Opposition Movements to Black Lives Matter on Twitter

Research Question

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a movement that has gained significant prominence in recent years as part of a broader social justice goal seeking racial equality and police reform. Particularly shocking events have triggered the growth and visibility of the movement such as Michael Brown's fatal shooting in 2014 (Goodman et. al, 2023) and George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police in 2020 (MPR News, 2024). Events like these typically precede large upticks in discussions of Black Lives Matter online, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter. In tandem with this rise in activism, the internet has seen a rise in opposition movements to BLM, especially as a reaction to online discussions by its supporters. These opposition movements use a variety of tools in language, hashtags and tactics to advance their message.

This prompts the primary research question for this paper: **how do opposition movements towards Black Lives Matter use Twitter to advance their goals?** Within this question, I seek to answer a number of sub-questions: what do opposition movements look like, when do they gain momentum and what tactics do they employ?

This is an important question because social justice movements like Black Lives Matter often face significant counter-mobilization from groups who seek to disrupt the message of the movement, its goals or its legitimacy. Understanding these counter movements on platforms like Twitter can provide valuable insight on how these opposition movements create counter-narratives and what effect these might have on policymaking and general support for Black Lives Matter.

Data and Methods

To answer these questions, I performed an analysis of an existing data set of almost 300,000 tweets collected by researchers Simon Goodman, Krystal M. Perkins and Friederike Windel over a one year period from March 2020 to March 2021. These tweets were identified by the presence of the anti-BLM hashtag #AllLivesMatter. Since this is a broad collection of tweets, some users employed #AllLivesMatter to critique BLM, to criticize All Lives Matter (ALM) or to make other comments about

related issues. This means that not all collected tweets in this data set reflect criticism of Black Lives Matter despite containing the hashtag #AllLivesMatter. Within this data set, I have identified 4 groups based on commonly used hashtags that are useful in delineating opposition from support of BLM:

Group	Description	Example Tweet
#AllLivesMatter	Largest countermovement towards Black Lives Matter.	Facts are not racist. This is from the super liberal Sadly blacks are far more likely to commit violent crime, which means more interactions with police and more potential to be killed by them. #WhiteLivesMatter #BlackLivesMatter #AllLivesMatter.
#WhiteLivesMatter	A countermovement to Black Lives Matter that coopts their phrase to apply to white people.	So why is it OK for them to have #BlackLivesMatter on their shirts, but a banner saying #WhiteLivesMatter is offensive. Only racists can find one fine and the other offensive. #AllLivesMatter
#BlueLivesMatter	A countermovement against Black Lives Matter to support police officers, who often wear blue uniforms.	No matter the race, gender, age nor faith, we became #OneFamily God bless all Law Enforcement Officers! May you all come home safe! #BlueFamily #ServeAndProtect #AllGaveSomeAndSomeGaveAll #BlueLivesMatter #AllLivesMatter #LawEnforcement #Police #DefundThePolice #FundThePolice
#AllBuildingsMatter	A hashtag that satirizes #AllLivesMatter as a response to Black Lives Matter. Users generally employ it in response to discussions of 9/11 and the Twin Towers.	Yall bitches say #AllLivesMatter then get mad when we say #AllBuildingsMatter do yall get it now?

In this paper, I use a mixed method approach to analyze these groups in different ways. First, I look at the entire data set to assess general language and themes that people use when they tweet #AllLivesMatter which is the most widespread anti-BLM movement. Then, I analyze the subgroup #WhiteLivesMatter to discuss individuals who are more strictly in opposition to Black Lives Matter and pro white lives. I then perform a comparison of #BlueLivesMatter and #AllBuildingsMatter to show how explicitly anti-BLM individuals may differ compared to those who are anti-ALM.

This data is relevant to answering my question because it allows us to look at large scale opposition movements to Black Lives Matter. Twitter users employ hashtags to help categorize their posts and make them more discoverable when searching. Collecting data based on these hashtags allows us to evaluate their messaging and compare tactics between them. My data set is also sufficiently large that it allows for analysis of subgroups whereby a smaller data set may not reveal the importance or prevalence of other counter movements like Blue Lives Matter. This also helps us understand general trends of opposition movements and different wings within them. This wealth of data allows for a more granular analysis of the language and themes most often used in opposition movements to Black Lives Matter on Twitter.

Visualizations

In this section, I provide a discussion of my research findings. I will draw insights from each group I identified earlier in this paper, beginning with a general analysis of the entire data set.

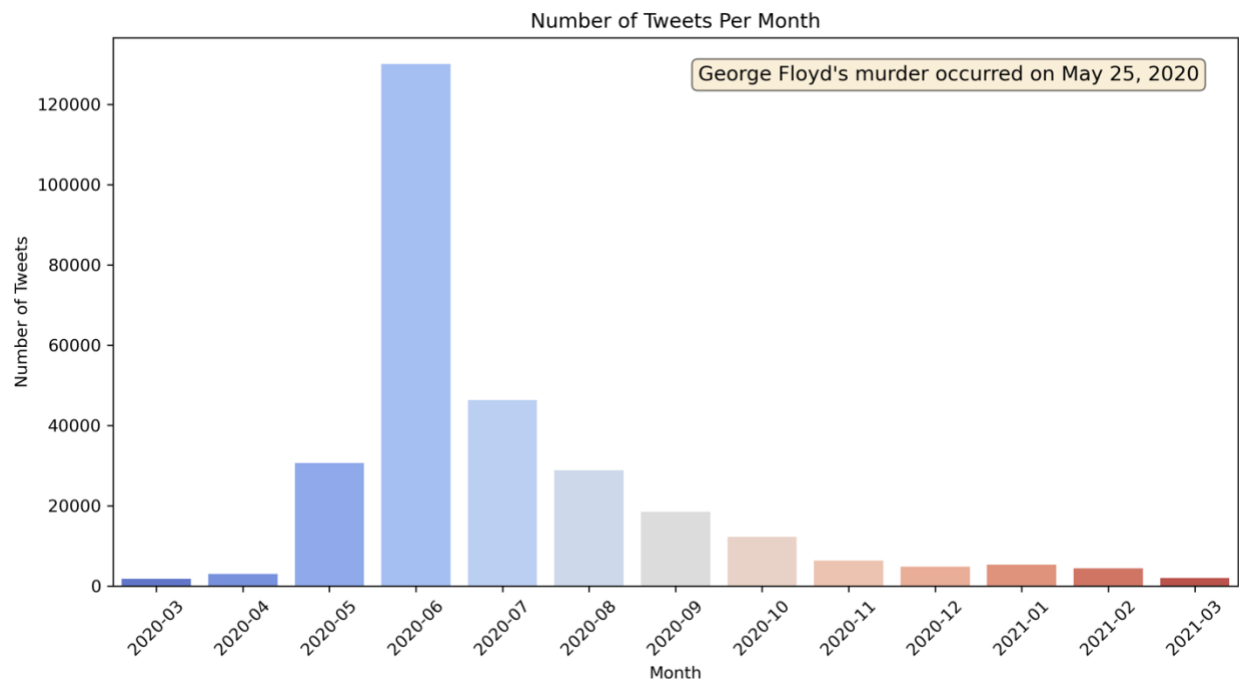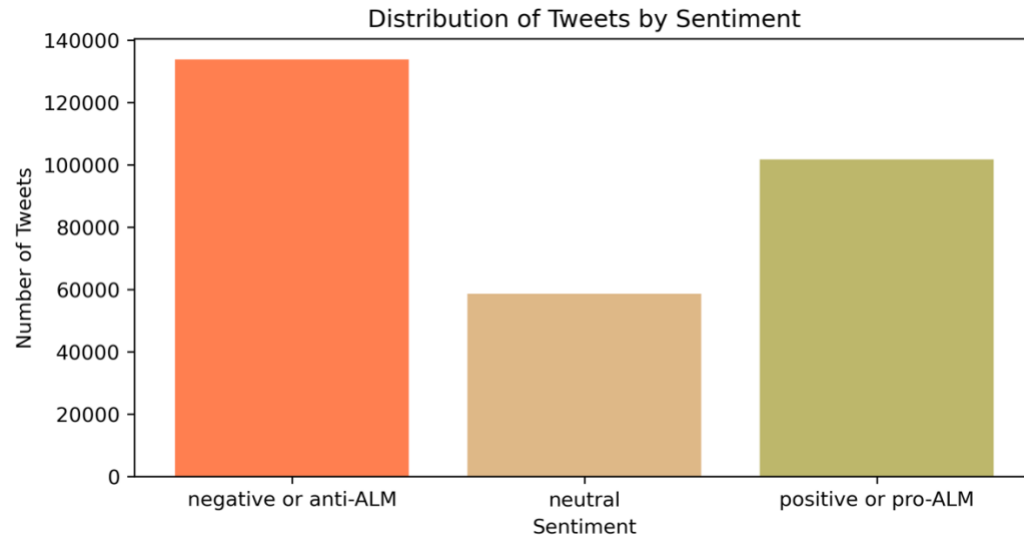## Overall Trends of All Lives Matter Discussions on Twitter

Figure 1: Number of Tweets Per Month

In Figure 1, I used the date of Twitter posts in my data set to depict the monthly volume of tweets posted with the hashtag #AllLivesMatter. There was a significant spike in June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd. This indicates that there was a large reaction from opposition movements to Black Lives Matter in response to highly disseminated evidence of police brutality. The number of tweets gradually declined after June, suggesting that external events created large temporary spikes in online activity related to Black Lives Matter.

Figure 2: Sentiment Analysis of All Lives Matter Tweets

Using a sentiment analyzer function (Ali, 2023), I assigned a sentiment value to each of the tweets based on whether they were positive, neutral or negative. Before applying the function, I processed my data set to remove uninformative words such as "that", "is" or "it" and stripped words to their roots so that words with the same meaning would not appear twice, for example "stopped" and "stopping" would both be reduced to their root, "stop". After processing, I then found that posts with a negative sentiment generally meant that a user was criticizing ALM. The reverse was also true for posts with positive sentiments who were more likely to support ALM. Between those two extremes were more neutrally coded tweets and it is more difficult to determine whether they are pro or anti ALM in this category. Though this function is imperfect and certainly leaves out some exceptions, for example pro ALM tweets with negative sentiments, Figure 2 indicates that a large portion of ALM discussions on Twitter are using language that is either extremely positive or extremely negative. Moreover, this shows that a significant portion of users that employ the #AllLivesMatter may be using it to offer a critique of the countermovement rather than support it.
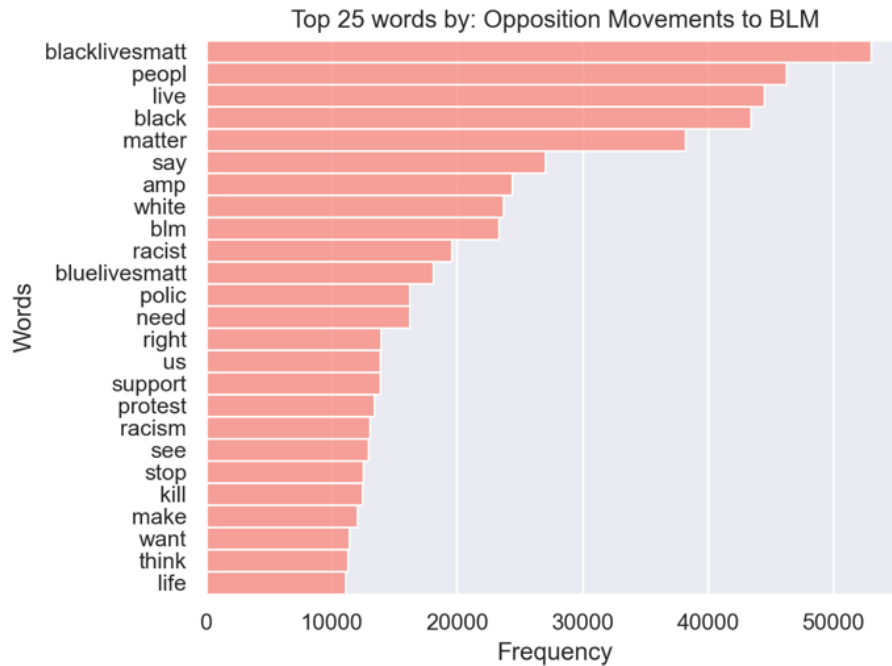
Top 25 words by: Opposition Movements to BLM

Figure 3: Frequently Used Words in All Lives Matter Tweets

In Figure 3 above and Figure 4 below, I conducted a bag of words analysis on the entire data set to assess general words and terms users employed. I processed my data set in a similar way to Figure 2 to remove unnecessary words and reduce them to their roots. This process is not perfect, explaining why the top word, "blacklivesmatter" appears as "blacklivesmatt". Despite this flaw, this analysis still provides valuable insights on choice words. Many users discussed topics relating to race, referencing "white" and "black". There are also discussions of "life" and "kill" and "bluelivesmatt" suggesting that people are focused on police and how this impacts people's lives. Many words are verbs such as "need" or "support" or "stop", indicating that discussions center around changing beliefs or policies in society.

Figure 4: Word Cloud of All Lives Matter tweets

Figure 4 represents the language of All Lives Matter discussions visually by depicting the top 150 words most commonly used. The size of a word corresponds to its frequency, revealing important insights at a glance. In addition to reinforcing the takeaways from Figure 3, Figure 4 illustrates that the types of words people are using are generally simple nouns and verbs such as "man" and "see". This is interesting because it reveals that Twitter discussions of All Lives Matter are more casual in nature, allowing a wider range of people to more easily read and engage in them. This may also suggest that these tweets reflect the perspectives of ordinary people rather than more specialized discussions typically found in academic journals.

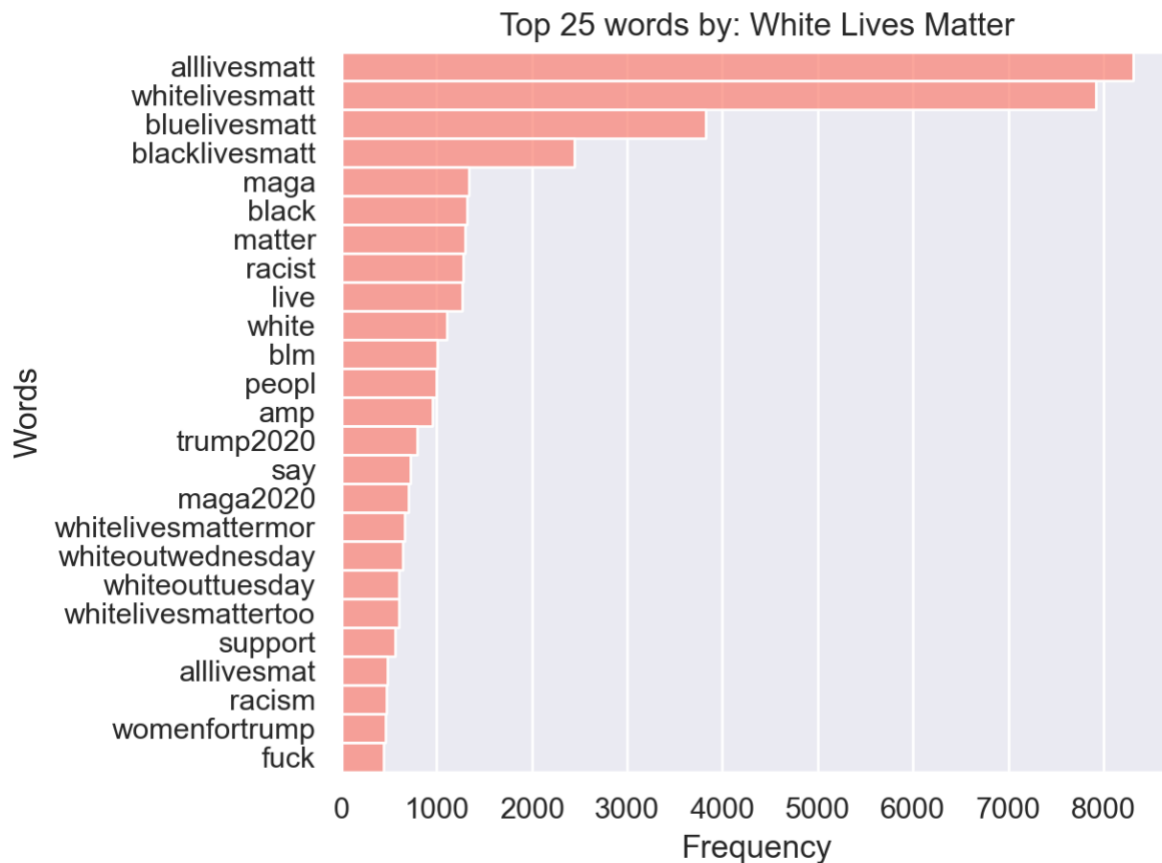# Trends in White Lives Matter Tweets

Figure 5: Frequently Used Words in White Lives Matter Tweets

In Figure 5, I conducted the same bag of words analysis on a subsection of the data set characterized by the hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter. In contrast to the word analysis of the entire data set, this subgroup shows a greater presence of political ideologies such as referencing Donald Trump and the 2020 presidential election. There is also a greater likelihood that users who employed the hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter also used other hashtags such as #WhiteLivesMatterToo and #WomenForTrump. This suggests that those who seek to undermine the Black Lives Matter movement by using #WhiteLivesMatter, are more likely to employ right wing political references and use more explicitly racist phrases such as #WhiteLivesMatterMore.
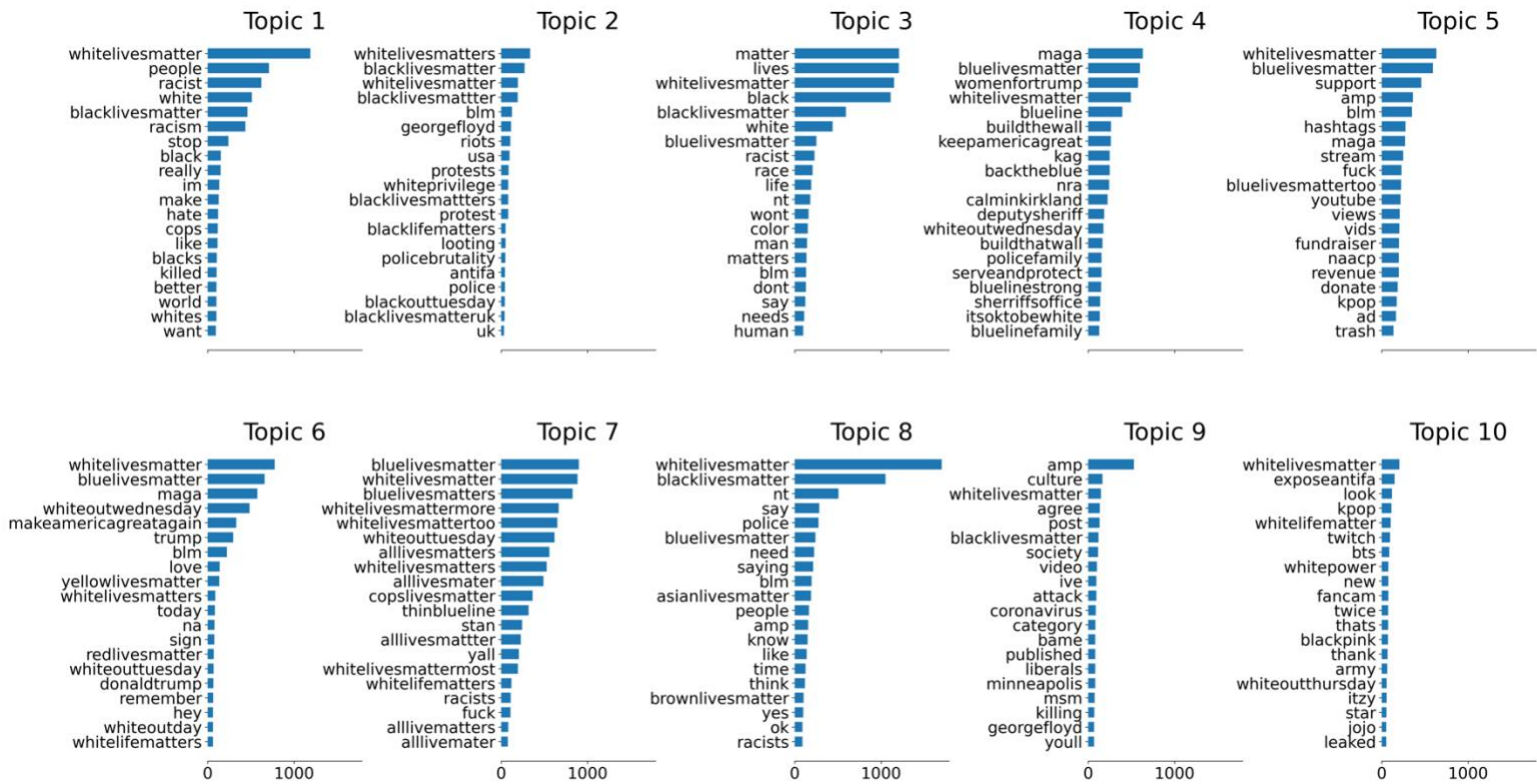
Figure 6: White Lives Matter Word Cloud

Figure 6 represents the language of White Lives Matter discussions visually by depicting the top 150 words most commonly used. This illustrates that the White Lives Matter subgroup is a countermovement towards BLM characterized by its political ideology, with words such as "exposeantifa" and right wing conspiracies like "Qanon". Moreover, it suggests that some users view #BlackLivesMatter as an attack on their white identity, defending against this through hashtags like #ItsOkToBeWhite. There are also some references to other racial groups such as "#AsianLivesMatter" which may reflect an attempt to include other minorities in the mission of BLM or decentralize black people in the discussion. These themes reflect strategic ways the White Lives Matter countermovement attempts to discredit or move focus away from BLM.

Figure 7: Topics in White Lives Matter Tweets

Figure 7 uses a topic modelling function to group frequently used words together into 10 distinct topics. I will not provide an analysis of every topic, as some offer more clear and meaningful insights than others. Topics 1, 2 and 3 illustrate opposition to White Lives Matter by discussing racism, police brutality and white privilege. Topic 4 demonstrates a collection of tweets centered around the police and right wing phrases like "build the wall" and "keep America great". This suggests that White Lives Matter users often defend against BLM by painting the police in a favorable light. Topic 6 reflects a theme that satirizes Black Lives Matter by using terms like "yellow lives matter" and "red lives matter". There are also references to right wing ideology and Trump. Topic 10 contains more explicit anti-BLM words with references to white power and exposing Antifa, a left wing political group. There are also discussions of K-pop, which probably refers to a phenomenon where K-pop fans would weaponize social media to support (or detract from) Black Lives Matter (Romano, 2020). Topic modelling of White Lives Matter tweets suggests that there are even subgroups of thought within this movement, reflecting different strategies to undermine BLM such as supporting the police, spotlighting right wing ideologies and satirizing the message of Black Lives Matter.
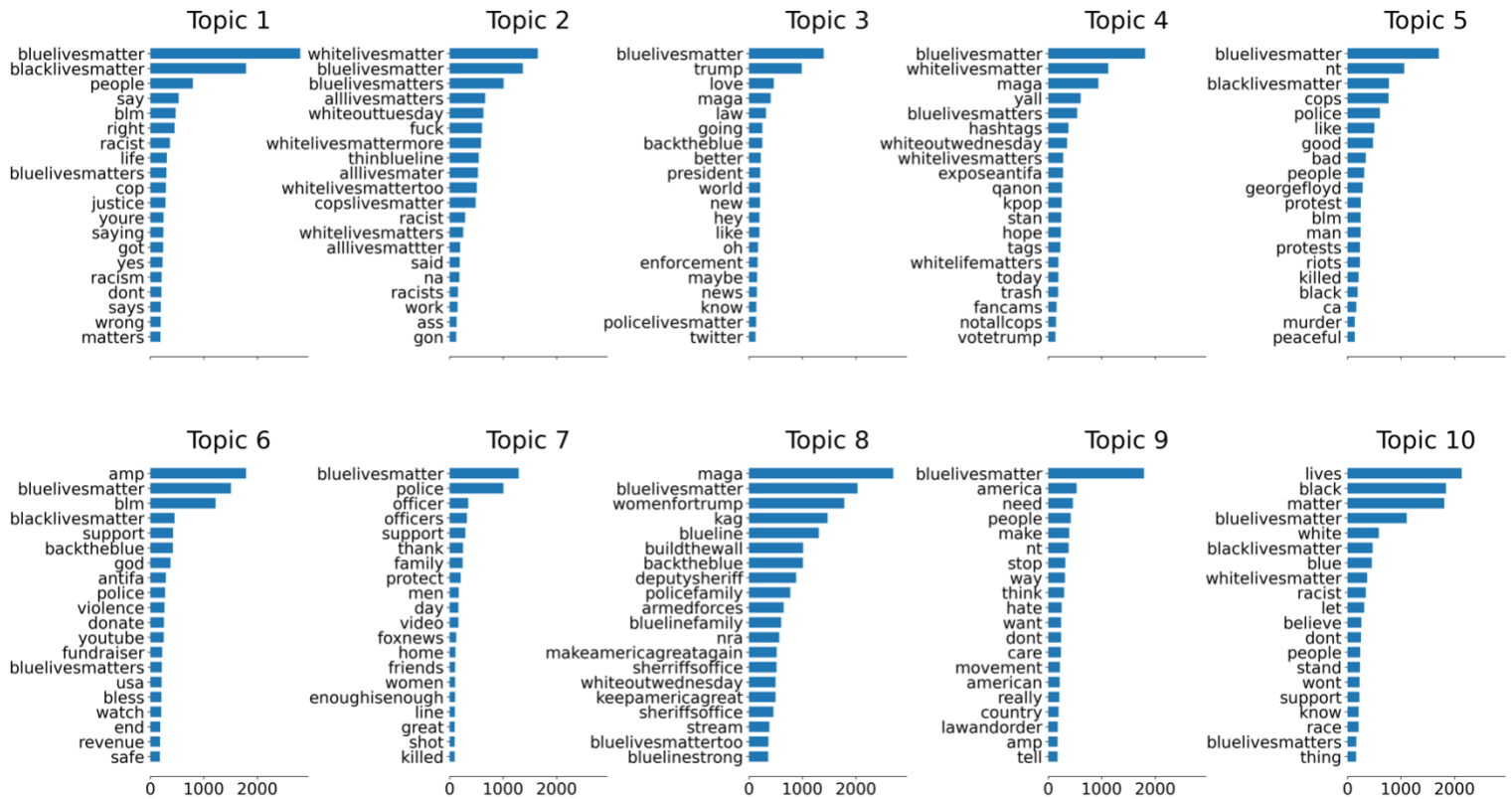
Topics in Blue Lives Matter Tweets

Figure 8: Topics in Blue Lives Matter Tweets

I conducted a topic model of tweets containing Blue Lives Matter which is a countermovement seeking to discredit attacks from BLM against the police. Topic 6 suggests that one theme under this category seeks to use social media to spread information about events and generate money through terms like "fundraiser", "youtube" and "watch". Topic 7 demonstrates gratitude for police officers and how they are impacted by violence in America through words like "protect" and "great". Topic 8 reinforces the right wing messaging often contained in counter movements to BLM through words such as "Make America Great Again" and "Blue Lines Strong" which is a movement that supports the armed forces such as the police and military. These notable topics reveal that Blue Lives Matter supporters are generally right wing and support the existence and efforts of law enforcement as a means to undermine the BLM movement.
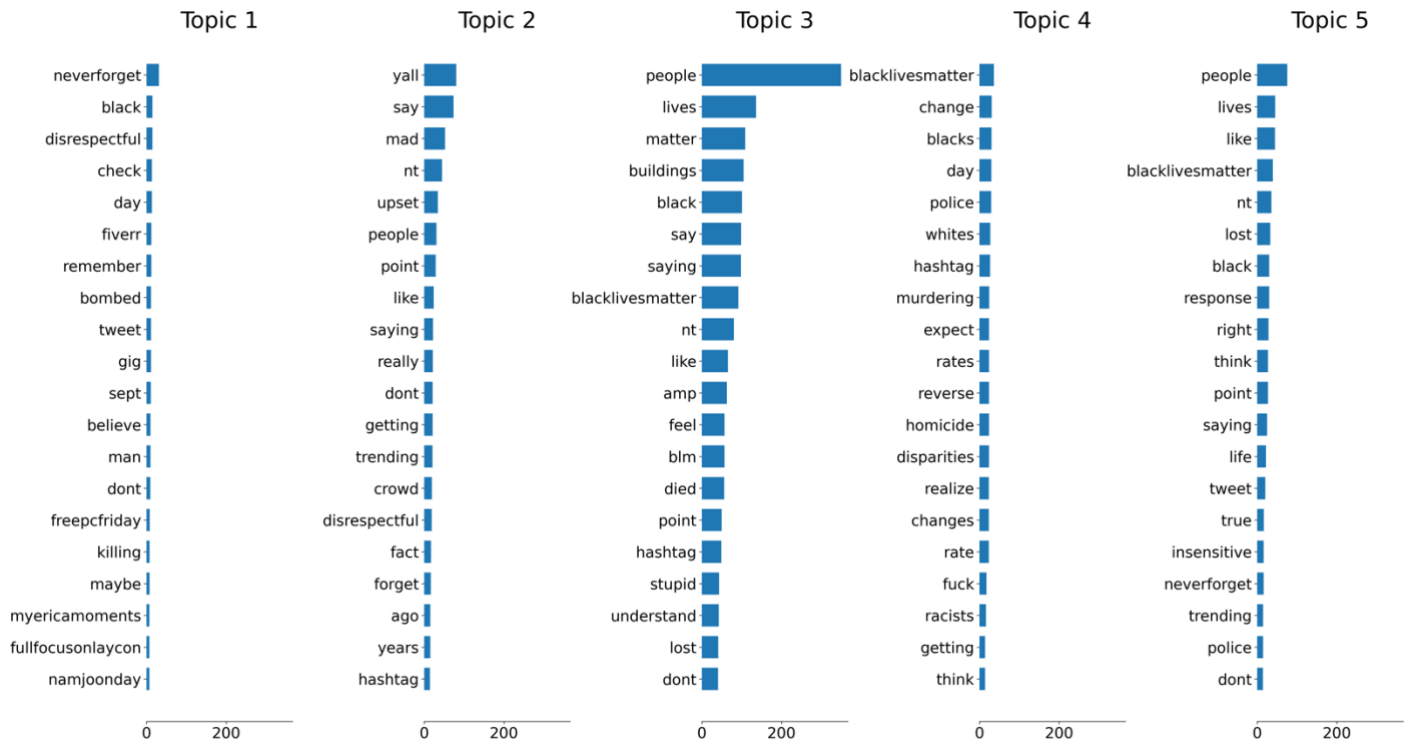
Topics in All Buildings Matter Tweets

Figure 9: Topics in All Buildings Matter Tweets

In figure 9, I performed another topic analysis of tweets containing the #AllBuildingsMatter. Members of this movement are pro-BLM and use the hashtag to criticize the insensitivity of the All Lives Matter movement. This was a smaller group of tweets with around 1200 posts so I decided to reduce the number of topics to 5 instead of the usual 10. Topic 1 references the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, probably explaining the meaning of #AllBuildingsMatter and why it is being used. Topic 2 reflects criticism towards All Lives Matter by showing how #AllBuildingsMatter is disrespectful to victims of 9/11 in the same way as All Lives Matter is to black people. Topic 4 shows discussions that engage in critical discourse through words like "change" and discussions of "BlackLivesMatter". This contrasts the discussions and tactics of the #AllBuildingsMatter movement against the other three movements.

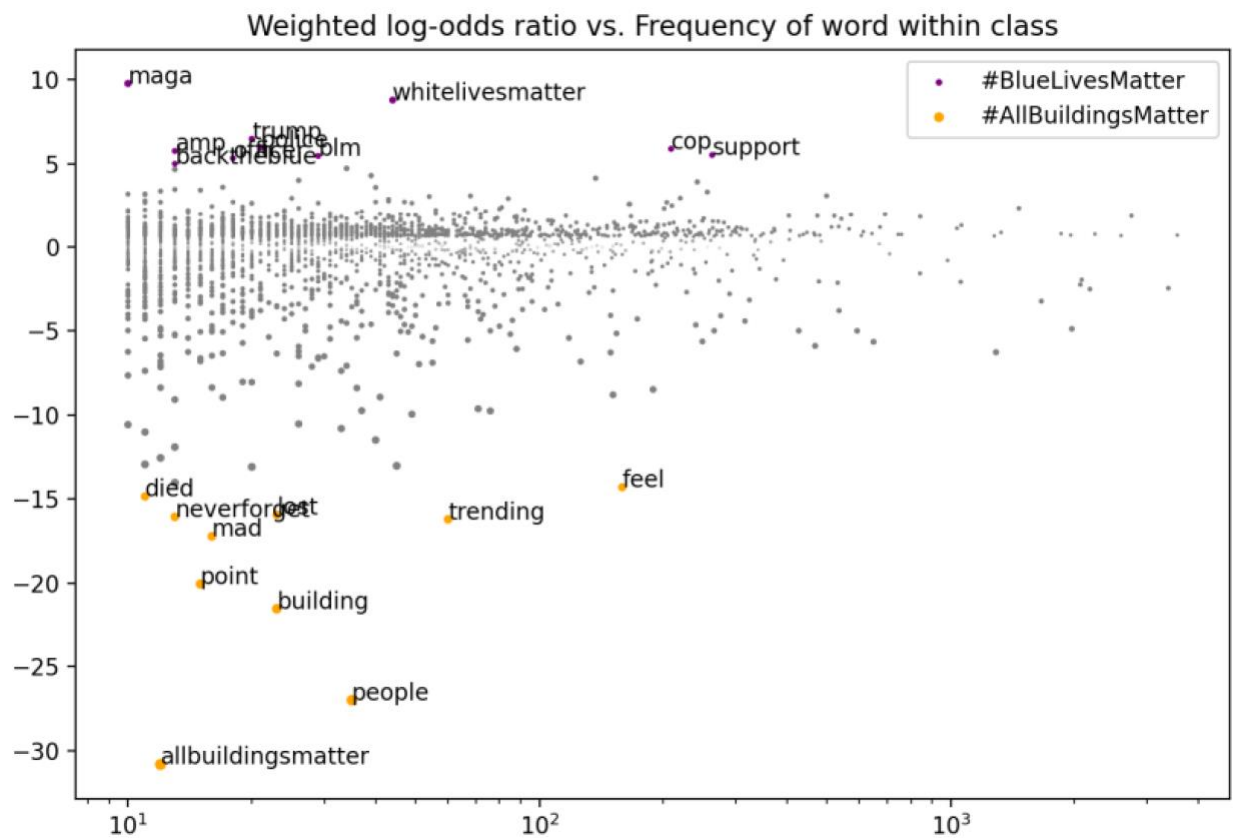# Discourse Variations in Blue Lives Matter vs. All Buildings Matter

Figure 10: Word Usage in Each Subgroup

In Figure 10, I performed an analysis comparing the words used in tweets with the hashtag #BlueLivesMatter with tweets with the hashtag #AllBuildingsMatter. I first processed my text from each category to remove unnecessary words that would not provide valuable insights from the data. Then, I used the fighting words module in Convokit to demonstrate the differences in word usage between an explicitly anti-BLM movement and a pro-BLM movement. Figure 10 shows that Blue Lives Matter users are more likely to reference #WhiteLivesMatter, cops and their support for them. They are also more right wing with references to MAGA and Trump. In contrast, All Buildings Matter users employ words like "people", "mad" and "never forget" referencing the themes of remembrance and discontent with the All Lives Matter hashtag.

Conclusion

My analysis of nearly 300,000 tweets using the #AllLivesMatter hashtag illustrates the diverse strategies of opposition movements to Black Lives Matter on Twitter. Through an examination and comparison of the sub-movements, #WhiteLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and #AllBuildingsMatter, I further demonstrated differences in techniques within opposition movements and in comparison to those who support BLM. These movements, which oppose BLM in various ways, often take off after incidents of racial violence or police brutality which activate attention to BLM, reflected by the spike of #AllLivesMatter tweets following the murder of George Floyd.

Through linguistic and thematic analysis of this data, I provide a comprehensive analysis of counter movements and their strategies:

1. Decentering black lives: Movements like #AllLivesMatter and #WhiteLivesMatter regularly promote messages that either look to take over the conversation around black lives (other lives matter, not just black people) or to especially strengthen white identities who feel attacked and vulnerable in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

2. Support for Law Enforcement: #BlueLivesMatter acts as a countermovement to support police officers as a tactic to undermine criticism towards them in response to police brutality. This subgroup makes use of terms that stress endorsement of the authorities in combination with other right wing values such as phrases like "Make America Great Again."

3. Simplistic and Accessible Language: Opposition movements to Black Lives Matter employ simplistic words and counter hashtags to access a wider audience. They are also less likely than pro-BLM movements like #AllBuildingsMatter to discuss the victims of police brutality, opting for more positive language and messages than pro-BLM Twitter users.

This research highlights the complexities of online discussions in relation to issues of racial and social justice. Various opposition movements have used Twitter as an important terrain to contest, re-articulate, or redirect conversations around racism in this country. With more understanding of how opposition movements seek to discredit BLM, supporters can better dismantle these tactics and more successfully achieve their goals.

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