support for, the BLM movement.” These critiques stemmed from both the power and influence of international artists such as BTS and the fact that K-pop is heavily influenced by Black music (Lee and Kao 2021). Criticisms are therefore centred around the sincerity of allies’ messages, an issue that is intimately related to self-obligation. A similar argument can be directed towards powerful Progressives such as Democratic politicians. In the case of police brutality and structural racism, therefore, Strawsonian reactive attitudes of moral indignation and self-obligation are closely intertwined. Promoting the rights of Black people also requires an intentional choice to “eliminate social inequalities from which the ally may benefit” (Brown and Ostrove 2013, 2212) if these moral responsibility practices are to be considered sincere.

## 3.3. Reactionary Community

The Reactionary community reveals the starkest departure from Strawson’s reactive-attitude framework out of the four Twitter communities we studied. Their response to the Black Lives Matter discourse can best be understood as (1) an explicit rejection of the demand for self-obligation and (2) vicarious counter-indignation. The Reactionaries were largely composed of conservative, Republican figures such as Donald Trump, anti-Black Lives Matter supporters, advocates of the police, right-wing news outlets, and supporters of conspiratorial, offensive, and racist views. The hashtags that they commonly used included #AntifaTerrorist, #WakeUpAmerica, #BLMTterrorists, #Maga2020, #BlueLivesMatter, and #DemocratsAreDestroyingAmerica.

Looking first at the explicit rejection of self-obligation, it is important to distinguish between the primary targets of the Black Lives Matter movement and the Reactionaries. The target group to which resentment and indignation is directed is not the Reactionary group specifically. Instead, these reactive attitudes are directed towards the police, White vigilantes, and White people who contribute to or benefit from systematic racism. The Reactionaries make up a proportion of this target group, but it also extends to the Progressives such as White Democratic policymakers. In the Strawsonian framework, the expectation is that showing resentment and indignation to the accused party will elicit self-obligatory responses. The accused party is invited to take responsibility by acknowledging their wrongdoing, making amends, and exhibiting self-addressed reproach (Darwall 2004). However, when we examine the response of the Reactionaries to the Black Lives Matter movement, we do not find attitudes of guilt or remorse but rather contempt. For example, frequently used emojis in the Twitter discourse included the “angry” face 😡 and the contemptuous “rolling eyes” face 🙄. This contempt can also be located in the Reactionary community’s hashtag usage. Langford and Speight (2015) argue that the hashtags #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #WhiteLivesMatter:

engage in a politics of erasure, shifting focus from violence and discrimination against Black lives in an effort to re-center Whiteness. Each of these hashtags co-opts the #BlackLivesMatter movement by negating the Black race in favor of all persons, police officers, and White people. The first ignores the importance of race, the second rejects race in favor of institutionalized force, and the third decries reverse discrimination.

By supporting and reproducing these hashtags, the Reactionaries explicitly reject the moral demand to engage in self-obligatory attitudes, through an unwillingness to accept that racism exists (e.g., #AllLivesMatter) and an unwillingness to accept one’s role in systems of racial oppression. We note, however, that it is not that the Reactionaries do not express self-obligation at all. They may well express feelings of obligation towards other issues and ideals such as the Blue Lives Matter counter-movement. However, we highlight that the self-obligation we seek to locate is specifically in response to the core moral wrongdoing of racially-based police violence and systemic racism.

Next, the Reactionaries reveal a reactive attitude of vicarious counter-indignation in support of the police. The #BlueLivesMatter campaign itself arose in 2014 during the grand jury investigation of police officer Darren Wilson, who shot and killed 18-year-old African-American Michael Brown (Solomon and Martin 2019). Its objectives are to provide financial and ideological support for police officers and their families, who are believed to have been targeted by the Black Lives Matter movement, and increase respect for police officers (Langford and Speight 2015). By supporting the #BlueLivesMatter counter-movement through hashtags such as #BackTheBlue, #DefendThePolice, and #BlueLivesMatter, the Reactionaries demonstrate vicarious support for the accused party. It is here that the inadequate geometry of Strawson’s reactive-attitudes framework is most clearly revealed. Strawson’s framework only has roles for the accuser (i.e., resentment experienced by the Activists), those who join in on behalf of the accuser (i.e., indignation shown by the Progressives and the Boosters), and the accused (i.e., the expectation of self-obligation by those who commit or support police brutality and racism). However, it is also necessary to have a role for those who join in on behalf of the accused (i.e., the Reactionaries) — what we call the *reactionary* attitudes. Not all reactionary attitudes are morally reprehensible. For example, in criminal prosecutions where a defense lawyer is obligated to support the interests of the accused party, we would find such support permissible under the right to a fair trial and equal representation. In situations when the accused is innocent or their actions are excusable, supporting the accused party is not only permissible but admirable. We can think of the example of lawyer Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) who legally represented a falsely accused black man, Tom Robinson (Hutchison et al. 2018). However, joining in on behalf of the accused party when they are morally blameworthy can itself be blameworthy. Indeed, moral wrongdoing can be recursive or embedded (Alfano 2016; Harman 2008). For example, if it is wrong to *x*, then it is generally wrong to support someone to *x*. It is also wrong to persuade someone to support someone to *x*. In our case, if it is wrong for the police to use excessive force to kill or injure Black people (e.g., Edwards et al. 2019; Schwartz & Jahn 2020), then it is also wrong for Reactionaries to support police who use excessive force to kill or injure Black people.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such is the case with the Reactionaries who in their vicarious counter-indignation negate Black experiences of discrimination, intentionally or unintentionally support racial violence, and maintain White privilege and supremacy (Atkins 2019; Chaney and Robertson 2015; West et al. 2021; Langford and Speight 2015).

## 3.4. The Social Dimensions of Twitter Communities

Examining the four Twitter communities has revealed how diverse social forces shape our moral responsibility, in a way that is more complex than Strawson articulates. In the case of structural oppression, in particular, deeply entrenched material and psychological forces are at play. These undeniably influence the reactive attitudes that agents experience and express to one another. Hutchison et al. (2018; 16) argue that material forces that perpetuate social oppression and disadvantage include systematic violence and wage gaps, whilst psychological harms include trauma and powerlessness. Similar experiences can be located in the Activist community – where struggles over violence, threat of violence, and prejudice, amongst others, interact to produce deep-seated emotions of resentment and anger. Undisputedly, one’s emotions and responses to the external world will be constructed by social identities, personal experience, and group politics. There are also norms implicit and explicit within society which can influence one’s behaviour and reactive attitudes. For example, the expectation that members of the moral community will join in to combat moral injustice is reflected in the sentiments of the Progressives and Boosters.

However, material and psychological forces of oppression will also shape the reactive attitudes of oppressing agents. In the case of police brutality and racial disparities in criminal justice outcomes, prejudicial stereotypes and discrimination has distorted the attributability and accountability responses (Shoemaker 2011) of people in socially privileged positions. For example, prejudicial stereotypes, ignorance, and racism (Leach and Teixeira 2022; Glazer and Leibow 2020) have hindered the Reactionaries from indicting police and vigilantes who kill Black people (Schwartz & Jahn 2020; Edwards et al. 2019), that is, issues arise in the attribution of blame and responsibility. This same ignorance and racism diminishes the extent that police and justice systems are held responsible for oppressive practices, which can convolute and diminish accountability responses.

Due to hierarchical power relations in society, therefore, moral responsibility practices are often not reciprocal or equal. The Black Lives Matter movement emphasises the need for a modified Strawsonian framework of moral responsibility that addresses oppression and the way it impacts how we hold ourselves and others morally accountable. Herein, we examine vicarious counter-indignation on behalf of the accused party as a key moral responsibility practice which has not received any sustained academic attention.

# 4. Analysing Counter-indignation: Colour-blind Ideology and Social Networks

The reactionary attitude of counter-indignation has importantly been facilitated by the two primary factors of colour-blind racism and online social networks. By examining these two phenomena, we highlight the role that socio-cultural oppression and privilege play in developing, enabling, and restricting the ways that we both manage and fail to hold each other morally accountable. Thus, the following sections examine how social networks and colour-blind ideology have enabled counter-indignation, and the contemporary challenges that these issues raise regarding Strawson's reactive-attitude framework.

## 4.1. Twitter and Online Networks

Social networks have played a significant role in shaping the modern ways that we share information and hold each other to account. These online networks have given rise to contemporary phenomena such as echo chambers (Thi Nguyen 2020), increased group identification, increasing moralisation and polarisation of political issues (Mooijman et al. 2018), and social pressure to express outrage or similar negative emotions (Brady and Bavel 2021). The key question asked here is: does moral responsibility still unfold in the same way that Strawson states on social media platforms such as Twitter? Although Strawsonian reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation, and a moderate level of self-obligation can be located in the Black Lives Matter Twitter discourse, we find that social networks distort the way we engage with others. When an individual posts a tweet, the recipient is not engaged face-to-face, nor bilaterally (due to the asymmetric nature of communication on Twitter and other modern social networks), nor exclusively (other users not part of the initial conversation have an opportunity to engage e.g., via quote tweets and ‘likes’). Instead, information is disseminated to a broader group that typically shares the same beliefs and narratives due to personalisation algorithms that do not optimise for epistemic well-being or effective communication, but rather, user engagement associated with monetisable behaviour (Kozyreva et al. 2020; Alfano & Sullivan 2021).

In our empirical research, we found that the Twitter communities clustered around distinctive interests and shared hashtags. The most obvious example is the distinction between #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter (Section 3.3). However, potential filter bubbles also arose around particular incidents such as the 2020 clash between police and Seattle George Floyd protestors at the Capitol Hill Organised Protest (also called Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone) area. Reactionaries used the hashtags #chop and #chaz to reference this occupation, whereas the Progressives discussed the same situation with the hashtag #seattleprotest. This suggests that individuals may use hashtags to signal their interest in a topic, which they expect other community members to already be interested in. It also highlights that depending on the hashtags used, vastly different viewpoints can arise even around a single topic (Alfano et al. 2021). Therefore, when controversial topics emerge, the segregation of information on social platforms — arising from algorithmic personalisation, echo chambers, and many other phenomena — means that the blaming attitudes of resentment and indignation are less likely to be heard and self-obligatory responses are less likely to be triggered in the accused party.

Furthermore, Reactionary counter-indignation can be explained through the tendency towards moralisation on social platforms, which has been identified in the literature (e.g., Brady and Bavel 2021; Mooijman et al. 2018). Although this can increase motivation for participation in protests, spark collective action, and raise awareness of moral issues, the online shift towards negative moral emotions such as outrage has been closely related to increased group identification and deteriorating intergroup relations (Brady and Bavel 2021). Once an issue such as the Black Lives Matter movement is moralised, people’s attitudes become more entrenched and polarised (Skitka et al. 2005). This creates an amenable environment for group counter-indignation to arise. A recent empirical study by Viciana et al. (2019) further reveals that prejudice towards other partisan groups can arise from two psychological antecedents. Partisan prejudice can arise from a fundamental ideological, moral, or political disagreement (the issues view) *and* it can emerge from the desire to protect or increase ingroup identity (the identity view). Both these motives can be seen in the Twitter discourse and can explain in part the wide schism between the Reactionaries and the Activists, Progressives, and Boosters (Figure 1).

Furthermore, research has found that people do not only use social media to express their moral sentiments, but also use these platforms to ascertain the moral sentiments of others (Mooijman et al. 2018). The result of this perceived moral convergence is that when people encounter others who share their moral attitudes, their attitudes are validated and less likely to be changed. For the Reactionaries, these attitudes have converged around shared “Whiteness”, either a belief that race and racism do not exist in America or an intentional championing of racist attitudes, and a shared opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. In contrast, the #BlackLivesMatter Twitter discourse has been found to contain diverse and informationally rich conversations, with greater lexical and hashtag diversity than #AllLivesMatter (Gallagher et al. 2018). Therefore, social networks have distorted our moral responsibility practices in idiosyncratic ways not anticipated by Strawson, who was of course writing decades before the rise of these technological affordances. Reactive attitudes are not shared in bilateral and symmetrical interpersonal relationships, but instead in online conversations being held at a societal level (see Figure 1). The contemporary phenomenon of ideological echo chambers has also resulted in the arguably worse social, technological, and psychological clustering of like-minded communities, each with differing levels of misinformation, conspiracy, and diversity. These siloed narratives have been essential in facilitating counter-indignation and reducing self-obligatory responses despite the facts of the Black Lives Matter movement.

## 4.2. Colour-blind Ideology and the Reactionary Community

Colour-blind ideology is another phenomenon that has played a pivotal role in supporting Reactionary counter-indignation towards Black Lives Matter. If an agent is blind to racial differences, oppression, and racism, then the attitude of counter-indignation against a movement that problematises race relations is a seemingly logical response. Colour-blind ideology stems from a post-racial liberal theory that denies that race exists. Although it appears egalitarian at first glance, it effaces the experiences of people of colour, refuses to acknowledge that racist prejudices exist, and ignores White privilege (Medina 2013; Carney 2016).

In our study of the Twitter discourse, we found that of all four communities, the Reactionaries most frequently invoked the hashtag #AllLivesMatter in their counter-movement. Gallagher et al. (2018) reveal that #AllLivesMatter emphasises that equal attention should be given to all lives regardless of race. However, this “race-neutral” or “colour-blind” approach to race masks power inequalities and racial biases. Carney (2016) similarly notes that this ideology has been quickly critiqued as an expression of either thinly veiled racism or ignorance. Colour-blind ideology is one example of what Medina (2013) calls racial meta-ignorance, where a person is ignorant to their own ignorance about racial injustices. Here, deeply rooted ignorance towards privilege, oppression, and social injustice makes a subject cognitively numbed and insensitive to their social positionality. This makes ascribing blameworthiness to Reactionary counter-indignation complicated, as it is ambiguous whether oppressive practices are intentionally caused or sustained out of ignorance — and if so, whether that ignorance is culpable.

Although Strawson does not engage with the impacts of oppression or privilege on one’s reactive attitudes, his work provides some solutions for ascribing blameworthiness to counter-indignation when intentionality is ambiguous. Strawson argues that resentment can arise from “indifference” (2008, 15) and “contemptuous disregard of [one’s] existence” (2008, 6). In other words, we can rebuke someone for thoughtless behaviour and resent them for it, even if there was no explicit ill will. The failure of Reactionaries to reproach police violence comes dangerously close to, and in many cases is, endorsement of this deep moral wrongdoing. Despite racial meta-ignorance that muddies the waters around intention and quality of will, Reactionary counter-indignation on behalf of the accused can itself be blameworthy.

# Conclusion

Overall, applying Strawson’s reactive-attitude framework to the Black Lives Matter Twitter movement has revealed that sentiments of resentment, indignation, and self-obligation can be generally located in the Activist, Progressive, and Booster communities. However, we find that Strawson’s framework and Strawsonian literature at present has not distinguished a category for or analysed the role of agents who vicariously support the accused party — what we have been calling reactionary attitudes. This is exemplified by the Reactionaries’ expressed attitude of counter-indignation in support of “all” people, police officers, and White people, revealed through their #AllLivesMatter, #WhiteLivesMatter, and #BlueLivesMatter counter-movements. Thus, we emphasise the need for an expanded reactive-attitude framework that includes counter-indignation as a key attitude. Furthermore, this study has emphasised the distinct impacts of oppression, social media platforms, and colour-blind ideology on our reactive attitudes. This challenges the idealised view that our moral responsibility practices occur in equal and reciprocal relationships with one another. Rather, the issues we have discussed will undeniably distort the ways that we hold each other accountable through our reactive attitudes.

**Word Count:** 9787

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1. For additional information into our empirical method, refer to the following paper: Alfano, Mark, Ritsaart Reimann, Ignacio Quintana, Marc Cheong, and Colin Klein. “The affiliative use of emoji and hashtags in the Black Lives Matter movement: A Twitter case study”. (2021) <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-741674/v1>. Forthcoming in Social Science Computer Review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since the first quarter of 2019, Twitter no longer reports on its monthly active users (MAU) and instead tracks users through the metric of monetisable daily active users (mDAU) (Statistica 2021). Twitter defines mDAU as users who log on to the Twitter website or mobile applications at any given day that it can show ads to (Twitter Investor Relations 2019). To contrast, MAU records users according to the number of user logins to the Twitter website, mobile application, or third-party applications and therefore generates a higher user count. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance the edited collection *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility* (2018) which contains contributions from key Strawsonian scholars such as Michael McKenna, Manuel Vargas, and Bennett Helm, centred around the core themes of power and social identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cudd’s definition of a social institution is broad, including government, stereotypical beliefs, schools, and ethnic classification systems (Cudd 2006, 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These prevailing attitudes themselves are the aggregated opinions of Twitter users, however the views of individual Tweet authors can diverge quite widely. Additionally, in the online sphere, individuals will obtain impressions about what the prevailing societal attitudes are around a topic. These perceptions of prevailing attitudes are likely to be distorted due to factors such as the overrepresentation of sensationalist perspectives online. Nonetheless, it is these general perceptions and impressions (regardless of how accurate they are) that give rise to the Strawsonian reactive attitudes that play out across Twitter communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Black Lives Matter activist organisation can be distinguished from the broader Black Lives Matter, which encompasses all organisations, individuals, protests, and digital spheres that are dedicated to ending police brutality and racism against Black people (Freelon et al. 2016). Nonetheless, the organisation represents and attempts to speak for the diverse coalition of advocates in the wider movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Recent empirical research into the risk of being fatally killed by police by Schwartz and Jahn (2020) has found that men, racial minorities, young people, and those living in economically disadvantaged areas are at the highest risk of fatal police violence, especially individuals at the intersection of these demographics. Edwards et al. (2019) similarly find that out of all social groups the risk of death is highest for Black men, who face a 1 in 1,000 chance of being killed by police across their lifetime. This is comparison to an approximate 1 in 2,000 chance for all men, and a 1 in 33,000 chance of death from police violence for women. Black women are also approximately 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police than White women. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)