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Sono lieta di presentare come nuovo *Occasional Paper* un saggio rilevante per la sua attualità e approccio, scritto da una giovane studiosa, Angela D'Ambrosio, che nasce a Bari il 6 giugno 1992. Dopo aver conseguito la laurea triennale in "Comunicazione linguistica ed interculturale" all'Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro" con una votazione di 110 e lode e con una tesi dal titolo "The Language of Struggle: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Malcolm X's speeches", a marzo del 2019 si laurea a pieni voti nella laurea magistrale "Language, Society and Communication" all'Università di Bologna, discutendo una tesi intitolata "#BlackLivesMatter and hashtag activism in a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective" da cui il seguente articolo è tratto.

Attualmente, si interessa dell'analisi di discorsi politici contro-egemonici sviluppatisi su Twitter (in particolare nel contesto statunitense) e facilitati dall'utilizzo degli hashtag. Inoltre, ha sviluppato un interesse per l'utilizzo dei corpora nella Critical Discourse Analysis che prossimamente approfondirà nella Summer school in corpus linguistics istituita dall'Università di Lancaster.

Il saggio che presentiamo, ricalcando il titolo della tesi magistrale dell'autrice, s'intitola:

#BlackLivesMatter and hashtag activism in a critical discourse analysis perspective

In questo studio, utilizzando gli strumenti della Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, cfr. van Dijk 1993) e un approccio sistemico-funzionalista sono analizzate le strategie linguistiche e discorsive di #BlackLivesMatter, un movimento socio-politico sviluppatosi online negli Stati Uniti come reazione a presunte forme di razzismo istituzionale espresse, perlopiù, in forma di episodi di violenza da parte della polizia e una rappresentazione distorta degli Afro-Americani a livello mediatico. Avendo la protesta provocato forti contro-reazioni sui social media, in questo studio vengono anche presi in esame altri hashtag come #BlueLivesMatter e #AllLivesMatter, il cui obiettivo principale sembra essere quello di delegittimare #BlackLivesMatter. In particolare, il principale assunto alla base della ricerca è che, nel contesto dell'attivismo online e soprattutto su Twitter, gli hashtag fungono da armi ideologiche che, da un lato, facilitano l'inclusione e l'affiliazione, ma che, dall'altro, provocano una polarizzazione di punti di vista, esacerbando, pertanto, una divisione tra "noi e loro" e al contempo incoraggiando la circolazione di discorsi contro-egemonici.

Per dare corpo a quest'assunto teorico, in un corpus di micropost reperiti da Twitter tra settembre e novembre 2018 e contrassegnati dagli hashtag summenzionati, vengono indagate specifiche categorie linguistiche e discorsive alla base della Critical Discourse Analysis (elementi lessicali, agency, transitività, presupposizioni e implicazioni…), applicando altresì il modello di Appraisal, come teorizzato da Martin & White (2005) e suggerito negli studi sui social media di Zappavigna (2012, 2018). I risultati dell'indagine svelano come specifici discorsi socio-politici vengono strutturati, contestati e contrastati nell'ambito dei social media e tramite l'utilizzo di tag che stanno assumendo sempre più una funzione fortemente interpersonale.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, hashtag activism, #BlackLivesMatter, Corpus-based discourse analysis, Appraisal Framework, social media, race

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#BlackLivesMatter and hashtag activism in a critical discourse analysis perspective

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1. Introduction

That social media has the power to bring about change is epitomised by the growing interest in hashtag activism, grassroots activism that pre-eminently takes place on social media through the use of hashtagged phrases. This article will focus on the linguistic strategies and discursive features used by hashtag activism in the field of racial justice, such as #BlackLivesMatter, a hashtag that has been widely used in recent years to characterise the strong criticism against what is seen by many as a form of institutionalised racism as expressed mainly by alleged police brutality. Elected in 2014 as "Word of the Year" by the American Dialect Society, #BlackLivesMatter epitomizes perfectly the way the large African American minority has mobilised in the public sphere. However, recent demands for justice by the black community have not been welcomed by everyone. In fact, they provoked a backlash by a part of the white community, expressed on social media through other competing hashtags such as #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. By way of comparison, we shall also focus on the discursive strategies of these hashtags in order to have a better understanding of how resistance and counter-resistance are constructed in discourse.

More specifically, in the current study, I analyse a set of microposts retrieved from Twitter including the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter at levels of both vocabulary and grammar in order to answer the following questions:

(1) What is the role of hashtags in propagating ideologies and constructing meanings?
(2) How do users create and negotiate discourses around race, racism and police brutality? How do they affiliate and dis-affiliate around certain values?
(3) How are these discourses connected to broader social identities and contexts?

Given the socio-communicative, political and ideological nature of this study, a critical discourse based research, which also takes into account the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White 2005) is fitting since our task is "to examine how power and ideology are discursively produced, resisted and counter-resisted through textual representations that have

had their meaning components 'broken down' by Appraisal analysis" (Konnelly 2015: 5). While Critical Discourse Analysis has become a popular method of analysis, some detractors have criticised how it has always dealt with negative uses of discourse, overlooking positive and emancipatory alternatives. Some scholars such as Martin (2004), Macgilchrist (2007) and Bartlett (2012) have then focused on the ways bottom-up change can be brought about.

Regardless of the actual efficiency of #BlackLivesMatter in bringing about social change, what is striking in the analysis is the persuasive power of hashtags in the contemporary political context. Indeed, far from being only discourse markers, they work as ideological weapons that not only facilitate group inclusion but also emphasize a polarization of point of views, in an ongoing struggle for control in discourse.

2. Twitter and hashtags

For many people around the world, social media services such as Twitter and Facebook have become a fundamental part of everyday life. According to Salazar (2017) about 37% of the world's population actively engage in at least one social network, a figure which suggests how the social web, nowadays also known as Web 2.0 (based on user-generated content, where users are also producers), is transforming and shaping our society. Indeed, what is changing with the advent of Web 2.0 and what is worth analysing from a discursive perspective is the way we make meaning through words and how we negotiate relationships with people at an interpersonal level of language.

Developed in 2006, Twitter is an internet service based on microblogging, "a form of length limited service (hence 'micro') communication using a social networking service" (Zappavigna 2012: 27). Twitter allows active social interaction, or 'networking', between users through character-constrained messages known as 'tweets' – limited originally to only 140 characters and from 2017 onwards to 280 characters – presented to users in reverse chronological order as a flow of content. This content is public and may be searched by everyone unless there are privacy restrictions chosen by the users themselves. This makes Twitter a more 'public' space compared to Facebook and other social network sites that allow different forms of expression.

Twitter has a number of functions (e.g. "retweet"), but among its communication conventions, "the hashtag is arguably its most powerful" (Konnelly 2015: 2). The use of hashtags, chunks of metalanguage introduced by the '#' symbol, on Twitter was first

introduced in 2007 as a means to categorize tweets according to similar topics (Salazar 2017). Since then, this practice has been adopted also by other social networking sites and 'social' tagging has started to afford more functions than the mere classification and description of textual contents. In fact, other than being topic-based, hashtags are now becoming 'evaluative', thus used to ideologically express identity, beliefs and group membership (Kreis 2017) and able to create "affective publics: public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds" (Papacharissi 2015: 14).

According to Lee (2018), hashtags are "user-generated writing", involving "deliberate choices of language", they are "meaning-making resources" and are "conversational", since they "enable users to connect similar topics, interests, and like-minded people" leading to "a new form of online conversations that is more dynamic and searchable" (2018: 2).

Microposts are interesting data to analyse from a linguistic perspective to investigate how meaning can be made even when there are some technical restrictions. Indeed, "although one might question the clout of a message restricted to [280]-characters, few could challenge the potent power of language, no matter the word count" (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson 2014: 176). In this sense, hashtags are of pivotal importance, in that they unite single tweets into one socially constructed corpus, providing researchers with "a veritable treasure trove of linguistic data about public thought" (Zappavigna 2012: 172-173). This is due to the fact that by clicking on a hashtag on Twitter the user is re-directed to a page containing all the tweets with the same hashtag.

This study provides a linguistic analysis of an example of 'hashtag activism', which may be understood as the use of hashtags to generate opinion within protests and social movements. The main characteristics of this expanding phenomenon are described below.

3. Hashtag activism

During the last years, social networking sites (SNSs), and especially Twitter, have played an increasingly important role in the political field. This is particularly true for the United States. According to Kreis (2017) the most popular subjects of conversation on Twitter in the U.S. in 2015 revolved around politics.

The shift from media based on one-way communication (from the producer to the citizen user) to Web 2.0 whose main feature is user-generated content that makes citizens not

only consumers, but also producers – the so-called "produsers" (Ramírez & Metcalfe 2017) or "prosumers" (Boyd 2018) – has changed the way politics is made. Common citizens engage more and more in political activity, by expressing their opinions and spreading information on political subjects "because of the interactive features of social media, which, at least ostensibly, lack 'gatekeepers' in charge of managing the flux of information produced by, and exchanged between, users" (Demata 2018: 70). In this 'democratized' context, the hashtag plays a pivotal role to the extent that Rambukkanna (2015) discusses the emergence of the "publics of the hashtag" described as "the kinds of publics that do politics in a way that is rough and emergent, flawed and messy, and ones in which new forms of collective power are being forged on the fly" (2015: 160). It is, indeed, this collective power created using hashtags, that is exploited in grassroots activist movements nowadays to spread awareness and information about given social justice subjects. Within the context of hashtag activism, Konnelly (2015) proposes the classification of "Cause hashtag", which "is used or created [...] to advance a cause, raise awareness, or rally support for a particular social issue" (2015: 2). Cause hashtags, in particular "act as tools of affiliation, political discourse-making, and collective identity-informing" (ibidem). Therefore, cause or activist hashtags are means to diffuse certain discourses, narratives and ideologies and "collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities" (Bonilla & Rosa 2015: 6).

At a linguistic and genre level, hashtag activism is characterised by three main categories: *narrative agency*, *intertextuality* and *emotionally charged language*. Narrative agency may be understood as the capacity to create stories or "microstories" (Giaxoglou 2018) through hashtags that, through certain textual and rhetorical devices, invite audiences to take part in the co-production of stories themselves. This co-production of narratives involves the hashtagging by individuals of their personal thoughts, emotions and stories (Yang 2016). Through hashtags, the microstories are transportable across contexts and may function as legitimization for one's view, as an "appeal to authority" (Giglietto & Lee 2017). According to Yang (2016), in the most influential cases of hashtag activism, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter have complete sentence structures and express a sense of action and force, through specific speech acts such as protesting and demanding. However, the narrative form of hashtags is not only visible in the syntactical structure of the hashtags themselves, but also in the rhetorical devices used in the microposts. By hashtagging their thoughts and stories, posted in temporal unfolding, users give rise to a larger, collective

narrative that may be, however, re-appropriated and reversed in order to develop counter-narratives and delegitimize the main one.

With regard to intertextuality, since social media like Twitter are based on sharing, referring back to other texts in hashtag activism through retweeting, through links to other online material or through hashtags themselves, helps to convince the audience of one's view. According to Zappavigna (2018) "intertextual meanings are particularly important in social media environments, given the tendency of image, video and written text to be replicated, modified and recontextualized at rapid rates and high volume" (2018: 73) In the specific case of hashtags, Zappavigna also adds that they "enable cacophonies of different voices" (2018: 11) and that they are "heteroglossic in meaning" (2018: 74) since a post is always in relation with other posts in the social stream. The intertextual potential of hashtags must be carefully considered, since they link "a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics [...] regardless of whether, from a given perspective, these tweets have anything to do with one another" (Bonilla & Rosa 2015: 5). In this way, hashtags are vulnerable to re-appropriation, reversal and recontextualization.

Finally, the language used in microposts is charged with intense emotions. Indeed, the "controversial and polarizing" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013: 218) nature of politics tends to trigger sentiments that draw public attention. According to Chiluwa & Ifukor (2015), "emotional discourses in the media or politics have greater influence on hearers/readers [...] a discourse that is highly emotional is more likely to reach people's heart and lead to political action than the usual technical and consensual one" (2015: 273). Public opinion is, therefore, deeply influenced by the feelings and emotions of citizens. However, what is important to underline is that "emotion and affect do not simply belong to the individuals and are not just a private matter, rather emotions are collective and socially constructed" (Lee & Chau 2018: 23).

4. Discourse of #BlackLivesMatter: A Case Study

#BlackLivesMatter is used on social media, in particular Twitter, to raise awareness about racial injustices and, above all, to condemn police brutality against Black people in the United States and contest misrepresentation of African Americans in traditional media. Indeed, "social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations" (Bonilla & Rosa 2015: 12). The 'cause' hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was started

by three Black women following the death of Trayvon Martin, a black 17-year-old boy who was shot dead by neighbourhood watchman George Zimmerman on February 2012 (Hall 2018, Gallagher et al. 2018). The hashtag functioned as a call to action against anti-Black racism, but it was not until November 2014 that it started to become widespread and 'viral'[1]. Indeed, on that date, the Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson escaped indictment for the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old who was reportedly executed while he was holding his hands up begging the police officer not to shoot. These deaths, followed by many others besides the lack of accountability for the police officers responsible triggered heated debate on Twitter, in an attempt to control the power of discourse about race and violence against Black bodies.

Far from being just an online social tag, however, #BlackLivesMatter has resulted in a proper offline movement that has reached global importance to such an extent that, according to Gallagher et al. (2018) some have likened it to the new civil rights movement, even though it has employed different tools to promote its cause. Being born on social media, in fact, the movement has exploited the virality of hashtags and posts to diffuse its ideology and news.

In particular, exchanges on Twitter revealed "the emergence of a few dominant ideological positions, emphasizing how different groups viewing the same media coverage interpret issues of race and police violence in drastically different ways" (Carney 2016: 3). Indeed, according to Zappavigna (2018), "hashtags can act in the service of both homophily and polarization" (2018: 201), in the sense that, on the one hand, they are means to create communities that share the same values and beliefs and that can discursively create a common identity; on the other hand, this involves the creation of contrasting groups with different sets of opinion and beliefs who struggle against one another to reach that visibility that is so important on social media.

The polarization of points of view and ideologies led to the emergence of counter-movements aimed at delegitimizing the demands put forward by #BlackLivesMatter. These movements play upon the phrase and give rise to competing hashtags such as #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter. The first ignores the role of race in the deaths of Black people, reinforcing an alleged colour-blindness of contemporary society, while the

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[1] Virality: as one of the buzzwords of today, according to the Oxford Dictionaries (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com) virality is "the tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another".

second rejects race in favour of the institutionalised force of police (police officers typically wear blue uniforms), in order to "re-center Whiteness" (Langford & Speight 2015: 83).

4.1 Methodological framework

The discursive strategies of #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter are examined by using a critical approach and by analysing specific categories of language (in particular lexical items, pronouns, agency and transitivity, implications and presuppositions). Moreover, the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White 2005) is also applied.

Appraisal may be defined as "the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgments and evaluations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations" (Martin, 2000: 145). In my analysis, I consider one of the systems included in the Appraisal framework, the system of *attitude*, which in turn is subdivided into three categories: *affect*, *judgment* and *appreciation*. Affect may be defined as the "resources for expressing feelings", judgment as the "resources for judging character" and appreciation as the "resources for valuing the worth of things" (Martin and Rose 2003: 24). Attitude involves also a degree of *explicitness* and *attitude-polarity*. Evaluation is *inscribed* when the meaning is explicit and easily recognizable and *invoked* when it requires deduction. Attitude-polarity is *positive* when the user agrees with the message of the hashtag and *negative* when he/she does not (Konnelly 2015). In the analysis of social media posts, the appraisal framework is of value in that it identifies the linguistic structures of evaluation and stance not only at an 'explicit' lexico-grammatical level, but also at the 'implicit' semantic level included in the co-text.

In my analysis, two important features of discourse, in particular computer-mediated discourse, are also examined, where present: intertextuality and multimodality. Indeed, microposts often refer back to other microposts and texts, and the hashtags themselves fuel the intertextual relations not only between posts and online data, but also between posts and the offline context of culture in which meanings are created. I then consider the inherent multimodality of microposts by also analysing images, videos and texts in order to better understand the context of production of the tweets.

4.2 Data

The present investigation was conducted on a data set retrieved after about four years since the appearance of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and its main counter-hashtags in order to gain enough data to have a better understanding of the context in which the posts are inserted and to keep track of the evolution of the hashtags since their creation and diffusion.

The data at the basis of this case study are derived from a corpus of around 4500 tweets including the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter that I retrieved from Twitter between September and November 2018 through a web browser extension called NCapture[2]. These data were then imported on NVivo 11[3]. In particular, after having coded the tweets based on whether they used #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter or #AllLivesMatter, a preliminary word frequency query of the corpus was conducted using this software. This quantitative analysis was used as a starting point to have a general idea of the lexical items available in the corpus and Attitude expressed, to outline the main topics addressed and to ensure the coherence of the data collected with the main subject of this study. However, my analysis is essentially qualitative, since I analysed a reduced sample of tweets (about 200). More specifically, for the purpose of sampling, each tweet was sorted according to its key theme (i.e. violence against black men, death of police officers, representation of the protest, general injustices, etc.) in order to create initial categories of microposts. After that, the tweets in each group were counted and only the categories including a high number of occurrences were selected for analysis. Then, from each initial grouping, around 30 tweets were selected that were representative of the larger sample. Although the resulting sample is fairly small, it still provides useful insight into dominant discourse on race and police brutality.

In this way, I was able to delineate a micro-context to which the majority of posts seemed to refer, in other words the sum of all the events that took place online and offline in the period in which the posts were written. Since according to KhosraviNik & Unger (2015) in the analysis of language in digitally mediated spaces "there is a need of contextualization of language-in-use […] by drawing on the socio-political context of the audience and network of discourse in place, both in the immediate online context and in the socio-political context

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[2] NCapture allows researchers to collect data from Social Networks as data sets.
[3] NVivo is a software that allows researchers to analyse the data retrieved from the web

of society" (2015: 230), the next section will be dedicated to the introduction of the main events to which the tweets analysed refer.

4.3 Micro-context

Data analysis showed that, as suggested by the lexical items presented in **Appendix 1, 2** and **3**[4], the users employing the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter in their posts express negative attitudes and emotions. This is exemplified by the use of certain nouns and adjectives with a negative connotation such as *hard*, *racist*, *disgusting*, *injustice*, *awful*, *nightmare*, *attack*, *outraged*, *fascist*, *wrong* and so on, evoking emotions such as fear and anger, as in **examples 1 and 2**:

> **Example 1**: When white people ask me why I say #blacklivesmatter instead of #alllivesmatter. This is why. A sitting senator makes a joke about public hangings in a state with a long history of lynching black people. Disgusting. I hope she loses her seat in the #MississippiRunoffElection

> **Example 2**: This is the AG of the USA, @jeffsessions Ms. Coretta Scott King was 100% correct about this horrible man! He's the biggest bigot, race baiting racist on the planet. #BlackLivesMatter #ANTIFA #ACLU

What should be emphasised is that the majority of these negative emotional dispositions is triggered by news circulating on social media during the period in which the tweets were written. Indeed, many users include in their tweets hyperlinks to specific online newspaper articles so that the 'ambient audience'[5] created through the use of the hashtag can read and possibly retweet them, while sharing the same negative attitude towards the information diffused.

Given the importance of the specific events the users refer to in understanding the tweets themselves, I gathered more information about what was happening at that specific point in time in the United States, based on the multimodal elements (articles, video, images)

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[4] Appendix 1, 2 and 3 include a stop list of the most frequent grammatical words present in the corpus. More specifically, Appendix 1shows the words associated with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, Appendix 2 those associated with #BlueLivesMatter and Appendix 3 those related to #AllLivesMatter.

[5] *Ambient audience*: users on social media affiliating around values and beliefs who "may not have interacted directly and likely do not know each other, and may not interact again" (Zappavigna 2011: 801)

shared by the users. The following list summarizes the main happenings occurring between September and November 2018:

1. Colin Kaepernick's protest: as a protest against the treatment of racial minorities in the USA at the end of August 2016, the NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the national anthem, justifying his choice in these words: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color". The 'take a knee' national anthem protest against police brutality became, in September 2018, the new face of Nike's 'Just Do It' campaign, arousing controversy and getting much public attention. [6]

2. Black people killed by law enforcement officers – Botham Jean and Jemel Roberson: On the night of 6 September, Amber Guyger an off-duty police officer, shot dead under mysterious circumstances his downstairs neighbour, a black man called Botham Shem Jean, while he was in his own flat in Dallas, allegedly because the officer entered the wrong apartment. Then, police carried out multiple search warrants in the house of the victim in the aftermath of the killing and diffused the information that they found a small amount of marijuana, in an attempt to discredit the man. [7] On 11 November, Jemel Roberson, a young black man, was working as a security guard at a bar in Chicago when a shooting broke out. Roberson managed to subdue the shooter at gunpoint, but when the police arrived, they fatally shot the armed security guard. According to the witness statements, the officer fired even though they were screaming to stop since the black man was not the shooter. Both these events provoked outrage. [8]

3. Jeff Sessions' speech: during a gathering of state and local law enforcement officials in Illinois, on 19 September the Republican Attorney General Jeff Sessions blamed a number of

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[6] Draper, K., Creswell, J. Maheshwari, S. (2018), "Nike returns to familiar strategy with Kaepernick ad campaign": https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/sports/nike-colin-kaepernick.html (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[7] Flynn, M. (2018), "Dallas police shooting: Search for marijuana in victim's home was attempt to 'smear' him, attorneys say": https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/09/14/dallas-police-shooting-search-for-marijuana-in-victims-home-was-attempt-to-smear-him-attorneys-say/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0c77b8e639dd (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[8] Bever, L., Horton, A. (2018), "Police chief 'saddened' after officer killed armed guard — 'a brave man who was doing his best'": https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/14/police-chief-saddened-after-officer-killed-armed-guard-brave-man-who-was-doing-his-best/?utm_term=.1e7055940dcf (last accessed 26 April 2019)

activist groups for a rise in violent crimes in Chicago, arguing that "if you want more shootings, more death, then listen to the ACLU, Antifa, Black Lives Matter and groups who do not know the reality of policing". [9]

4. Jon Burge's death: Jon Burge, a Chicago police chief accused of torturing more than 100 black suspects to coerce confessions, died on 26 September.[10]

5. Cindy Hyde Smith's joke: On 2 November, Senator Cindy Hyde Smith joked about sitting on the front row of a public hanging in Tupelo, Mississippi. While embracing a local supporter during her electoral campaign, she said: "If he invited me to a public hanging, I'd be on the front row". The video of this event went viral on Twitter, given Mississippi's history of violence against African Americans including public hangings and lynchings.[11]

6. Officers killed – Deputies Mark Stasyuk and Robert Kunze: Mark Stasyuk, a white Sacramento County sheriff's deputy, was killed by a black convicted felon during a shooting in Rancho Cordova on 17 September.[12] In the same days, Sedgwick County Deputy Robert Kunze was fatally wounded during another shooting, making him the 36th officer to die in 2018. [13]

7. Midterm elections: On 6 November, midterm elections took place during Republican President Donald Trump's presidency. Many users on Twitter saw this occasion as an opportunity for the Democratic Party to re-gain an electoral advantage over the Republicans,

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[9] Higgins, T. (2018) "Attorney General Jeff Sessions: If you want more death, 'listen to the ACLU, Antifa, Black Lives Matter'": https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/19/jeff-sessions-if-you-want-more-death-listen-to-the-aclu-antifa-black-lives-matter.html (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[10] The Guardian (2018) "Ex-Chicago police commander linked to torture of more than 100 suspects dies": https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/19/chicago-cop-jon-burge-torture-dies (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[11] Pilkington, E. (2018),"White Republican Mississippi senator jokes about 'public hanging'": https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/12/white-republican-mississippi-senator-public-hanging (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[12] Smith, D., Chabria, A. (2018) "Suspect charged with murder of deputy who was gunned down in Rancho Cordova": https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/crime/article219071050.html (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[13] Fox News Insider (2018), "'Who's Kneeling for Him?': Former Cop Reacts After 36th Shooting Death of US Police Officer": http://insider.foxnews.com/2018/09/17/36-officers-killed-gunfire-year-kansas-deputy-robert-kunze-shot-suspect (last accessed 26 April 2019)

through a so-called "blue wave". This, of course, was countered by a call for a "red wave" by the Republican Party. [14]

It was these happenings which attracted much public attention in Sept-November – and, therefore, had a major impact on language and hashtag choices. In the next section, a more detailed qualitative analysis of the microposts marked by the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter will be presented.

4.4 Analysis and findings

4.4.1 *Representing police brutality*

The most frequent lexical items [15] in the microposts marked by the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter include *white* (671) and *black* (313). This gives a first clue on how the discourse pertaining to race in this case is presented as a dichotomy, in clear contrast with the dominant discourse of colour-blindness. Moreover, it comes as no surprise that one of the most frequent nouns is *police* (363) and all of the other lexical items related to police brutality and violence (*killed*, *shot*, *gun*, *murder*, *death*…), given that it is one of the main concerns of the movement. Indeed, a great part of the posts taken into account in the qualitative analysis is related to officer-involved shootings during which a black man lost his life. All of these posts feature lexis containing reference to intense emotions (e.g. fear, frustration, disgust, etc.) and usually include an inscribed or invoked negative judgment towards the police and whites, as in **example 3** about the death of Botham Jean:

> **Example 3:** Police will murder black ppl/PoC in their own homes & still blame the victims...AND GET AWAY WITH IT. Anyone who tries to justify this is TRASH. #BlackLivesMatter

This tweet includes an inscribed negative judgment not only of police that murder people of colour in the serenity of their own home, try to blame the victims by searching their apartments and past records to find a way to exculpate themselves and then, according to the user, will not be punished, but also of those who try to justify police's actions. These are described as 'TRASH' in capital letters, thus also representing graphologically the negative

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[14] BBC News (2018), "US mid-term elections: What is at stake?": https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29412354 (last accessed 26 April 2019)

[15] The list of the top 55 words is given in Appendix 1

affect towards the event that provoked outrage and anger. The negative affect provoked by police-involved killings is evident in **example 4**:

> **Example 4:** Stop killing black males if you're a cop. And that goes for other races. But these are getting to be ridiculous. I'm afraid to leave my house sometimes and I'm 1/2 black #BlackTwitter #BlackLivesMatter #badcop #goodcop #JusticeForGarnett #JUSTICEFORJUNIOR

In this example, the use of the imperative *stop* implies that the list of black males killed by police is interminable and that the negative invoked affect is that of frustration. Moreover, the user clearly inscribes a sense of fear in the post, highlighted by the fact that he is only half-black (which presupposes that the 'total black' males should be more afraid). Finally, by the use of hashtags #JusticeForGarnett #JUSTICEFORJUNIOR he calls for justice for specific people involved in police-involved shootings and interpersonally asks other users to align to the same call for justice.

What is clear in the analysis is that each killing brings with it a specific narrative. Since by using the same hashtags, users commune around the same values and opinions and also share the same emotions (which as mentioned before are collective and socially constructed), the posts with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter tend to include the same *topoi*. Topoi can be understood as "reservoirs of generalised key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be generated" (Richardson 2004: 230). In other words, topoi are standard arguments typical for specific issues. Let us consider **example 3** and **examples 5-7** about Botham Jean's death:

> **Example 5**: Officer shot a black man in his apartment thinking it's hers. So watch now they can shoot you if you are in a parking with the same color and car model. Because they might shoot you and say I tought he was stealing my car . #blacklivesmatter #whiteonblackcrime

> **Example 6:** The police used excessive force on minorities
> Then police killed non violent minorities
> Then police killed unarmed minorities
> No one was prosecuted
> So now police think they can break into a minority's home and murder them without consequences #BlackLivesMatter #TakeAKnee

> **Example 7:** A black man is killed minding his own business in the privacy of his own home, and a search warrant is issued for his residence but not the assailant's. Now do you

understand why #AllLivesMatter is the dumbest response to have to #BlackLivesMatter? #BothamJean

In the posts about Botham Jean, the main topoi emerging are: a) black people are not even safe in their home from the violence of police (strengthened by the use of possessives such as *his*, *his own*, *their own*…) b) police will not be prosecuted for their misdeeds c) black people will be unjustly blamed. This sense of danger is highlighted by the circulation of an article within the #BlackLivesMatter ad hoc public titled "When will it be safe to exist while black in US?" shared and re-shared by users introduced by tweets such as:

> **Example 8:** When will it be safe to exist? #BlackLivesMatter
>
> **Example 9:** #when ?? #BlackLivesMatter #ColinKaepernick #makeamericagreatFinally

The reiteration of the grammatical question *when?* and the use of the hashtag *#makeamericagreatFinally*, that is a pun on Trump's slogan and hashtag 'Make America Great Again' where *again* is substituted by *finally* implying that America has never been great and it will only be when violence against blacks will be over, expresses the invoked affect of increased exasperation and impatience for change. The use of a pun on the campaign slogan popularized by Trump also includes an invoked negative judgment of Trump's administration and right wing politics, which as we will see is typical of the posts including the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Indeed, this pun "rel[ies] on the intertextual reference to the original as a means of recoupling[16] the political stance […] by reversing the valence from positive to negative" (Zappavigna 2018: 11). This also exemplifies the multiple layers of meaning that can be contained in a single micropost.

The case of Botham Jean has also been useful to prove that the 'ambient audience' created by the use of the same hashtag is not as weak and passive as the audience of traditional media (KhosraviNik & Unger 2015, Boyd 2018). Indeed, users on Twitter seem to be well aware of the subtleties of language and are able to resist and challenge the power in discourse. In an interview released after the death of Botham Jean, the Republican Senator Ted Cruz, in an attempt to 'protect' the police officer involved in the shooting said: "It may well be that two lives were destroyed that night. Obviously, the individual that was at home in

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[16] *Coupling* "refers to the combination of meanings across a range of semiotic dimensions" and it is a co-selection that "can occur across ranks, metafunctions, strata or modalities, and will have some coordinated discursive function" (Zappavigna 2018: 105). According to Zappavigna, the most important form of coupling is the ideation-attitude coupling, that is a coupling between an attitude and an ideational target. *Recoupling*, in the context of hashtags, means subverting the original attitude associated to the ideational target included in the hashtag.

his apartment and found himself murdered…". This statement sparked criticism on Twitter. In the first sentence, victim and perpetrator are put on the same level, even though just one of them died. A transitivity analysis reveals that both sentences include an instance of passivization - a transformation from an active to a passive material process. Material processes are processes about concrete actions involving actors or participants (Eggins 2004). Passivization implicates that the Agent of the clause, the doer who has responsibility for what is going on and that usually is in the first position, is moved to the rheme position and may also be eliminated, while the Patient of the action is relocated to the thematic position. In this way, Ted Cruz is able to hide the responsibility of the police officer in his statement, almost implying that Botham Jean died by pure chance. The #BlackLivesMatter public reacted as follows:

> **Example 10:** @user Two lives were ruined. One deserves his (& all of our) heartfelt sympathy. The other deserves a trial and a prison sentence. She brought that ruination on herself. #bothamjean #blacklivesmatter
>
> **Example 11**: @user Two lives were ruined? No @tedcruz one life was taken away, the Cop still has a life....and the way it's going in the USA, she might get away with murder. #BlackLivesMatter #TakeAKnee
>
> **Example 12**: Fuck Ted. He stood up for Zimmerman and now he's defending another killer. #StopCriminalCops #BlackLivesMatter
>
> **Example 13**: Let's make sure this November that @tedcruz "finds himself" ceremoniously voted out #BlueWave2018 #BlackLivesMatter #VoteTedOut

All of these examples include a negative judgment of Ted Cruz and the police officer. In many cases Ted Cruz was directly involved in the post through the use of '@' so that users could address him directly, even in a fairly informal way (through the use of obscene language, and by calling the Senator just 'Ted'…). In **example 10** and **11**, the users react to the clause "two lives were ruined" by clearly stating what makes those lives different through the use of lexical contrasts (one deserves sympathy, the other a trial and a prison sentence / the life of the black man was taken away, the policeman has still a life) efficiently countering dominant discourse and gaining power. Finally, in **example 13** the user ironically uses the same passivization used by Ted Cruz (the irony is highlighted by the use of inverted commas) to mock him in order to persuade the other users reading the tweet to vote the Senator out and vote Democrats in the upcoming midterms elections.

In order to subvert the dominant ideology that sees Black people as 'dangerous' and 'brutes', #BlackLivesMatter users tend to employ grammatical structures in which the Agent and the Patient are clearly expressed. Let us consider this sentence about the death of Jon Burge:

> **Example 14:** Civil Rights had passed; we were supposed to be in a post-racial society. Nah, that's all bullshit. Whites in this country have always intimidated, tormented and killed black/brown people with impunity since the slaves were first brought here four centuries ago. #BlackLivesMatter

In this example, the dichotomy between blacks and whites is expressed as a categorical truth, a fact. Agency is absolutely clear: whites are responsible for the atrocities against black people and always have been. Through the use of overlexicalisation (i.e. the repeated use of words belonging to the same semantic field) resulting in a climax of injustices (intimidated, tormented, killed) the user is able to attribute the accusation of criminality, usually attached to black men, to whites.

The dichotomy between black and white/police, good and evil and the idea of a 'white criminality' is clearly evident in the microposts related to the killing of Jemel Roberson that sparked negative affect especially because he was a security guard and, as such, reflected what Obasogie and Newman (2016) call the "politics of respectability"[17]:

> **Example 15:** Security guard (and new dad) doing his job shot by Police. It's criminal. #Blacklivesmatter

> **Example 16:** This man prevented what could have been a mass shooting & was KILLED by a trigger happy misinformed officer SMH. THIS IS NOT OKAY. How many times are we gonna lose lives? #BlackLivesMatter #ProperlyTrainOfficers to prevent UNLAWFUL deaths. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

> **Example 17:** White men walk around armed to the teeth!!! No one bats an eye!!! Black man doing his job & is murdered!!! This IS racism!! Total disregard for lives of POC! #DomesticTerrorists #BlackLivesMatter What the hell!!!

> **Example 18:** #BlackLivesMatter .... or certainly SHOULD!!!! Another son/father/brother lost to racist gun toting government goons...working #whileBlack

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[17] The politics of respectability is "the notion that minorities can respond to structural racism by individually 'behaving' in a respectable manner that elicits the esteem of Whites as a way to insulate the self from attack while also promoting a positive group image that can 'uplift' the reputation of the group" (Obasogie & Newman 2016: 543)

Example 19: But to law enforcement ... despite his heroism, his gun license, his security attire, the crowd of people screaming he was one of the good guys- he was a black "suspect with a gun". He was target practice. #History #BlackLivesMatter

In all of these example there is a strong contrast between the positive attitude towards the black man, described as one of "the good guys", and the negative judgment of the police. In order to 'humanize' the victim, that was seen only as 'target practice' by police, he is described as a member of a family (new dad, son/father/brother) who was simply doing his job. In **examples 16 and 19** and in many other instances, Jemel Roberson is described as a hero, since he stopped the shooter in the fight. Conversely, the police are described with derogatory, inscribed negative judgments through noun phrases such as *trigger happy misinformed officer, racist gun toting government goons* and even *domestic terrorists*. Especially this last hashtagged noun phrase subverts a dominant, white ideology that sees black people as more 'dangerous' and expresses the affect of fear that permeates the majority of the posts.

Example 16 also expresses the inscribed affect of exasperation and disappointment, underlined by the capitalized interjection *ENOUGH IS ENOUGH* and by the online acronym SMH, that means literally 'Shaking my head'. Users employ it to express the same body language of shaking their head in disappointment, disbelief or disagreement. Other posts of the same kind express the same sense of exasperation and disbelief through interpersonal hashtags such as #enough, #enoughisenough and #notonemore.

Finally, negative affect expressing fear and anger is inscribed in the following examples in which the actions of law enforcement officers are referred to as an 'attack' and, hyperbolically, as an act of war:

Example 20: Black men its very apparent that it's an attack on our lives as we see time and time again. Rip, to everybody who was gunned down due to gun violence. #AllLivesMatter they do however, right now is about #BlackLivesMatter

Example 21: Smfh ! Like I say all the time ! #BlackPeople we are at War ! We have been @ War with these "Colonizers" for over 500 years ! Living in AmeriKKKa around them will never bring peace ! Complete Separation is key   !! #BlackLivesMatter #BlackTwitter #BlackAgenda

In particular, **example 20** shows also the ideological struggle between the signs #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. In **example 21**, the acronym SMH discussed above

is used with the addition of an *f* , which stands for the vulgar intensifier *fucking*, expressing increased exasperation. Moreover, white Americans are referred to as *colonizers* and the USA as *AmeriKKKa*, a pun on the words 'America' and 'KKK', that is Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist organization notorious for its acts of violence against black people and that has established a climate of terror in the African American community over the decades after the Civil War. In this way, a connection to the tormented past of the black community is created to advocate a total separation of black and white, underlined by the use of the pronouns *we* and *them*. In this way, the user linguistically constructs his/her interaction in terms of in-group and out-group identities.

What has emerged so far in the analysis of Attitude related to the theme of police brutality is that through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, the users are able to share micro-stories about the black victims of law enforcement-involved shootings and are able to subvert dominant ideologies of colour blindness and victim-blaming. Along with the micro-stories they also share negative judgment against police and whites and strong emotions such as fear, anger, disappointment and exasperation. Users in this way implicitly invite the ambient audience to evaluate the news related to police brutality in the same way. The result is a narrative that increasingly humanizes black people and blame white police officers in a context where, according to the activists, black people are constantly dehumanized:

> **Example 22:** #BlackLivesMatter is a statement of fact, and yet many W people treat it as
> revolutionary. That's evidence of the W norm of dehumanizing black lives. Silence and
> inaction are powerful, socialized ways to perpetuate white supremacy. #cleartheair

The last sentence in **example 22** presupposes that 'noise' and action are the only way to struggle against white supremacy, hence the need to express outrage on social media and to continue the protest offline as well. It is, indeed, an offline protest started by the NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick that fuelled further discussion online, becoming a matter of ideological and political contention between supporters and opponents.

4.4.2 Supporting and representing the protest

The presence of lexical items such as *movement*, *protest*, *activists* in the frequency list in **Appendix 1** suggests that much of the conversation arisen in the corpus revolves around the protest against police brutality and racial inequality itself. In particular, the hashtag

#takeaknee occurs 198 times in the first set of data. The hashtag, which includes an imperative and can be understood as a call to action, appeared when on 22 September 2016, after Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the American National Anthem as a means of protest, President Donald Trump said the following words during a speech: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out. He's fired. He's fired!'". This sparked outrage on the Internet and as emerges in the corpus many users started to combine the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter with #TakeAKnee and other related hashtags such as #ColinKaepernick, as may be seen in **example 9** in support for the quarterback and his right to protest. I argue #BlackLivesMatter users started to employ the hashtag #takeaknee and in particular Kaepernick's protest action as a form of legitimization for continuing their protest. According to Reyes (2011), the process of legitimization in discourse may be understood as a form of justification of one's behaviour or words whose main aim is that of obtaining the interlocutor's support or approval in order to obtain power, social acceptance, etc. Appealing to the fame of Kaepernick and including his voice, or rather actions, in a post seem to be a way to strengthen #BlackLivesMatter's remonstrance. In **example 23**, the user simply leaves the task of expressing his/her point of view about the protest to Kaepernick and the black speaker George C. Fraser:

Example 23: I'm just gonna leave this right here. #SipsTea #TakeAKnee
#ISupportKaepernick #BlackLivesMatter
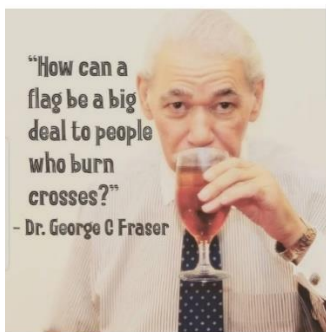
The quoted sentence in the picture delegitimizes the white backlash against Kaepernick's protest through a rhetorical question implying that white people opposing the protest and considering it as a 'disrespect to the flag' are white supremacists (cross-burning being a practice associated with the Ku Klux Klan). This can, therefore, be understood as an invoked negative judgment of those opposing the protest.

In many cases, Kaepernick's protest is represented as in a line of continuity with protests of the past, such as the Civil Rights movement. Let us consider the following examples both including multimodal elements:

Example 24: It wasn't about the Bus then and it's not about the flag now!!!
#fightforyourrights #blacklivesmatter #peopleofcolor #webuiltthiscountry
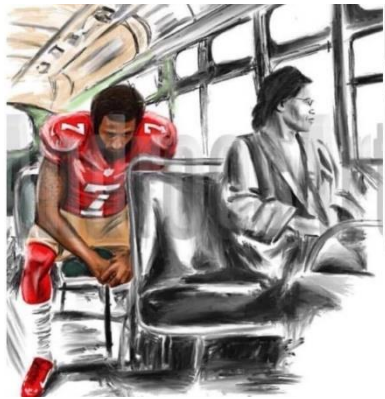
Example 25: #BlackLivesMatter

Tommie Smith

John Carlos

Colin Kaepernick

"If I win, I am American, not a black American. But if I did something bad, then they would say I am a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight."-Smith 1968

As is evident in the **examples 24 and 25**, the presence of intersemiotic relations between text and image and the presence of different voices or "heteroglossia" (Zappavigna 2018) are distinctive features of Twitter microposts in the field of hashtag activism. In **example 24**, the user makes an intertextual reference to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960 and to the Montgomery bus boycott started by Rosa Parks with the aid of an image representing the two protesters together seated in a bus. The demonstrators are, indeed, connected by their refusal to stand up (to the flag or to give up a seat in the bus). The user in his/her sentence criticizes the attempt of Trump and his supporters to deviate the attention from police brutality and racial disparities by framing the protest as a mere 'disrespect to the flag'. In **example 25**, the NFL protest is associated with a momentous protest that took place in 1968, when the medal winners John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City raised a black-gloved fist during the American National Anthem as a protest in support of civil rights. The gesture of the two athletes was charged with symbolism: the black glove expressed African-American strength and unity, while the clenched fist was a clear symbol of resistance associated with the Black Power movement, a socio-political movement of the 1960s and 1970s emphasizing racial pride, self-sufficiency and equality for all African-Americans. The micropost is accompanied by an image including the photos of both protests and a direct quotation by Smith revealing the double standards used by whites in judging black people.

Furthermore, 'Kaepernick's voice' is included in the posts with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter through recurring utterances such as "this is why we [or they] kneel" (also in the form of the hashtag #thisiswhywekneel) associated to articles or other posts about some form of injustice and violence against black people in order to shift attention back from the 'disrespect to the flag' to the real issues behind the protest, that is racism:

> **Example 26**: Why @NFL players like @Kaepernick7 kneel. #BlackLivesMatter is about defending and protecting #Constitution from racists. [Includes link to the article: Ex-Chicago police commander linked to torture of more than 100 suspects dies]

> **Example 27**: @user Yeaha...I'm getting Really, Really Really sick of this Bull*hit!!!How many times do you think this will happen before people, black and brown people say ENOUGH!!! NOT TODAY!
> #Thisiswhywekneel #blacklivesmatter #BringbacktheBLACKPANTHERS to #PatrolThePolice [As a reply to a post including a video in which a black man is tased and handcuffed for entering the wrong gate of an apartment complex]

Finally, reference is also made to Nike's 'Just Do It' campaign starring Colin Kaepernick. The advertisement campaign is based on a series of black-and-white portraits of famous athletes with a text that in the case of Kaepernick's photo reads, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". It can be argued that the Nike brand took a stance on the social issue of racism and police brutality and many people using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter saw the success of the campaign as a victory against opponents of the protest:

The example above includes a positive appreciation of the campaign and its success expressed by the adjective *good* and a negative judgment of the opponents of the protest that started a Nike boycott campaign, described as *racist* and *hatemongers* through the use of hashtags. Nike's increase in sales thanks to the campaign is described hyperbolically as a 'big fat fail' for opponents. What is interesting to notice in this post is also the usage of the hashtag *#MAGAfail* that implies a recoupling in negative sense of Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan and implies that Nike's success is a fail for all Trump's supporters, giving the campaign a clear political direction. Indeed, in many posts in the corpus a clear-cut political polarization, expressed also through the use of hashtags, is perceivable. #BlackLivesMatter users tend to include anti-Trump and anti-Republican hashtags in their post and to attack directly Republican politicians, as we have seen in the case of Ted Cruz, or the president himself.

4.4.3 The resistance against Trump's administration

As emerges from the corpus, many #BlackLivesMatter users consider Trump, his supporters and Republicans in general to be racists and tend to include their political affiliation, either in implicit or explicit form, in their posts. Some of the hashtags that seem to combine often with #BlackLivesMatter are #Resistance, #TheResistance or #Resist, that according to Zappavigna (2018) represent "a call to 'resist' or marker of resistance to the administration of Donald Trump" that "invokes the French resistance in the Second World

War fighting against fascism" (2018: 209). Indeed, in many cases Trump's administration is considered to be fascist, as in the following example about the speech delivered by the former Attorney General Jeff Session:

> **Example 30**: @jeffsessions in Chicago today promoting the administration's neo-fascist
> style of law enforcement adding: "If you want more shootings, more death; listen to the
> @ACLU Antifa and Black Lives Matter." #jeffsessions #BlackLivesMatter
> #CriminalJusticeReform

Accordingly, negative judgment is inscribed in many of the microposts related to Sessions' speech. In **example 31**, for instance, the user describes Session as a *racist*, Trump as a *traitor* and the president's administration as *totally corrupt*:

> **Example 31**: @NBCNews Sessions is and always has been a racist. Look back at his
> political career. He did not want Blacks to be able to vote. Anything that is part of traitor
> trumps administration is totally corrupt. #TheResistance #Resist #StopTrump #BlueWave
> #BlackLivesMatter #BlueTsunami2018 #FBR

More importantly, this example illustrates how hashtags enable "expansion in the meaning potential available to social media users as they create texts" (Zappavigna, 2018: 199). Indeed, #BlackLivesMatter in this and many other cases is inserted in a highly politicized 'string of hashtags' including a call to resist against Trump and to stop him and invoking a victory of democrats at the forthcoming midterm elections (#BlueWave, #BlueTsunami). This proves that the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has been recently inserted in an ideological struggle between republicans and democrats, revealing a polarization of political discourse on social media. The political influence on the discourse around race and police brutality is arguably exacerbated by the elections taking place in November, as exemplified by the tweet in **example 32**:

> **Example 32**: #BlackLivesMatter Continue to #Vote out the bigots, racists, misogynists,
> #KKK and #MAGAts. WE MUST. OUR LIVES DEPEND ON IT!!

In this example, which represents an appeal to voters and a call to action, what is evident is the creation of an in-group and an out-group. The in-group, highlighted by the personal pronoun *we* and the possessive adjective *our,* is represented by the #BlackLivesMatter ambient audience and democrats, while the out-group is that of republicans, negatively appraised as *bigots, racists, misogynists, #KKK and #MAGAts*. Negatively evaluating social actors, as explained by Zappavigna (2018) is an extremely affiliative practice and allows the

construction and sharing of social bonds and the framing of identities and communities. In this tweet, a #BlackLivesMatter identity is forged that, by contrast to that ascribed to the out-group, embodies the positive values of tolerance and liberalism.

4.4.4 Delegitimizing #BlackLivesMatter

At a linguistic level, the delegitimization of #BlackLivesMatter resulted in a recoupling of the original hashtag and a distortion of its original meaning. Indeed, in order to legitimize their 'white victimhood', people counter-resisted the discourse developed around the hashtag by eliminating the adjective *black* and substituting it with *blue*, to show support for police in the struggle between minorities and law enforcement, implying that one's job is a social category as important as race in discrimination, and with *all* in order to shift the focus from black people to *all people*. The result is a battle, a competition for assessing which life is more important, even if this has never been the purpose of the movement. Obviously, this struggle is visible in the language structures used in the discourse developed around #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter.

4.4.4.1 #BlueLivesMatter and the war on cops

The most frequent *topoi* emerging in the qualitative analysis of #BlueLivesMatter microposts are: a) The police are victims of a 'reverse discrimination' b) The police are under attack and in danger. This is already apparent when we read the lexical items listed in **Appendix 2**, evoking an extremely negative reality very similar to that evoked by #BlackLivesMatter users, e.g. *murder*, *attack*, *nightmare*, *violence*, *death*, etc. Also in this case, affect (fear, sadness…) is invoked and inscribed in microposts in order to interpersonally invite users to share the same emotions:

> **Example 33**: So Sorry For Your Loss #Stop this War on our Peace Officers #BlueLivesMatter

> **Example 34**: Our police are facing armed insurrection every day, most of it hatred stirred up by bad actors. Everyone must STAND FOR THE BLUE! They put their lives in danger every day for US...& are reviled for it. #BackTheBlue #BlueLivesMatter

> **Example 35**: @bluelivesmtr This is bull crap! These cops who would do anything for their community are being gunned down in ambush style attacks! This is exceptionable! Something must be done to stop these people ! #BlueLivesMatter #BackTheBlue

> **Example 36**: The war on Cops is real. May God protect them. #BlueLivesMatter

As we can see, the representation of reality is completely opposite to that emerging in #BlackLivesMatter microposts. According to #BlueLivesMatter users, police officers, not black people, are under attack and victims of hatred and violence even though they do not deserve it. Indeed, law enforcement officers are described in an extremely positive way, through inscribed and invoked positive judgment, which highlights how they are peaceful workers whose only aim is to protect people. In many cases, police officers are also described as heroes or superheroes, as in **example 37** in which people 'opposing' police are also described as ungrateful:

> **Example 37**: @NYPD50Pct Thank you for your service for ungrateful people. People
> should demand pay raise and better working condition for our heroes. #BlueLivesMatter

What is important to notice is that, compared to #BlackLivesMatter posts, agency in these examples is vague. Indeed, users tend to use passive structures and eliminate the Agent in the clause or express it through euphemisms (*bad actors*, *these people*). This vagueness may be due to the effects of colour-blindness and politically-correctness. However, given that the hashtag #BlueLivesMatter appeared as a direct criticism to #BlackLivesMatter, it may be assumed that 'these people' are black people, minorities and democrats.

Many posts in the corpus related to #BlueLivesMatter oppose to the deaths of Botham Jean and Jemel Roberson, which were given much attention in the #BlackLivesMatter social stream, the death of young, white police officers, such as Deputy Mark Stasyuk, killed during a shooting. In the same way as in the case of Jemel Roberson, there is a tendency to highlight certain features such as his age and the fact that he had a family, in order to humanize the police officer and to arouse strong emotions in the reader:

> **Example 38**: Another family member has been killed. May Deputy Mark Stasyuk never be
> forgotten. Send prayers to his family. "Deputy Mark Stasyuk Killed In Rancho Cordova
> Shooting". When will this end? Why do heroes have to die? #TheThinBlueLine
> #BlueLivesMatter

> **Example 39**: Another senseless killing, he was just 27. Praying for his family and friends
> to bring peace at this very difficult time   #BlueLivesMatter #Enough #respectthelaw
> #restinpeace #hero @sacsheriff

> **Example 40**: What a tragic and senseless act and loss we endured today. RIP Deputy
> Stasyuk. Never forgotten, prayers for the family and blue family #EnoughIsEnough
> #BlueLivesMatter #backthebadge #stoptheviolence

The structure of the discourse of desperation and exasperation, highlighted by the numerous references to divine intervention through the pragmatic act of prayer, conveying a sense of helplessness (Chiluwa & Ifukor 2015), is very similar to that used in #BlackLivesMatter posts. The negative affect of exasperation is conveyed through the same hashtags (#Enough, #EnoughIsEnough), similar questions (When will this end?) and imperatives (#stoptheviolence). Very interesting is also the rhetorical question "Why do heroes have to die?" somehow implying that the lives of heroes (police officers) are more important than the others. Opposing the death of police officers to the struggle against police brutality carried out by #BlackLivesMatter activists is a powerful way to delegitimize their cause.

In the posts related to #BlueLivesMatter there are very few references to the deaths of black men at the hands of police, but it is interesting to discuss those few instances in order to understand how #BlueLivesMatter users counter-resist the remonstrance of #BlackLivesMatter:

> **Example 41**: How sad that there is more attention paid to a tragic accidental shooting in
> Dallas than the deliberate murder of a police officer in Fort Worth. #RIPGarrettHull
> #BlueLivesMatter

> **Example 42**: Witnesses Say Officer Issued Commands to Drop Gun Before Fatally
> Shooting Security Guard #Police #BlueLivesMatter

In **example 41**, the user describes the shooting in which Botham Jean was killed as *tragic* and *accidental* and compares it to what he/she calls *the deliberate murder of a police officer*, presupposing that this latter is more important. In this way, the user delegitimizes the outrage against Botham Jean's death. In **Example 42**, instead, the title of a newspaper article is shared that serves as a justification for the police officer who killed Jemel Roberson (given that the security guard did not drop the gun on the officer's command, his actions are legitimate).

In other instances, #BlueLivesMatter users directly attack #BlackLivesMatter supporters as in the following example:

> **Example 43**: FACT: #BlackLivesMatter is just a shitty excuse for "people of colour" to kill
> cops. Then when they get shot everyone can whinge about it! #BlueLivesMatter

Also in this case, the struggle against police brutality and the misrepresentation of black bodies is discredited and delegitimized, being described as a mere *excuse for "people of*

colour" to kill cops. These examples show how the power gained by black people through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is jeopardized by attempts to re-centre institutionalized power and how black people are criminalized again as 'police killers'.

The responsibility for the start of the 'war on cops' mentioned so far is attributed, by many users, to Obama's administration, as exemplified by the following micropost:

> **Example 44**: A divided country still feels the effect of #Obama's War on #Police. Are the #nflprotests an offshoot? #tcot #Conservatives #BlueLivesMatter #PBA #NFLBoycott #TNF

In this example, the user clearly states his/her political alignment through the use of hashtags such as #tcot (an acronym for Top Conservatives On Twitter) and #Conservatives. Moreover, he/she wonders if Kaepernick's 'take a knee' protest derives from the previous administration and through the hashtag #NFLBoycott, like many other users employing the hashtag, denounces and opposes the offline protest started by the quarterback, inviting other users to boycott it.

4.4.4.2 The protest against the protest

Some of the most frequently used words in the corpus related to #BlueLivesMatter are *kneeling*, *nike*, *flag*, and the hashtag *#boycottnike*, demonstrating how the protest against police brutality has become a 'hot topic' also among its opponents and critics. Let us consider **example 45** relating to the death of Robert Kunze and including an invoked negative judgment of Kaepernick and his fellow protesters:

> **Example 45**: Thank you for your service sir! A true example of sacrificing everything. The real heroes of America #ThinBlueLine #BlueLivesMatter

This example demonstrates the importance of micro-context in understanding language. Indeed, being aware of the context, we can notice that 'Kaepernick's voice' is implied in this post with the intention to subvert it and 'recouple' the positive judgment associated with the protest. As mentioned before, the slogan associated with Kaepernick's photo in Nike advertisement campaign is "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". In order to glorify the police officer killed during a shooting and delegitimize the protest against police brutality, the user makes an intertextual reference to the slogan of the campaign and with the use of the adjective *true*, he presupposes that there is a 'false example of sacrificing everything', that is Kaepernick. In the same way, the utterance *the real heroes of America*

presupposes that there are false heroes (Kaepernick and other protesters). Finally, the hashtag #ThinBlueLine emphasizes the heroism of law enforcement officers. Indeed, the 'thin blue line' is a phrase that represents figuratively the position of police in society. According to this emblem, police officers stand as a thin line between order and chaos, good and evil.

This strategy is used also by other #BlueLivesMatter users, as in this example where *real* is intensified through capitalization:

> **Example 46**: @Kaepernick7 & @Nike read & understand what REAL sacrifice is! #IPledgeAllegiance & #StandForTheFlag & #BlueLivesMatter [Includes photo of Iraqi war veteran with a scarred and burnt face]

The use of hashtags *#IPledgeAllegiance* and *#StandForTheFlag* express the user's framing of the protest as a 'disrespect to the flag', as it was represented by Trump. Along the same lines, in the next example Kaepernick is discredited through a comparison with Pat Tillman, a NFL professional player who left his sports career and enlisted in the United States Army in 2002 after the September 11 attacks, and urging the ambient audience to honour him, instead of Kaepernick, through an imperative:

> **Example 47**: Honor Pat Tillman, Not Colin Kaepernick #Kaepernick #ColinKaepernick #PatTillman #Tillman #BlueLivesMatter #NFLBoycott #NFL #Nike #NikeBoycott #MAGA #KAG #KeepAmericaGreat #KAG2018

As in the case of #BlackLivesMatter, also here #BlueLivesMatter is included in a list of politicized hashtags such as *#MAGA*, *#KAG*, *#KeepAmericaGreat* and *#KAG2018* that shows the alignment of the user to right-wing politics. In particular, the imperative *keep America great* works as an exhortation to conservatives to keep on voting the Republican Party in the upcoming midterm elections.

In the following example, Kaepernick and his supporters, especially advocates in Hollywood like the black actress Jenifer Lewis, are directly attacked:

> **Example 48**: CNN Word on the street is NIke approached many hollywood elitists and paid @JeniferLewis a lot of money to support Kaepernick, the guy who protests black on black murders in the form of fake police brutality. #bluelivesmatter

> **Example 49**: @GametimeUnited You can't give the NFL tickets away as far as I'm concerned. At least not till the millionaire play babies stand for the anthem and Goddard enforces the rules #BoycottNFL #StandfortheAnthem #stopthedisrespect #BlueLivesMatter

Example 50: Nike and Kaepernick are anti American thugs. Jenifer lewis wearing all Nike at Emmys is disgrace, dumb hoe. Police need to boycott all NFL games. #BoycottNike #BoycottNFL #MAGA #Emmys #Thugs #itsokaytobewhite #BlueLivesMatter #snowflakes #USA #RedPill

In **example 48**, Kaepernick's protest is delegitimized by stating that police brutality is *fake* and that instead the real problem is black on black murders. This is a widespread topos in #BlueLivesMatter microposts: many users blame black people themselves for the violence and killings in their own communities, often supporting their ideas with statistics from questionable sources. In all of the above-mentioned examples, Hollywood personalities are negatively judged (*millionaire play babies*, *anti-American thugs*, *disgrace*, *dumb hoe*). Also the use of hashtags in **example 50** suggests the political alignment of the user: *snowflake*, for instance, has recently become an insult used on the Internet by those on the political right to insult those on the political left, described as fragile. Moreover, the hashtag #itsoktobewhite, expresses white victimhood by implying that black protesters are protesting against white skin colour and accusing them of reverse discrimination.

Finally, 'Kaepernick's voice' is inserted in #BlueLivesMatter posts through intersemiotic reference to the action of 'kneeling' and recurring utterances such as 'who is kneeling for…?" in connection to police officers killed:

Example 51: Who is kneeling for him? #RedNationRising #Wichita #BlueLivesMatter

Example 52: @user @user wonder if #Kaepernick will take a knee. #bluelivesmatter

Through such strategies, Kaepernick and his supporters are accused of being biased towards black victims of violence and ignoring white victims. Through white victimhood, #BlueLivesMatter users try to delegitimize the protest against police brutality and gain support for the institutionalized power of police.

4.4.4.3 #AllLivesMatter and the erasure of race

As already mentioned, #AllLivesMatter appeared as a critique against #BlackLivesMatter. It represents the refusal to acknowledge that race is still an important category in American society. In other words, users employing this hashtag consider black people the ones who make everything a 'race problem', the ones attacking a post-racial order. The #AllLivesMatter hashtag brings with it a message of universality, which is not wrong in itself, but which delegitimizes the struggle of black people by erasing the issue of race

altogether. Let us consider **examples 53-56**, in order to understand how the hashtag works rhetorically:

Example 53: @user THERE IS NO #WhitePrivilege ONLY #AmericanPrivilege BECAUSE #AllLivesMatter

Example 54: Why does everything have to go as far as being a "race" thing? .....Why can't we all just love each other as children of God? #iseenocolors #equality #weallhavethesameblood #childrenofgod #AllLivesMatter

Example 55: I understand white people enslaved P.o.C but persecuting white people for any reason and especially to as a platform to speak out against being persecuted is hypocritical at best and at worse delegitimizing to your cause. #AllLivesmatter #endwhitepersecution

Example 56: A culture of hate has been built up on white people, it is sad really how far we have fallen we are to the point that calling a white person "cracker" is acceptable but saying the N-word is not and people are being shamed for being white. #endwhitepersecution #AllLivesmatter

In the first two examples, users delegitimize #BlackLivesMatter struggle by asserting that white privilege does not exist (**example 53**) and by erasing the importance of race through rhetorical questions (**example 54**). In particular, the hashtag #iseenocolors evokes a discourse of colour-blindness. The user in the **example 54** appeals to a Christian message of equality and tolerance in order to support his/her colour-blind rhetoric. Finally, the hashtag #weallhavethesameblood include an inclusive pronoun 'we' which refers to all humanity, strengthening the idea of a post-racial, equal world. Even though the message in this post is clearly positive, it totally pushes aside structural racism and black people demands.

In **example 55** and **56**, instead, users accuse #BlackLivesMatter protesters of starting a 'hate campaign' against white people, a *white persecution*. In particular in **example 56** the double standards that usually #BlackLivesMatter users try to expose in their argumentations, are completely reversed to the extent that whites are described as the victims and blacks as the persecutors. The hashtag #endwhitepersecution works as an appeal to black people and amplifies the idea of white victimhood.

Given the universality of the message it should carry, the hashtag #AllLivesMatter tends to be more prone to re-appropriation and recoupling. In many instances in the corpus it has been used by both #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter users in order to support

their causes. But what is really striking, is that the hashtag has been re-appropriated by other protesters struggling for causes that transcend race issues. The frequency list of #AllLivesMatter posts (in **Appendix 3**) shows that one of the most frequent words is *abortion* (683), a lexical item that has nothing to do with race, racism or police brutality. Indeed, the hashtag seems to have been 'hijacked' by pro-life and animal rights protesters:

> **Example 57**: People are sending Susan Collins coat hangers in protest of abortion? If you're willing to use a coat hanger to kill your own baby, perhaps you deserve the consequences that come with it.... #AllLivesMatter #prolife #KavanaughHearings #maga #AbortionIsMurder

> **Example 58**: killing species of beautiful animals endangered with extinction is absolutely awkward. no life should be taken for fun. #AllLivesMatter

While this vulnerability of hashtags to re-appropriation and recontextualisation is interesting from the point of view of struggle in discourse and meaning evolution, it may lead to difficulties in the creation of a representative corpus. This is why a qualitative analysis of microposts is of pivotal importance in a Social Media Critical Discourse Analysis. Indeed, some scholars such as Baker et al. (2008) call for an integrated approach, a synergy that could bring together methodologies traditionally associated with corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), based on the assumption that "CL needs to be supplemented by the close analysis of selected texts using CDA theory and methodology. CDA, in turn, can benefit from incorporating more objective, quantitative CL approaches, as quantification can reveal the degree of generality of, or confidence in, the study findings and conclusions" (2008: 297).

5. Conclusion and final remarks

After this discussion of the main linguistic findings related to the analysis of microposts including the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, let us return to the original research questions: What is the role of hashtags in propagating ideologies and constructing meanings? How do users create and negotiate discourses around race, racism and police brutality? How do they affiliate and dis-affiliate around certain values? How are these discourses connected to broader social identities and contexts?

It can be argued that hashtags are extremely powerful tools in propagating ideologies and constructing meanings in that, in just a few words, they convey social messages and influence the structure and rhetorical devices of entire microposts, giving rise to a narrative in which similar topoi are shared and reshared in order to accomplish a change in discourse. As we have seen, the #BlackLivesMatter posts analysed in this case study revolve around the same topics and news coverage that provoked anger, outrage, frustration and sadness, like the death of black men and the misrepresentation of black bodies carried out by institutionalized power. Through the negative judgments of police, Republicans and racist white people, the supporters of #BlackLivesMatter try to resist a dominant discourse of oppression. Recently, as exemplified by the continuous intertextual and intersemiotic references to the NFL protest, many black protesters have found in Colin Kaepernick a new guide and a new source of legitimization in their struggle towards a better treatment of African Americans, enriching in this way the 'microstory' inside the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which now has acquired an anti-Trump component and a pronounced political connotation. Discourse around race and police brutality is negotiated, in this highly politicized context, in a way that resembles a battle, with social media as a battlefield and hashtags as the main weapons. In order to delegitimize their struggle, indeed, police supporters deploy the hashtag #BlueLivesMatter in microposts charged with the intense negative emotions that characterise #BlackLivesMatter posts, but totally reversing the point of view, thus claiming that police officers are the real victims of a society that no longer respects law and order. However, agency in #BlueLivesMatter microposts is almost always vague and unclear, as if their protest was directed towards unknown perpetrators. Yet, the usage of a hashtag that emerged as a direct criticism to black people's remonstrance implies a narrative that is imbued with the mainstream and dominant ideologies of colourblindness and white victimhood, as is the case for #AllLivesMatter. The discourse fuelled by #BlueLivesMatter in particular is constructed as a protest against the protest whose only aim is that of removing social rights, not expanding them. The embedding of the hashtag in a string of right wing, pro-Trump hashtags clearly suggests that this kind of ideology is somehow sanctioned by the state and by the current administration that may strengthen already existing racial tensions.

The analysis demonstrates that hashtags are powerful linguistic and semiotic resources in that they "act as facilitative devices for asserting one's collective group identity and ideological affiliation" (Konnelly, 2015: 13). Indeed, the aim of this study was not that of ascertaining the actual efficiency of hashtag activism in bringing about social change, but

assessing how at a language level in the new context of social media ideologies are shared and propagated. Despite the backlash against black people and their protest, it can be argued that the main aim of hashtag activism - raising awareness on issues of societal importance - is reached through a constant negotiation of opposing points of view, in a constant struggle for power *in* and *over* discourse.

Finally, this research has demonstrated that hashtags and Twitter (or other social network) microposts can be analysed in depth from both a linguistic and socio-political point of view and that some of the lexico-grammatical categories at the basis of Critical Discourse Analysis may also be examined in the context of social media. Indeed, the shift from the unidirectionality of classic mass media to the multimodality and interactivity of social media, has led to a new interest in bottom-up resistant discourses.

In the present study, I tried to embrace the 'positive side' of Critical Discourse Analysis and focus on the "bottom-up relations of resistance" (van Dijk 1993: 250) in discourse, as recommended by, among others, Bartlett (2012), Macgilchrist (2007) and Martin (2004). In particular, Martin introduces the term *Positive Discourse Analysis* and argues that the lack of it "cripples our understanding of how change happens, for the better across a range of sites [...]. And this hampers design [of emancipatory alternatives] and perhaps even discourages it since analysts would rather tell us how the struggle was undone than how freedom was won" (2004: 185).

Therefore, future linguistic research should ideally be focused on activist 'ambient' communication, in order to provide a solid framework for analysing resistance and reception factors, rather than concentrating only on text production elements that maintain unequal power structures. In other words, as suggested by Breeze (2011), discourse analysis should also investigate "emancipatory discourses or positive changes in social language use" (2011: 521) because this would shed light on the ways in which society may change for the better.

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Appendix 1 - #BlackLivesMatter Word Frequency Query

N°	Word	Count
1	#blacklivesmatter	1155
2	white	671
3	making	538
4	color	537
5	life	535
6	hard	531
7	mean	528
8	means	527
9	privilege	527
10	things	527
11	skin	525
12	police	363
13	black	313
14	#takeaknee	198
15	racial	184
16	movement	183
17	use	167
18	force	165
19	disparities	158
20	effort	155
21	people	128
22	#metoo	110
23	killed	86
24	stop	67
25	lives	58
26	protest	57
27	activists	54
28	man	54
29	privileged	54
30	security	54
31	shot	53
32	gun	52
33	kavanaugh	52
34	racist	52
35	community	51
36	disgusting	49
37	exploiting	47
38	republican	44
39	#jemelroberson	43
40	please	41
41	voting	40
42	democrats	35
43	justice	35
44	Trump	34
45	cop	33

N°	Word	Count
46	women	33
47	#resist	32
48	murder	31
49	#racism	30
50	brother	29
51	injustice	29
52	congratulations	26
53	death	26
54	America	25
55	awful	25

Appendix 2 - #BlueLivesMatter Word Frequency Query

N°	Word	Count
1	police	2522
2	#bluelivesmatter	2174
3	#backtheblue	1305
4	officer	1018
5	shooting	888
6	cop	857
7	man	830
8	death	797
9	kneeling	783
10	36th	778
11	shot	551
12	nike	489
13	supporting	465
14	flag	458
15	hero	425
16	peace	399
17	deputy	396
18	killed	272
19	gunfight	259
20	nightmare	223
21	please	221
22	murdered	220
23	rest	188
24	people	156
25	family	132
26	stop	118
27	fire	110
28	sheriff	108
29	attack	100
30	another	92
31	suspect	92
32	violence	92
33	nation	89

34	american	87
35	Obama	87
36	#maga	86
37	heart	86
38	friends	84
39	thank	83
40	attacked	82
41	christians	82
42	community	82
43	condolences	82
44	divider	82
45	dies	79
46	fatally	77
47	arrest	76
48	citizen	76
49	fascist	76
50	change	66
51	social	66
52	gun	65
53	#rip	64
54	#boycottnike	61
55	outraged	61
56	murder	59
57	resisting	59

Appendix 3 - #AllLivesMatter Word Frequency Query

N°	Word	Count
1	abortion	683
2	human	681
3	rights	678
4	#alllivesmatter	526
5	hillary	347
6	clinton	339
7	celebrates	338
8	#police	235
9	caught	223
10	gunfight	223
11	nightmare	223
12	female	118
13	wrong	95
14	#blacklivesmatter	90
15	#bluelivesmatter	90
16	possibly	87
17	scenario	87
18	support	85

19	respect	79
20	people	77
21	service	75
22	#wethepeople	74
23	honor	74
24	officer	73
25	sacrifices	73
26	amendment	70
27	praying	70
28	family	67
29	resisting	58
30	innocent	46
31	woman	46
32	citizens	41
33	condolences	41
34	friends	41
35	baby	38
36	#maga	37
37	white	34
38	blood	33
39	parenthood	33
40	#feminism	31
41	black	21