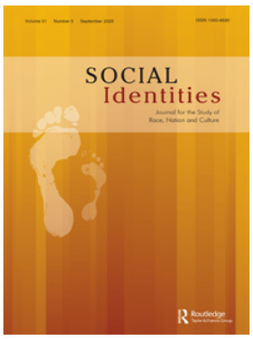

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Becoming *BAME*: social identities and racialised terminology in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of racialised terminology through the first sociolinguistic, cultural analysis of the acronym *BAME* (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) in the UK. Using a mixed methods approach, we present an analysis of how this collective term of ethnic difference is used across parliamentary discourse, news articles, and social media spaces, identifying a rise in the term since 2014, but also evidence of a decline since 2022, together with qualitative interpretations of the mechanisms underpinning discursive (re)constructions of the UK's Black and Asian communities. More specifically, our analysis situates language as a site of identity struggle where racially minoritised communities can be fixed and administered but also strive for social change. We propose that *BAME* is a race-making discursive practice where a hierarchical and lateral arrangement between institutions and publics co-exists, since it is a term that is both imposed and aligned with. *BAME,* as a form of racial categorisation, is thus implicated in the ambivalence of racialised discourse.

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'BAME'; Black; Asian; language; racialisation; identity

Constructing 'Race' through *BAME*

Just as with its antecedents that have included 'coloured', 'ethnic minority', 'black', 'black and Asian', and 'Black Minority Ethnic', the term *BAME*[1] ('Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic') has travelled as a linguistic category in the UK since the early 2000s, from widespread usage in public policy frames and market research, to media reportage, grassroots campaigning messages, and diasporic/'ethnic' press. Concurrently, *BAME* (either in acronymic form, expanded form, or both) has been widely repudiated, including by those who derive from the 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic'[2] communities that the term seeks to describe and who *BAME* constructs as subjects. And yet *BAME* has routinely been adopted within institutional frameworks *and* by its racialised subjects. We examine the incongruity of this complex discursive formation within the UK's contemporary racialised landscape.

Despite its longstanding use as a standard measure of ethnic classification, many of the UK's leading institutions, from the government to broadcasters, are erasing *BAME* from

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organisational discourse by publicly disassociating themselves from a term they had hitherto deployed, including for data collection purposes. In fact, *BAME* has a particular utility in relation to intensifying data regimes within policy and organisational contexts. In 2022, the UK government stated, 'To communicate more effectively on racial issues and to avoid lumping together different ethnic minority groups, the government has stopped using the term "BAME" in its own communications and will encourage other public sector bodies to do the same'[3] (Gov.uk, 2022a). Public criticism of the term has emphasised how it reduces, flattens, and simplifies (aggregating for simplicity's sake) culturally heterogeneous communities that experience varying forms of (dis)advantage, inequalities, and racisms. And yet, in some cases, *BAME* continues to be used as a campaigning and communication tool, including within grassroots community contexts.[4]

The institutional denunciation of *BAME* has been publicised through press releases and government statements where new language choices are presented as a feature of progressive, anti-racist organisational change and awareness. These linguistic adjustments have intensified following calls for racial justice highlighted by the *Black Lives Matter* (*BLM*) movement after George Floyd's murder in May 2020.[5] *BLM*-influenced anti-racist activism has helped to reshape organisational and public conversations about racial privilege, coupled with a new impetus to reassess the basis of race and ethnic disparities (UK Parliament, 2021) and develop a more nuanced understanding of racial identities beyond broad categories (Gill, 2024).

To date, however, very little research has explored *BAME* as a racialised language practice and what it reveals about changing social identities. While recent research has analysed the discourse of *BAME* in ethnic press (e.g. Aujla-Sidhu & Briscoe-Palmer, 2024), there is no analysis of *BAME*'s changing value, over time, in media, institutional and social media discourse, or an analysis that foregrounds the value of using corpus linguistics methodologies to understand social identity formations better. To address this gap, the article analyses how the term is used across a range of data sources and environments, including parliamentary discourse, news reporting, and social media, drawing on approaches from corpus linguistics (briefly, computer-aided analyses of large bodies of textual data, Collins, 2019), raciolinguistics (Rosa & Flores, 2017), and cultural studies (Hall, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). To our knowledge, this study is one of the first attempts to undertake an interdisciplinary analysis of how collective racial/ethnic terms of reference are used across a broader section of parliamentary debates, news articles, and social media posts. In doing so, our study makes a significant contribution to social identities scholarship at the nexus of race, racism, and sociolinguistics, arguing that socially led, critical approaches to racial categorisation are required to understand contemporary politics of representation and recognition and the intersections between political governance, the public, and the media. With the overarching aim of understanding how the term *BAME* shapes constructions of racialised social identities, our data and discussion is guided by the following three research questions:

(1) Over what timeframe has *BAME* been used across different forms of public discourse?
(2) What linguistic function has *BAME* performed within those contexts?
(3) What evaluative stances exist towards *BAME* in social media data?

In the next section, we outline a discussion of how the term *BAME* fits within the broader socio-political strategy of cultural categorisation, as well as how the term has been negotiated and critiqued more widely. We then present an overview of the three purpose-built corpora constructed for this project, which enables us to capture data across institutional and public discourse, and as it ran parallel to the new UK Government guidance (Gov.uk, 2021). An outline of our analytical approaches follows this. The research questions inform our subsequent analyses, organised across the following parameters – an analysis of *BAME* over time; an analysis of the most frequent collocates (that is, words appearing in close proximity) which occur in texts containing the term *BAME*; and finally, an analysis of how the term *BAME* has been evaluated, focusing specifically on social media data. We follow this with a summary discussion of the contemporary representational politics of racial identity across institutional, public, and community contexts, before reflecting on the role language plays in sustaining and challenging cultural categorisation strategies, and thus its significance in shaping social identities.

Background: contextualising *BAME* as a race-making practice

Before presenting our analysis of how *BAME* is used across the three original corpora, we begin by contextualising this analysis within wider socio-political developments. This section introduces some of the key literature relevant for social identities studies, on the role of language in race-making practices and the discursive construction of race. We can better understand the terminological anxiety at play when we situate the articulation of *BAME* as a unit of 'race-making' within ideological (language) practice; *BAME* as the 'centerpiece of a hierarchical system that produces differences' (Hall, 2017, pp. 32–33). The current linguistic turn we are witnessing, charted by *BAME's* ascent, demise, and residual presence exemplifies how social structures, human agency, and discursive practices collide to reveal the mechanisms of 'race-making'.

Studies of social identity, race, and ethnicity have emphasised the socially constructed (rather than biological, physical, or natural) basis of 'race' (Lentin, 2020) and the instabilities of cultural identities that are constantly being navigated in relation to others (Bhabha, 1994). In *New Ethnicities*, Hall (1988, p. 226) states:

> If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is 'ethnicity'.

We take this social constructionist approach as our starting-point – 'race' as a discursive construct – recognising the entanglements of racialisation and colonisation, where colonial relations depend on subjugation based on racial and cultural difference and the rationalisation of power arrangements. Our analysis, the first of its kind, draws on corpus methods, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and communication studies. It traces *how* race, vis-à-vis *BAME*, is mediated across a range of texts and spaces, in order to analyse racialised governance and institutional negotiations within enduring power structures.

We respond to Hall's question of 'what are the specific conditions which make this form of distinction [between groups with different racial or ethnic characteristics] socially pertinent, historically active?' (Hall, 1980, p. 338). The 'discursive conception of race' (Hall,

2017, p. 33) is perpetually in motion; or for Hall (2017, p. 37), a 'sliding signifier' that is made and re-made. As a unit of race-making in organisational discourses of cultural difference, *BAME's* classificatory function is for the labelling, differentiation, administration, and analysis of data designed to generate meaning, because 'until you classify things, in different ways, you can't generate any meaning at all' (Hall, 1997, p. 2).

In addition to being a race-making practice, we understand *BAME* as a data practice rooted in organisational culture. *BAME* has been a standard form of racial classification that is

> part of the fabric of everyday life as citizens are expected to locate themselves within official systems of categorisation not only via the national census but through 'ethnic monitoring' in employment, education, policing, and the provision of many public services. (Skinner et al., 2011, p. 116)

BAME is consequently utilised within UK policy and governance frameworks for data collection and statistical analysis on demographics, housing, workforce, pay gaps, education attainment, and so on. For some, *BAME* is seen as 'shorthand' or a 'necessary evil' (Ryder et al., 2021), including to highlight disparities. In the cultural industries, *BAME* has been widely used in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives to boost ethnic diversity (Ali & Byrne, 2023), while *BAME* has been used in the health sector to introduce measures to tackle specific kinds of health outcomes experienced by some racially minoritised communities (see Aspinall, 2021). For example, studies on COVID-19 infection rates (Milner & Jumbe, 2020) have found patterns amongst *BAME* patients and identified ethnicity and income inequality as linked to COVID-19 mortality (BMA, 2021).

Classification and critique: reflections on *BAME* as an organisational term

Given *BAME* is a recent phenomenon, it is not surprising there is only a small body of related academic literature concerning its use, with discussion of its classificatory function, value, implementation, and limitations most advanced in the health sector (BMA, 2021), while critical responses to *BAME* can be found in news reports, editorials, and grey literature (Bunglawala, 2019; Malik, 2020). Within the academic literature, there is now some reference to the inadequacies of *BAME* as a classificatory term within an already complex space of EDI policy embedded in majority white organisations, and to the contested basis of the term (Ali & Byrne, 2023; Gill, 2024).

Using an intersectional lens in their sociological study of sport, Parry et al. (2023) analyse perceptions of *BAME* amongst racially minoritised women who work as coaches in the 'hyper-masculinised and white-dominated' space of Association Football. Locating organisations as 'racial structures' where 'daily, routine organisational processes connect racial schemas to material and social resources' (Parry et al., 2023, p. 3), they argue that *BAME* upholds an assumption of difference from a white universalist norm. Although *BAME* was, for some time, 'the government's collective term of choice for minority ethnic groups' (Aspinall, 2021, p. 107), the UK Government affirmed Parry et al.'s assertion, with the Cabinet Office's Race Disparity Unit declaring '"BAME" is also often used as a proxy for "non-white," which can be unintentionally divisive' (Gov.uk, 2022b). Similarly, Lawrence et al. (2025) analyse the term *BAME* in the football industry, drawing on interviews with British South Asian in senior and executive levels. This analysis notes a

'perceived futility of the term "BAME" and its tendency to shape sector-wide policies that are sometimes well intentioned but ultimately promote an unhelpful '"White people and the rest"-type dualism' (Lawrence et al., 2025, p. 7). While *BAME* has utility, it appears to be rarely identified with (a point we develop further in our analyses below).

The recent unsettling of *BAME*, as a 'system of marked differentiations' (Hall, 2017, p. 50), is apparent through prominent re-enactments to reset racial language as part of broader anti-racist intention. For example, the BBC Creative Diversity department's headline, 'BAME We're Not the Same' (BBC, 2020) was followed with a BBC Studios' commission supported by partner broadcasters ITV, C4, Sky, and Viacom to analyse the impact of *BAME* with their audiences across all outputs and the appropriateness of *BAME* for internal and external communications and reporting (Ryder et al., 2021). The BBC commission, in which the authors of this article were appointed as the academic team, led to a public commitment to 'avoid the B.A.M.E acronym wherever possible' (BBC, 2021). The significant backlash to the Government-commissioned *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report* (2021) preceded the Government's agreed action to stop using the term (Gov.uk, 2022a, 2022b). The Report's denunciation of the existence of institutional racism (BMA, 2021; OHCHR, 2021) was widely contested, although the Report's criticism[6] that *BAME* is not a usefully aggregated term was commended, urging more specific ethnicity data to produce better-tailored solutions and outcomes (see BMA, 2021).

Those of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent in the UK, whilst experiencing different formulations, have a shared history of 'Other-ing' and as British colonial subjects. Discursive approaches within postcolonial social identities scholarship have highlighted the colonial techniques of racialisation and fixity inscribed through language. For Bhabha (1994, p. 31),

> In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; … The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.

'Political Blackness' was indeed formed as an oppositional discourse to challenge British state racism, violence, and imperialist legacies. *BAME*'s institutional origins therefore sit in contrast to those earlier terms such as 'black' that were more explicitly rooted within anti-racist, anti-colonialist political cultures, emerging from a coalition of African, Caribbean, and Asian communities, including Commonwealth migrants, in the late 1950s to 1970s. 'Black', through 'Political Blackness', helped to mobilise a dual politics of recognition and institutional change that asserted the need for better (representational) rights, access, and justice. This anti-racist conceptualisation of 'Black' has been identified as being rooted in a distinctively British form of anti-colonial politics through, for example, the Black British Power movement (Narayan, 2019). But even 'black' induced deep anxieties about 'false essentialism', including from a British-Asian standpoint (Modood, 1994), and about racialised classification and definition more profoundly. In 1987, Michael Banton, known for his analysis of race and social categories, stated, 'the lack of agreed nomenclature is one of the most revealing features of racial and ethnic relations in Britain today' (Banton, 1987, p. 175; see also Banton,1977). The decline of 'Political Blackness' led to a shift towards more specific ethnic identities in activism (Gill, 2024).

BAME is thus implicated in a long history of struggle around definition, difference, recognition, and self-identification, highlighting how identities are not fixed but are continuously produced and reproduced through cultural narratives and discourse. As our analysis

continues to show, it has also been present alongside other recent terms of ethnic categorisation, such as 'people of colour', 'minority-ethnic', and 'ethnic minority', in addition to terms like *BME* (Black Minority Ethnic) or *BAMER* (which also includes refugees). Meanwhile, 'global majority' has surfaced as a term of self-identification, asserting a more global consciousness of African and Asian as majority populations and a shift from margin to centre (DaCosta et al., 2021; Mirza, 2022). All of this suggests a broader context in which terms and language are used to construct racial categories and identities, providing the analytical impetus for rigorously examining the term and what its shift in usage signifies.

Our contribution to understandings of social identities is further motivated by recent calls within raciolinguistics to 'connect critical-language research with critical-race scholarship' (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 621). More specifically, they make the point that 'rather than taking for granted existing categories for parsing and classifying race and language, [raciolinguistics seeks] to understand how and why these categories have been co-naturalized in particular societal contexts' (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 622). Our critical examination of the trajectory of *BAME*, across different UK institutional and public contexts, suggests the relevance for social identities studies of 'how institutionalized hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy are central to processes of modern subject formation' (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 622).

The article does not present a historicisation of racialised terminology, nor does it evaluate *BAME's* merits. Instead, we consider how, in the wider historic and socio-political UK 'race relations' context, social identities 'are constructed within, and outside, discourse … produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific formations and practices, specific enunciative strategies' (Hall, 1996, p. 14). Our analysis of how *BAME* has been deployed as an ethnic categorisation tool in a range of contexts and environments seeks to advance research on the role of ethnic categorisation in how ethnic identities are socially constructed through discourse and how such discourse is negotiated. We therefore identify the significance of the recent example of the rise and problematisation of *BAME,* for questions of representation and political struggle. Using the example of the 'politics of multiculturalism' and minority communities, Taylor (1994) links the dialogical basis of identity to recognition, and (mis)recognition to human agency. For Taylor (1994, p. 25), 'nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being'. Therefore, the significance of understanding ethnic categorisation lies in its connection to questions of representation, which can be linked to the idea of the dialogical character of human life (Taylor, 1994).

Studies of social identities and critical race theory are both interested in how power dynamics and social inequalities shape individual and group identities, including the institutional and structural basis of racism. These approaches help to advance critical understandings of ethnic categorisation not just as 'what categories are' but to 'discussion of *how* categories are' (Skinner, 2011, p. 117). For critical race theorists, the logic of racisms remains intact, despite organisational and discursive shifts that may appear to perform anti-racist change (Ahmed, 2007). In this sense, formal modes of racial classification – whether used by institutions for monitoring, or the making and evaluation of policy – do not deliver anti-racist change or social equity.

Hall's work on racial classification and language hierarchies, and Bhabha's work on 'ambivalence' where complicity and resistance can co-exist in coloniser/colonised

encounters, also help us to navigate the messy, non-hierarchical relations we suggest underpin the rise and problematisation of *BAME*. As we go on to show, the analysis evidences the decline in frequency of *BAME* more expansively, indicating that *BAME* has been unsettled by the dialogic relations at work.

Data and method

Our interdisciplinary project addresses a gap concerning the history, distribution, and use of *BAME*. To explore the use of the term across different institutional, public, and community contexts, both over time and through more fine-grained analyses of collocation and co-occurrence, methods from corpus linguistics were employed. These methods involve the analysis of textual data using computer-aided methods to uncover large-scale patterns of usage. Before introducing the three corpora that form the basis of our analyses, it is essential to note that while corpus methods can facilitate a quicker and more replicable analysis compared to manual approaches (Collins, 2019), they are not without their disadvantages. First, there are issues concerning the representativeness of the underlying data. This is particularly the case in social media spaces, where only specific groups of users have access, post content, and engage with the platform. This has implications for the overall range of community participation captured during data collection. Second, while a corpus linguistic analysis can highlight patterns of usage, it cannot explain why these patterns exist. As such, additional interpretation is needed, usually via more qualitative analyses of smaller selections of data. In their comparison of different analytical methods of textual data, a similar point is made by Carter et al. (2021, p. 9), who note that 'by utilising a blended approach in our analysis, we were able to explore a much larger body of data and uncover more comprehensive patterns in usage.' Ultimately, corpus methods allow researchers to examine more data than is possible via manual methods, bolstered by qualitative analyses of selected examples.

In terms of the underlying data considered in this article, three purpose-built corpora were constructed by searching for the terms *BAME, B.A.M.E.*, *Black Asian and Minority Ethnic,* and *Black Asian Minority Ethnic* in the Hansard record, UK news articles, and Twitter (the composition of the three corpora is provided in Table 1) to understand how *BAME* is used in a range of outputs. These three contexts – parliamentary discourse, news discourse, and social media discourse – were selected as broadly representative of governmental communications, UK-based news coverage, and more grassroots (or community level) viewpoints, as well as mapping onto implicitly hierarchical institutional structures. For all three corpora, the searches finished in April 2023, with data collection finalised in May 2023. As mentioned, the data we capture also runs in tandem with changing UK Government guidance (Gov.uk, 2021) on the use of *BAME*.

The first sub-corpus (the *Hansard* corpus) comprises examples from UK parliamentary debates in the *Hansard* system, collected via the publicly accessible online interface (UK

Table 1. Overview of the three corpora.

Corpus	Number of texts	Number of words
Hansard	991	975,101
News	7,166	6,600,982
Twitter	131,133	3,974,361

Parliament, 2023), which was used to select examples and collate the dates of all query matches, since January 2000 (the first instance occurred after this).

The second sub-corpus (the *News* corpus) contains UK newspaper articles from *Nexis* (LexisNexis), a website which provides institutional access to search and download examples from a large archive of news articles. The search was limited to UK newspaper publications since January 2000, with matching articles downloaded, converted into text format, and processed to remove meta-data (e.g. headline, author) from the text and record the date of publication in the filename.

The final sub-corpus (the *Twitter* corpus) is a collection of social media posts downloaded from Twitter[7] using the Academic API (X Corp., 2023), allowing us to consider the evaluative stance that exists towards *BAME* in social media data (our third research question). Following initial data collection, tweets were further restricted to UK-based accounts using the location provided by the account's owner, as parsed by the Nominatim country lookup feature in the geopy Python library (geopy contributors, 2018). While this process may exclude relevant tweets where no location can be determined, it nevertheless facilitates our study's UK focus.

The first part of our analysis sets out a longitudinal examination of each corpus, focusing specifically on the rise and fall of *BAME* over the course of two decades, thus addressing our first research question which considers the term's use over time. With regards to our second research question, we then present the results of a data-driven analysis of the most frequent collocates across each corpus, drawing on corpus linguistic methods to explore the contexts of usage and reveal the linguistic constructions and functions in which *BAME* is applied. This discussion is augmented by considering qualitative examples[8] extracted from the data, to offer a more contextualised perspective. The final section of the analysis concentrates on the evaluation of the term *BAME* in the *Twitter* corpus, highlighting the semantic prosodies or mental associations – positive or negative – that collective terms of reference produce in the people who read or hear them, answering our third research question.

Trajectories of use and change over time

To address our first research question, we track the trajectories of collective terms of reference, noting that the data collected from Twitter only goes back as far as 2021. In doing so, we can identify general trends over time and how these trends might be influenced by real-world events.

First, the top sub-plot of Figure 1 shows the number of matches in the *Hansard* corpus containing *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic* or the abbreviation *BAME*. The full phrase first occurs in March 2004 with the first occurrence of *BAME* in July 2010. Both forms follow similar frequency patterns, such that the frequency of both increase gradually from their first occurrences until mid-2020. While the sudden increase in 2020 coincides with the *BLM* movement, by mid-2021 the frequency of both return to the previous level and continue to reduce month-by-month until the end of data collection in April 2023. The timing of this decline aligns with changes in UK Government guidance (Gov.uk, 2021), which discouraged the use of *BAME* following the *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report* published in March 2021. While this change is not immediately seen in UK Parliamentary

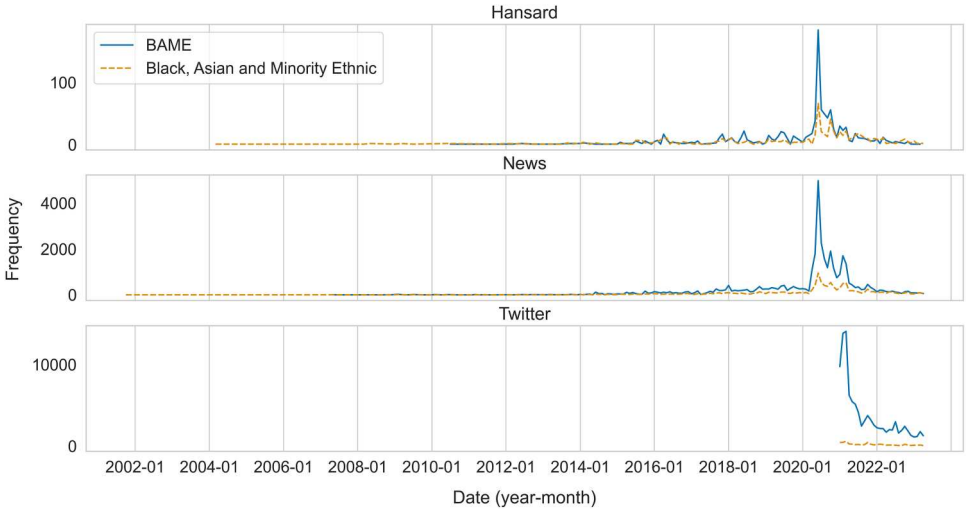

Figure 1. Number of results per month (2001–2023), including sub-plots for each corpus.

debates, the decline in frequency is noticeable in the most recent years of the Hansard data.

The first occurrences of *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic* and *BAME* are shown in Table 2. The expanded form is used when reporting statistics, which matches our understanding of the term as originating from data reporting contexts (see Background section). The first use of *BAME* is similar (occurring with the phrase *range of*), with a clear function as a categorisation tool to assist with organisational matters. This example of *BAME* occurs in a text where the expanded form precedes the use of the acronym, but with several sentences between them.

In the *News* corpus (Figure 1, middle sub-plot), the expanded form was first used in October 2001, whereas *BAME* was first used in May 2007. These uses are three years before those noted in the Hansard data, but the similarity is that the acronym version occurs approximately six years after the first occurrence of the full version in both corpora. The frequency of both forms remains low until 2014, after which a steady increase can be observed. The sudden rise in frequency in mid-2020 can be attributed to reporting of the *BLM* movement. The frequency in UK newspapers returns to a similar level of that before *BLM* in 2021 and then shows a gradual decline until April 2023. This fits with our work in that time period (Ryder et al., 2021) and general awareness of the term becoming problematic from 2021 onwards. These reductions in frequency

Table 2. First attestations of the terms in the *Hansard* corpus.

Term	Date	Frequency	Excerpt
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	March 2004	669	Forty-one per cent of London's children belong to **black, Asian and minority ethnic** groups and, between them, they speak 300 languages.
BAME	July 2010	991	My Cabinet Office colleagues are examining the range of **BAME** internships run by the Departments, and I expect to have discussions with them on the matter in due course.

Table 3. First attestations in the *News* corpus.

Term	Date	Frequency	Excerpt
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	October 2001	12,068	The conference, organised jointly by youth counsellors Off the Record, Shirley-based Oak Avenue Project, Croydon Health Authority, the Peoples' Housing Association, Mind and members of **black, Asian and minority ethnic** communities, took place at Croydon Clocktower in Katharine Street.
BAME	May 2007	37,010	Supported by the London Development Agency (LDA), PATH's focus is on addressing skills deficits and enhancing workforce diversity through training interventions aimed at black, Asian and minority ethnic (**BAME**) individuals. According to the 2001 census, **BAME** groups make up 7.9 per cent of the UK population and nearly a third of Londoners.

since 2021 in both UK parliamentary debates and newspapers also suggest that policy guidance, and broader social unease with the term, has influenced rates of use.

Table 3 shows the first attestations of *BAME* and *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic* in the *News* corpus. The first occurrence of *black, Asian and minority ethnic* pre-modifies *communities* and reports on a conference involving representatives of society-focussed organisations (concerning youth, health, housing, and mental health). Only *Asian* is capitalised, which suggests the term is not considered as related to an acronym at that time (October 2001). The first occurrence of *BAME* is from 2007 where the acronym is introduced in brackets following the expanding form; subsequently, *BAME* is used throughout the remainder of the article. The article also mentions a previous UK census from 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2023). *BAME* (and the expanded form) was not used as part of the census at the time, neither in the census form nor the release of key statistics. Thus, it has been applied retrospectively to reclassify the statistics from that census into *BAME groups*.

As the *Twitter* corpus starts from 2021, our data does not capture the first occurrence of the term on this platform. However, we observe very similar patterns in the *Twitter* corpus to those present in the *Hansard* and *News* corpora (Figure 1, bottom sub-plot). Firstly, *BAME* is much more frequent than the expanded term *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic*, with this difference being larger on *Twitter* than in our other sources, likely due to the character restrictions of the platform. Secondly, the decline in use of *BAME* on *Twitter* matches the period of decline observed in our other corpora. It seems, then, that a rejection of the term occurred simultaneously across the parliamentary, news, and social media spheres, without any one of the three areas leading the way.

Collocates of *BAME*

In this section we investigate our second research question through an exploration of the words occurring immediately to the left and right of *BAME* in our corpora. On the first-pass analysis, the top 20 words were retrieved from each corpus after, in line with general practices, grammatical words such as *the, and,* and *it* were removed and all words were converted to lowercase. To facilitate comparison between our corpora, the collocation frequencies are converted into percentages (out of the total frequency of *BAME* in each corpus) and presented in a dot plot. Figure 2 shows the collocates appearing immediately after *BAME* across the three corpora.

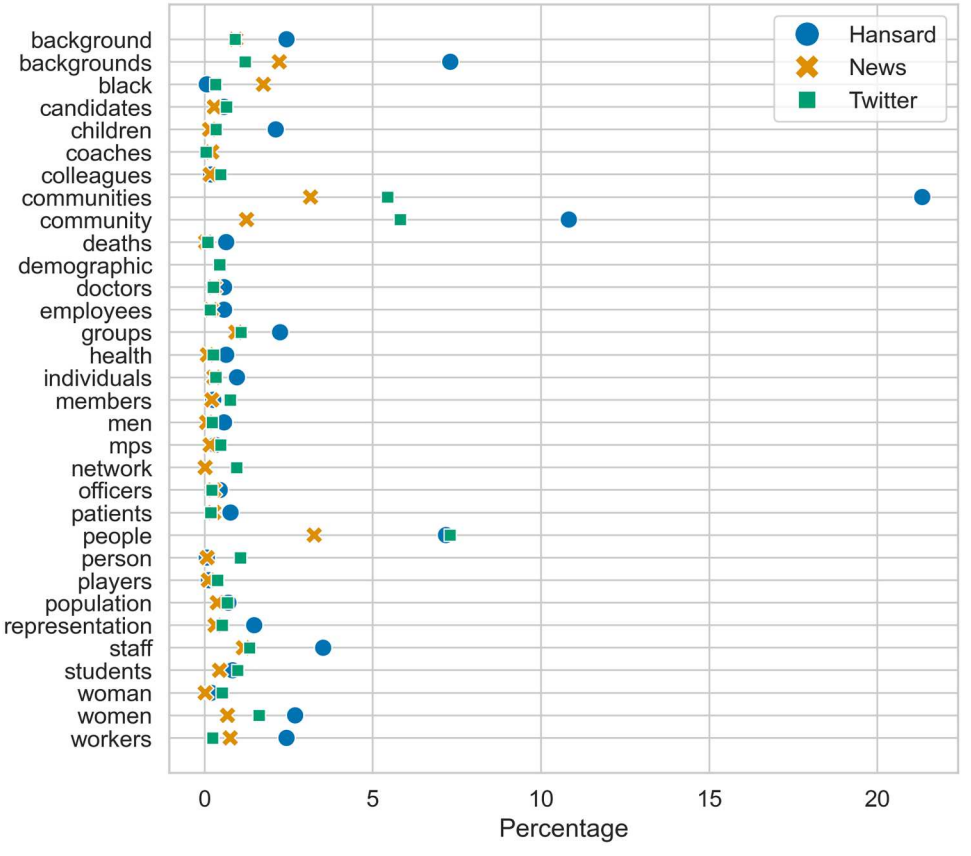

Figure 2. Most frequent collocates occurring immediately after *BAME*, ordered alphabetically.

As can be seen from the right side collocates (Figure 2), *BAME* is predominantly used as an adjective to modify (or describe) nouns (*BAME communities*, *BAME groups)*. The nouns being modified are mostly collective nouns denoting groups of individuals, including terms with limited specificity (*people, community*, *[from BAME] backgrounds*, *population*) and terms which denote genders and workplace roles (e.g. *staff*, *coaches*, *students*, *women*, *workers*, *players*, *officers*). The majority of these collocates are more frequent in *Hansard* than the other corpora, suggesting the adjectival use of *BAME* is particularly prominent in parliamentary discourse.

The left side collocates (Figure 3) reveal that *BAME* (and the nouns that follow it) can be further modified by words such as *young*, *female*, and *national*. In addition, *affect*, *increase*, *protect*, and *support* hint that required actions and issues are being commented on in all three sources. The collocate *ethnic* has such high frequency in the *News* corpus for the very practical reason that *BAME* often occurs in brackets following the expanded acronym when first mentioned. The collocates *lgbt* and *lgbtq* are most frequent in the *Twitter* corpus, which occur in contexts where *LQBT(Q)* pre-modifies *BAME* (referring to intersections of the two) or where the terms occur in lists of multiple minority groups. An exception to the adjectival use of *BAME* discussed above occurs where the term *BAME* itself is the focus, in which case it functions as a noun. This can be seen in the

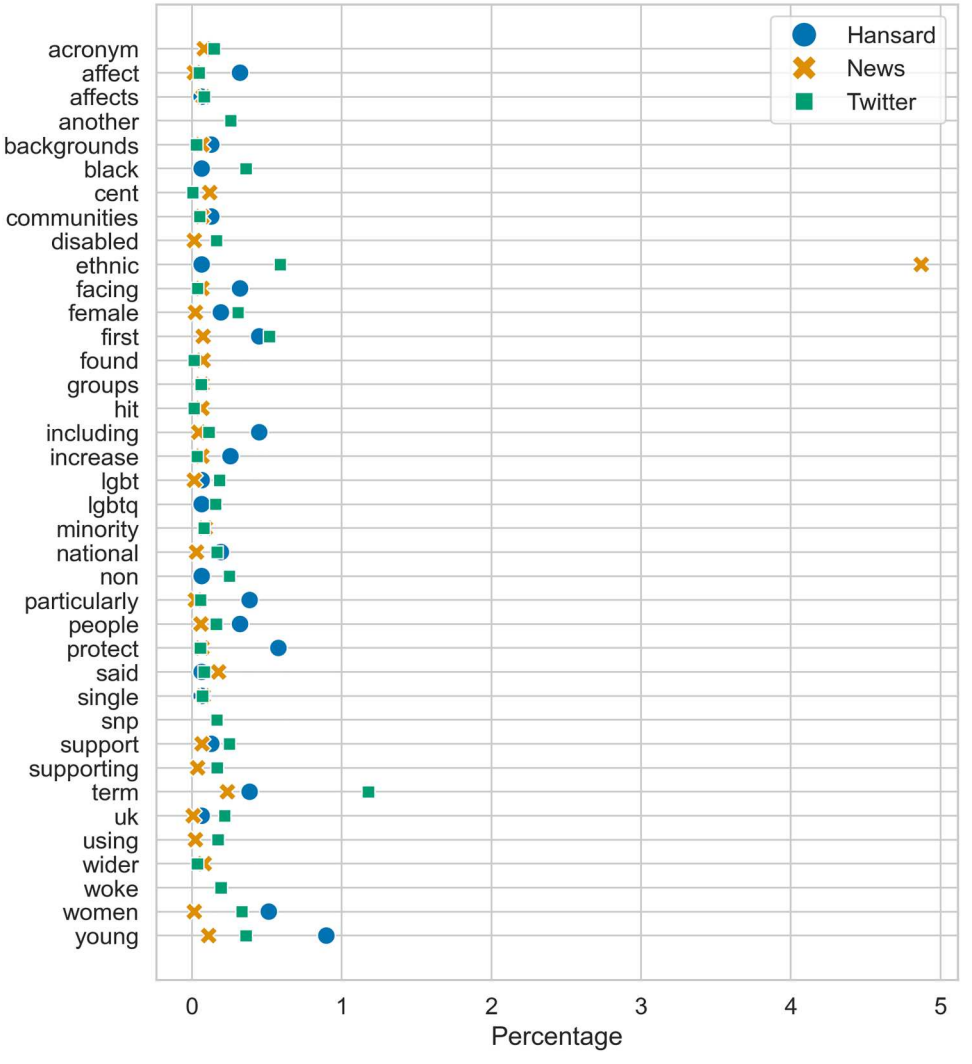

Figure 3. Most frequent collocates occurring immediately before *BAME*, ordered alphabetically.

left side collocates *acronym* and *term* (e.g. *the acronym BAME, the term BAME*), with *term* being the most frequent collocate of *BAME* in the *Twitter* corpus. We investigate this further in the next section, drawing on a range of qualitative examples.

BAME and *term* in social media data

In this section, we address our final research question and turn our attention to the discussion of *BAME* terminology on Twitter by investigating tweets that contain both *BAME* and *term* (Table 4). This work builds on Khunti et al. (2020, p. 1), who present the results of a poll (conducted on Twitter) where only 13% of 7,775 respondents selected *BAME* or *BME* as an appropriate term of reference (see also Khunti, 2020).

Rather than examine in detail every term, our discussion below focuses on selected examples based on frequency of use, expressed sentiment, and recognition of

Table 4. Words co-occurring most frequently with *BAME* and *term* in the *Twitter* corpus.

Frequency	Co-occurring Words
1982	people
1402	use
1268	black
1150	ethnic
888	white
868	using
850	minority
746	used
634	asian
628	just
546	uk
534	groups
468	think
462	racism
448	racist
438	now
422	group
402	stop
398	race
372	communities
370	colour
364	same
364	hate
358	report
348	poc

difference/similarity. Nevertheless, the range of terms presented in Table 4 are useful in establishing important contextual knowledge regarding the broader discourses circulating in our Twitter corpus.

Starting with a summary of frequently co-occurring words, we find examples of the same items as presented in the collocational analysis, including *people*, *group(s)*, and *communities*, as well as terms which are part of the expanded acronym (*black*, *asian*, *minority*, *ethnic*). We also find instances of the terms *just*, *think*, and *now*, all of which tend to be highly frequent in most corpora with a broad range of uses across multiple contexts and generally indicate mental processes and existence in the world.

Over and above these terms, we find that words co-occurring with both *BAME* and *term* typically relate to use of the terminology, racism, reports/commissions, and the grouping of people. For instance, the term *use* (and derivational forms *using* and *used*) is the most frequently co-occurring verb, with the most frequent phrase in this context being *stop using the term* (66 instances, as in Examples 1 and 2).

(1) Researchers really need to stop using the term BAME. It just adds to the erasure of black voices and issues. It also comes across as lazy and sensationalist. For example, it's not BAME mothers who are 5x more likely to die … it's black women #ImNotBAME

(2) Where is the BLACK in those names you've listed? For the love of the gods of old and new STOP using the term BAME when you really mean Asian. We are not represented here!

Continuing to investigate the context of *used*, phrases like *should no longer be used* (25 instances) and *should not be used* (22 instances) reveal the publication of reports that

support this stance (Example 3), suggesting a broader desire to discontinue the term. The word *report* also appears in the context of *BAME*, with the *Race and Ethnic Disparities Report* (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021) gaining considerable attention. In most cases, reports which use *BAME* receive criticism, whereas reports which suggest stopping use of the term receive praise (Examples 4 and 5).

(3) The term BAME should not be used by public bodies and companies any more, according to a racial disparities commission
(4) The Report falls-down on its simplistic approach. Many have pointed-out there is no simple group of 'BAME' people. Likewise, there is no simple measure of how racism affects the various ethnic & cultural minorities included in that blanket term
(5) There's going to be a lot of arguments about this report on UK race and ethnic disparities but I think the one conclusion it had that we should all be on board with is that BAME is a stunningly useless term only serving to lump dozens of unrelated ethnic groups into one category.

Moreover, the frequent use of *hate* in this sub-corpus suggests the main sentiment towards the terminology is negative (Examples 6 and 7), with frequent phrases including *hate the term* (100 instances) and *hate that term* (20 instances).

(6) 'Maybe we occupy different spaces online and in real life' yes hun I'm a black woman my experiences and spaces will be largely different to yours! And this is why I HATE the term BAME.
(7) I hate the term 'BAME' so much. It basically means not White. No one else allowed to have an identity then? Problematic on so many levels.

Tweets containing the term *same* reveal issues of identity, including comments about people and experiences *not* being the same, with tweeters sometimes offering more specific terms by which they would wish to be identified (Examples 8 and 9).

(8) The blanket term BAME is problematic for reasons like this. We're not all the same, and in fact due to the caste system and inferiority complexes, many minorities are racist and look down on black people, to the point of aggression.
(9) Another reason BAME term needs to be abolished All 'Asians' are not the same & differences are significant Not Asian or South Asian. I'm British Hindu or British Indian

An alternative collective term, *PoC* (acronym of *People of Colour*), is also discussed, with sentiment towards it mixed and it being described either as being preferable to *BAME* or manifesting the same problems as *BAME* (Examples 10 and 11).

(10) I don't like BAME as term to describe us, partly because Black & Asians are not the global minority – white people are. I prefer POC, People of Colour, but I think some have a problem with that
(11) On another day, I'll tweet about POC. 'Person of colo(u)r'. A term I used to use but refuse to use now. On face-value it makes more sense than BAME but actually is the same thing

Other tweets suggest that the term BAME is racist and regressive, further cementing the negative views which circulate on Twitter (Examples 12–14).

(12) Remember guys, it's BIPOC not BAME. Still hearing and seeing alarming levels of usage on the racist term BAME. Let's be progressive and use the correct terms. We need some sort of fine system for this soon.
(13) 1) He's Asian. Why not just say that? BAME is an umbrella term for multiple groups. 2) It's a racist category that means 'anyone that isn't white'. It means exactly the same as 'coloured', which was rejected years ago
(14) You should know that the term BAME is not being used to generalise people of colour anymore. I have had positive reactions from activist groups and people of colour for speaking out against [White power], [White supremacy] and institutional racism.

To summarise this section, we suggest that our analysis provides further substance to the poll presented in Khunti et al. (2020), namely that people on Twitter view the term *BAME* as generally unhelpful, unconstructive, and harmful. Such stances are based on a belief that the term flattens the lived complexity of people's lives and perpetuates a form of institutional racism rooted in the uncritical conflation of identities. As such, our analysis here has connected a quantitative perspective of specific linguistic items together with qualitative insights concerning the use of *BAME*.

Discussion: a social explanation of the data

Bringing together the research questions underpinning this article, we connect *BAME's* trajectory to new forms of contemporary representational politics of racial identity that continue to be negotiated across institutional, public, and community contexts reflected in the three corpora. Our interpretive research presents three overarching and interlinked ideas.

First, we pinpoint the ascent and demise across all three corpora of a form of ethnic classification in the UK, using it as an example of the linguistic (de)construction of racialised language that signifies the (re)production of 'race'. Our analysis suggests that *BAME* occupies a complex space and we find that discourse can institutionalise racial identities that can also be contested. The first instances in Hansard and UK newspapers demonstrate that *BAME* is used in data reporting and organisational planning. In our *Twitter* corpus, the term is used to draw attention to issues of categorisation. While there are negative associations with (and sentiment towards) *BAME* in tweets concerning terminology, the acronym remains widely used in social media and persists in everyday discourse.

That said, since the public denunciation of the term (including by the Government), a gradual decline in the frequency of *BAME* can be observed in parliamentary debates, UK newspapers, and social media usage from mid-2021 onwards. Trends in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the term's function as an institutionalised adjective to modify nouns for groups (denoting workplace roles, staff, students for example), especially in parliamentary discourse. The policy-driven decline signifies a recoding of racial classification that motivates and enables institutions to offer a semblance of responsiveness. If racial classification is deployed as an administrative categorisation tool for organisational purposes, the

rupture of *BAME* might thus be interpreted as a broader challenge to forms of racialised governance as systems of power in which discourse is implicated.

Second, we offer a social explanation for the unsettling of *BAME*, particularly highlighting the significance of social media for new configurations of participation, connection, identification, and critique. *BAME* is a site of dissent within a broader politics of (mis)recognition, which is simultaneously rejected and claimed, or revised (for example, some tweets show a preference for 'Black', 'British Hindu' or sometimes 'People of Colour'). As discussed in the first part of the article, we can tie this to a new consciousness about the role of language, race, and privilege during (and just after) the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent BLM protests which witnessed prominent enactments within organisations now committing to change. This chimes with recent sociological analysis that has observed a heightened awareness, perhaps sensitivity, concerning which racial terms and categories to use (Mirza, 2022) within a broader politics of struggles for recognition and activism (Gill, 2024).

Our analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, reveals quiet forms of contestation, especially in public discourse and social media; a 'bottom-up', potentially more subtle, discomfort with *BAME* based on grounds of cultural reductionism and non-specificity and thus, we suggest, with the (discursive, classificatory) tactics of 'race' itself. As such, it also aligns with how race and racisms are differentially experienced, and in complex, moving, intersectional ways. For example, as Mirza (2022, p. 10) notes, new ethnic and racialised identities are shaped by evolving forms of marginalisation and resistance, including how racisms are 'increasingly being framed in terms of (still visible) faith-based difference'.

And third, we challenge the idea that dialogic relations between organisations and publics present a clear-cut story of power and governance, given *BAME's* utility, alignment, and endurance, even within those communities that continue to (re)claim and connect through it, including in grassroots contexts. Rather, it is a story of ambivalence, fundamentally unsettling the colonial dominance (Bhabha, 1994) that organisations, as racial structures (Parry et al., 2023), seek to maintain. Moving out to the broader social context of *BAME*, and its relevance for social identities, we argue – and demonstrate through our qualitative insights – that the term can be perceived as a race-making data practice that involves both 'hierarchical and lateral relations'. While *BAME* operates as an institutionalised, state-managed mechanism for racial coding, it also requires negotiation, co-operation and compliance that suggests a more nuanced, lateral arrangement with (racially minoritised) publics, even if leaving the edifices of power intact.

In his discussion of articulation and societies structured in dominance, Hall references Althusser's work (1976) that is 'always speaking of "articulation" as involving hierarchical as well as lateral relations' (Hall, 1980, p. 328). Considering the role of human agency in producing social relations through communication processes (Fuchs, 2019), in the case of *BAME* (racialised) publics reject, reproduce, and commune around the term. Similarly, we suggest that the emergence of the abbreviation form of the term itself is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that works to formalise and institutionalise the term, aligning with Rosa and Flores (2017, p. 622) point concerning how institutionalised hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy become interpolated processes of modern subject formation.

For Fuchs (2019, p. 9), 'communication is the process in which humans connect societal structures to their lived experiences and these lived experiences enter societal structures.'

Sobande and Basu's (2023) analysis of diasporic feminist practices in 'beyond *BAME*' contexts captures digital practices of 'refusal, retreat and reclamation' (p. 94). As the last part of our analysis demonstrates, social media affords space to publicly (re)articulate critiques of racialised representation, asserting human agency in a digitally networked world. This is made even more complex when multiple identities converge, as is the case with an increasingly multiracial, mixed-heritage demographic, ambiguity about who constitutes a 'visible minority' (Song, 2020), and the broader matrix of intersectionality that race is bound up in. Reflecting on Taylor's work on the politics of recognition (1994), social media can be seen as a critical site for dialogical relations.

Conclusion

The residues of *BAME* linger within organisational contexts because, by their admission, a 'replacement term' has yet to be found, but for which there is a yearning. As the Chief Marketing Officer of UK public broadcaster Channel 4 states, 'we need to keep talking and looking for more inclusive language which acknowledges our uniqueness and experiences as individuals' (Al-Qassab quoted in BBC, 2021). Hall (2017, p. 79) provokes us further, asking whether 'the whole horrendous experience of race in the modern world come[s] down to nothing more or less than a metaphor or a metonym of cultural difference?'

We suggest that, far from being separate to or a simple distraction from resistance struggles and racialisation, language plays a significant role in maintaining, unsettling, and subverting power relations, and agency exists in (language) systems. At the same time, reappraisals of *BAME*, such as those articulated in our social media data, where it is viewed as problematic and reductionist, capture the processes that can break taken-for-granted assumptions of ethnic difference, unsettling the very basis of 'race' constituted in organisational settings. However, rather than a synchronised unsettling of *BAME* representing genuine systemic change, linguistic adjustments can be seen as a tool to absorb public critique while maintaining the existing 'system of marked differentiations', leaving unchanged and unchallenged forms of 'racialised governance'.

The relevance of discourse in constructing racialised social identities is profound. We advocate for a critical approach to ethnic categorisation, against the idea that language and discourse are separate from processes of race-making in everyday life. On race as a discourse, Hall (1997, p. 3) suggests that classification 'is a way of maintaining the order of any system, and what is most disturbing is that anything that breaks the classification.' Bhabha (1994) argues that the reflexive (colonised, racialised) subject can speak back in the struggle for recognition, so that the 'colonizers too are transformed, while the colonized deploy borrowed forms to tell their own, distinct narratives which "unsettle" and "subvert" the cultural authority of the colonizers' (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 102–22). We suggest that *BAME,* and the racialised conditions of its making, are implicated in these dialogic relations of representational power that characterise the wider socio-political history of (terminological) racialised struggle that frame and form social identities. The relevance of our study, the first such analysis of this term, lies in its contribution to future research on how racialised fixity, cultivated through language-based ethnic categorisations, helps shape (racialised) outcomes, for example, with regard to resource allocation and forms of disparity.

Statement of social media use

In accordance with Taylor & Francis guidelines, this article uses anonymised social media data and follows established ethical standards for online research.

Notes

1. Given its decline in use, we recognise the irony in using the term *BAME* throughout this article.
2. We use the term 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' in inverted commas and as a working, analytical term. We also revert to 'Black and Asian' to refer to those of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent, though understand the limitations. We also use 'racially minoritised'.
3. This announcement came two years after a June 2020 petition to abandon the use of 'BAME' and refer to minorities as individual ethnicities was rejected by UK Parliament on the grounds that 'The Government is not responsible for determining how ethnic minorities are referred to' (from: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/326887).
4. Examples at the time of writing include 'BAME Education Network' and 'BAME Hub-UK'.
5. Previously, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter emerged after the acquittal of George Zimmerman following the shooting of Trayvon Martin (Lebron, 2017).
6. The report states 'The term 'BAME community' feels like a group that is held together by no more than what it is not' (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 8).
7. We note that Twitter is now called 'X', following Elon Musk's purchase of the company in 2023. For simplicity and ease of reference, however, we retain the platform's previous name.
8. Where examples are shown, they are anonymised in line with the expectations for online research (for a discussion see Kaye et al., 2021). All examples are included with no editorial changes to spelling, punctuation, or grammar.

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