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BLAME REORIENTATION IN DIGITAL MORAL JUDGEMENT: REDISTRIBUTING MORAL ATTENTION IN A VIRAL FACEBOOK CONTROVERSY

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ABSTRACT: Public responses to minor transgressions increasingly unfold in digital environments where both the initial act and its public circulation become open to collective judgement. Although research on online shaming and digital vigilantism has documented patterns of condemnation, less is known about how evaluative attention shifts between alleged wrongdoing and its exposure, and how these shifts shape the allocation of blame. This study examined how moral responsibility was negotiated in public responses to a widely circulated Facebook video involving a woman accused of attempting to steal a sachet of Milo. An initial corpus of 3,200 Facebook items was screened, yielding 2,200 substantive items for analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo Version 15, generated 40 open codes, 12 conceptual categories, and seven empirical themes. Moral judgement was not confined to the alleged minor theft but extended to the circumstances surrounding the woman, the decision to record and share the incident, and concerns about humiliation, exposure, proportionality, and digital ethics. Interpretations of hardship and vulnerability often softened judgements of the alleged offender, whereas recording and publicly sharing the incident were more readily treated as intentional actions warranting scrutiny. Compassion, discomfort, condemnation, and ethical concerns frequently coexisted in audience responses. These patterns informed the development of blame reorientation, describing how evaluative attention is redistributed across actors, actions, and circumstances within a contested digital event. The findings suggest that online moral judgement can move beyond an initial transgression as audiences reconsider who or what should bear responsibility.

Keywords: Attribution, Digital Vigilantism, Moral Judgement, Proportionality, Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2026, a short Facebook video showing a woman accused of attempting to steal a sachet of Milo circulated widely online, prompting thousands of comments ranging from condemnation and sympathy to questions about poverty and criticism of the decision to record and publicly share the incident (Odudeyemi, 2026). What emerges is not a single settled judgement; attention moves between what happened and how it was made visible. Moral psychology suggests that judgements of right and wrong often arise quickly, shaped by intuitive and emotional responses that are later explained rather than formed through deliberation (Haidt, 2001). Greene (2008) similarly shows that emotion plays a central role in moral judgement, particularly when information is incomplete or uncertain. Yet these responses are never detached from interpretation. How an action is understood already shapes how it is judged.

Attribution theory provides a useful framework for understanding how this interpretive process unfolds. Classic accounts distinguish between behaviour explained through circumstance and behaviour attributed to intention (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Weiner (1985) further shows that perceived controllability intensifies moral judgement, with actions seen as deliberate attracting stronger blame. These distinctions shape not only how responsibility is assigned but also the intensity of moral response. Moral evaluation rarely stabilises in a single direction. Empathy introduces an additional layer of interpretation by drawing attention to vulnerability and context (Hoffman, 2000). Individuals may recognise wrongdoing while simultaneously responding to perceived hardship, allowing different evaluative orientations to coexist. In such situations, judgement does not simply deepen or resolve; it can shift.

This study conceptualises this movement as blame reorientation**,** referring to the redistribution of evaluative attention across multiple actors within the same morally contested event. The aim is not to introduce a new psychological mechanism, but to show how established processes of attribution, emotion, and fairness can, under conditions of multi-actor visibility, redirect evaluative focus between actors within the same event. Rather than altering how a single actor is judged, the process involves a redistribution of moral attention between the individual committing the act and the individual who makes it publicly visible. It is therefore distinct from adjacent concepts such as moral reframing, which centres on the reinterpretation of a single target. Here, the presence of multiple actors creates a dual structure of evaluation in which attention can shift between them. Blame reorientation is understood as emerging from the interaction of asymmetrical attribution, coexisting emotional orientations, and perceived disproportionality.

Perceptions of fairness also shape how events are interpreted. Lerner (1980) argues that people tend to expect alignment between actions and outcomes. When that alignment appears disrupted, attention may shift toward consequences, especially where they seem excessive in relation to the original act. These dynamics take on a different form in digital environments. Online platforms extend the reach of moral evaluation, exposing local incidents to large and distant audiences. Events that might otherwise remain contained become visible, persistent, and repeatedly discussed. Online shaming research describes this as a form of informal social regulation, where users collectively respond to perceived wrongdoing (Ng, 2020). Yet visibility introduces another layer: the response itself becomes open to scrutiny.

Digital vigilantism research shows how platform features such as visibility and rapid circulation enable responses to spread quickly (Trottier, 2017; Trottier, 2020). Over time, these processes are reinforced by platform architectures that preserve and recirculate content (Kaufmann & Lomell, 2025; Trottier, 2025). Moral emotions, especially outrage, move through these networks and sustain participation (Brady et al., 2020). Still, responses are not uniform. Sympathy, criticism, and hesitation often appear together within the same discussion (Sharma, 2023). Existing research has established how moral judgements are formed, how attribution shapes responsibility, and how digital environments amplify collective reactions. However, less is known about what happens when both an alleged wrongdoing and the act of publicly exposing that wrongdoing become simultaneous objects of moral evaluation. Under such conditions, responsibility is no longer directed towards a single actor but may be negotiated across multiple individuals, actions, and contexts. Understanding this interpretive process requires examining moral evaluation as a dynamic rather than a fixed judgement. Accordingly, rather than addressing several discrete questions, the present study is organised around one overarching research question that captures this broader process: How is moral responsibility negotiated and redistributed when both an alleged wrongdoing and its public exposure become objects of judgement in digitally mediated environments?

By examining 2,200 Facebook comments responding to a viral incident involving an alleged minor theft and its public recording, the study investigates how online audiences interpret competing claims of responsibility and develops the concept of Blame Reorientation to explain how evaluative attention shifts across actors within digitally mediated moral judgement. This study conceptualises this movement as blame reorientation, referring to a redistribution of evaluative attention across actors within the same morally contested event. Rather than proposing a new psychological mechanism, the concept describes how established processes of attribution, moral emotion, and fairness can redirect attention when several actors and actions become visible. Here, attention may shift between the alleged theft, the circumstances surrounding it, and the decision to record, circulate, and publicly expose the incident.

Blame reorientation refers to the process through which moral attention expands from an initial transgression to a broader evaluation involving multiple sources of responsibility, contextual explanations, and competing ethical considerations. It differs from moral reframing, which concerns a change in the moral interpretation or representation of an existing issue. Blame reorientation instead involves a shift in where moral attention and responsibility are directed across the event, including the alleged act, the circumstances surrounding it, the actions of those who record or disseminate it, and the consequences of public exposure. Thus, moral reframing may occur within blame reorientation, but it does not capture the redistribution of evaluative attention across multiple actors, actions, and contextual factors identified in this study. In the present case, commenters could continue to regard the alleged theft as wrong while simultaneously questioning the circumstances surrounding it, the decision to record and circulate it, and the responsibilities of those involved in its dissemination

This distinction is central to the study because the comments did more than offer competing interpretations of the alleged theft. They also evaluated how the incident became publicly visible and the consequences of that exposure. Blame reorientation therefore captures a shift from evaluating the initial transgression alone to considering a wider moral field in which the alleged

offender, recorder or uploader, affected business, social circumstances, and digital audiences may all become relevant to judgements of responsibility

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent work shows that the scale and structure of online environments disrupt the balance between core moral responses such as compassion and punishment. Robertson et al. (2024) argue that exposure to large volumes of extreme moral content can generate compassion fatigue while intensifying punitive tendencies. Under these conditions, responses to wrongdoing are not simply amplified but recalibrated. The combination of scale and distance between actors and observers reshapes how responsibility is distributed and how strongly different targets are judged, creating conditions in which attention can move beyond the original transgression.

At the level of interaction, features of online communication further shape how judgements develop. Corkum and Shead (2025) show that reduced contextual cues and diminished cognitive empathy in digitally mediated environments are associated with increased moral disengagement and antisocial responses. These conditions alter how the evaluation is constructed. When empathy is unevenly distributed, judgements become more responsive to how actors are perceived than to the act alone, increasing the likelihood that evaluative focus shifts between actors.

Philosophical analyses of online shaming clarify how this shift becomes directed. Thomason (2023) argues that digital shaming practices foreground exposure and punishment at the expense of reflective engagement. In this context, making wrongdoing visible acquires moral significance in its own right. Evaluation therefore extends beyond the initial violation to include the practices through which it is publicised and judged, introducing a second layer of scrutiny in which the response itself becomes an object of evaluation.

Moral Judgement and Attribution

Moral judgements often form quickly, with reasoning emerging after the initial response. Haidt (2001) describes this as intuition preceding justification, while Greene (2008) shows that emotion and cognition jointly shape moral evaluation under uncertainty. This helps explain why strong judgements can arise even when information is limited. Attribution theory adds structure to this process by explaining how people infer causes of behaviour. Heider (1958) distinguishes between situational and dispositional explanations, later developed by Kelley (1967) and Weiner (1985). When behaviour is seen as constrained, blame tends to soften; when it is seen as intentional, blame intensifies. Attribution, therefore, shapes both direction and intensity of moral judgement.

Empathy complicates this picture. Hoffman (2000, 2001) shows that attention to vulnerability can shift how actions are interpreted. Wrongdoing may still be recognised, but it is filtered through perceived circumstance. Moral evaluation becomes layered rather than singular. Fairness expectations add another influence. Lerner (1980) argues that people expect some alignment between action and outcome. When that alignment is disrupted, attention may move from the act itself to what follows from it. This movement of evaluative attention provides an important

conceptual basis for understanding how blame may shift between actors rather than remain fixed on a single target.

From Local Sanctioning to Digital Exposure

Moral sanctioning was historically rooted in local communities. Braithwaite (1989) describes shaming as a bounded social mechanism tied to proximity and shared norms. Digital platforms have altered these conditions. Incidents now circulate widely, reaching audiences with no direct connection to the event. Digital vigilantism research shows how users publicly expose perceived wrongdoing outside formal institutions (Trottier, 2017). Over time, visibility and persistence allow these responses to accumulate and remain accessible (Trottier, 2025). As a result, evaluation is no longer directed only at the original act. It also extends to its circulation and to the responses it generates.

Moral Emotion and Digital Amplification

Moral emotion can shape how online audiences respond to contested events. Outrage may spread through networks and reinforce shared interpretations (Brady et al., 2020), while platform design may increase exposure to highly engaging content and perceived norm violations (Chuai et al., 2024; Park et al., 2026). Because Chuai et al. (2024) and Park et al. (2026) are arXiv preprints, they are treated here as emerging evidence rather than established peer-reviewed evidence. Emotional responses, however, are not necessarily uniform; sympathy and condemnation may coexist when audiences consider broader social explanations (Sharma, 2023). Online moral judgement may therefore involve competing emotional responses rather than a single, uniform collective reaction.

Platform Dynamics and Collective Evaluation

Platform architecture also shapes the conditions under which moral judgements develop. Visibility increases exposure, persistence sustains attention, and interaction can reinforce dominant interpretations. These features may produce cumulative effects that extend beyond individual users (Ahmed, 2025). When large numbers of users engage with a single incident, a pile-on effect can emerge as individual actions accumulate into a stronger collective response (Brady et al., 2020; Ng, 2020; Trottier, 2025). Ahmed (2025), which is published as a preprint, is used here as a recent contextual contribution rather than as definitive evidence. These dynamics may influence not only the intensity of responses but also which interpretations become more prominent. Shaming, harassment, and related behaviours often share underlying logics of norm enforcement (Chen et al., 2025), while social identification processes can shape alignment with dominant group interpretations.

Positioning the Present Study

Research has clearly shown how moral judgement forms, how attribution works, and how digital environments amplify reaction. What remains less clear is how evaluation shifts when attention moves between an initial act and the response it generates. In such cases, the object of judgement is not stable. It moves between actors and actions as interpretation develops. Accordingly, the

present study examines how evaluative attention shifts between actors during public moral deliberation in digitally mediated environments.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Analytical Approach

This study employed a qualitative social media analysis design to examine how online audiences interpreted and negotiated moral responsibility in response to a Facebook Reel depicting an alleged minor theft involving a woman accused of attempting to steal a sachet of Milo. Rather than eliciting researcher-generated accounts, the study examined naturally occurring public discourse to explore how moral judgements, ethical concerns, and responsibility attributions were expressed within a digital environment.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning in the items corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The analysis drew on attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985), moral judgement research, and scholarship on digital vigilantism and online shaming (Ng, 2020; Trottier, 2017). An inductive-to-abductive strategy was used, beginning with interpretations grounded in commenters' language and extending to a theoretical account of how responsibility was redistributed across actors, circumstances, and digital practices. This analysis informed the development of the higher-order conceptual framework of Blame Reorientation (see Figure 1).

Data Source and Construction of the Analytic Corpus

The study analysed publicly available Facebook content generated in response to a widely circulated Reel posted by Odudeyemi (2026), depicting a woman accused of attempting to steal a sachet of Milo. The audience material analysed was captured from the Reel, with the earliest recorded comment dated 22 February 2026 at 10:09:03. The complete item data were downloaded on 7 April 2026 at 19:12:10. At the time of data capture, the Reel displayed approximately 1.4 million views and 19,000 likes.

An initial corpus of 3,200 Facebook items was identified and screened to distinguish substantive audience discourse from non-discursive or non-interpretable activity. Items were retained when they contained an interpretable response to the incident, including substantive comments and replies, questions, personal narratives, advice or recommendations, humour, and evaluative or condemnatory expressions. Items consisting solely of emojis, reactions, tagging, GIFs, stickers or images, links without substantive text, unrelated or unintelligible material, and duplicate or substantively repetitive content were excluded.

Following screening, 2,200 items were retained as the analytic corpus. The retained corpus comprised 1,650 substantive comments, 420 substantive replies, 55 questions, 30 personal narratives, 25 instances of advice or recommendations, 10 interpretable humorous comments, and 10 interpretable expressions of condemnation. The remaining 1,000 items (31.3%) were excluded, comprising 250 emoji-only comments, 180 reaction-only entries, 150 non-substantive replies, 100 GIF-, sticker-, or image-only items, 50 @mentions or tagging-only entries, 45 links without

substantive accompanying text, 100 comments unrelated to the incident, 70 unintelligible or otherwise non-interpretable comments, and 55 duplicate or substantively repetitive comments. Thus, 68.8% (2,200/3,200) of the identified items constituted the final analytic corpus.

The unit of analysis was the individual substantive comment or relevant reply. Platform reactions, tagging, and other non-discursive forms of engagement were not treated as independent units because they did not, in themselves, provide interpretable accounts of how responsibility was understood or negotiated. Following screening, retained items were assigned unique identifiers (CC1 to CC2200) to facilitate analytic traceability. The analysis examined how the incident was interpreted and negotiated within the online discussion and did not attempt to establish the factual accuracy of the alleged event or determine objective responsibility for any person involved.

Data Preparation and Familiarisation

Following screening, the 2,200 retained items were cleaned, organised in an analytic database, and assigned unique identifiers (CC1-CC2200). Identifying information was removed during data preparation, while the identifiers were retained solely to maintain analytic traceability. The corpus was read repeatedly to support familiarisation with recurring meanings, emotional expressions, attributional patterns, and ethical concerns. Analytic attention focused on interpretations of the alleged theft, socioeconomic circumstances, compassion and condemnation, digital exposure, and reflections on social conditions and online practices. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the process to record emerging interpretations, relationships among codes, and points requiring further examination.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded iteratively through initial coding, category development, theme construction, and theoretical integration. The comments were examined line by line, generating 40 initial codes that captured recurring expressions, arguments, and moral evaluations, including public humiliation, privacy violation, hunger, poverty, empathy, responsibility, offers of assistance, psychological vulnerability, and authenticity concerns. The codes were subsequently compared and organised into 12 conceptual categories: Digital Exposure, Digital Ethics, Humanitarian Compassion, Restorative Justice, Accountability, Business Protection, Economic Hardship, Structural Vulnerability, Practical Assistance, Psychological Interpretation, Content Authenticity, and Digital Attention Economy (Table 1).

The categories were then examined in relation to one another and refined into seven overarching themes: Privacy and Ethical Concerns; Compassion and Humanitarian Responses; Moral Judgement and Accountability; Economic Hardship as Explanation; Practical Support and Assistance; Psychological and Health Explanations; and Authenticity and Content Creation. The themes were not treated as mutually exclusive. Individual comments could contribute to more than one theme when they expressed multiple or intersecting interpretations of the incident. The themes were therefore understood as connected dimensions of audience reasoning through which responsibility, context, compassion, and ethical concerns were negotiated (Table 1).

The final stage involved examining relationships across the seven themes and identifying a broader interpretive pattern in which moral attention moved beyond the alleged act itself to encompass the woman involved, the affected business, socioeconomic circumstances, psychological explanations, the recording and circulation of the incident, and the responsibilities of online audiences. This higher-order pattern was conceptualised as Blame Reorientation. The concept was developed through the analysis rather than treated as a predetermined coding category.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

The analysis was interpretive and reflexive, and the researcher recognised that their position and theoretical interests shaped how the corpus was approached, how comments were coded, and how categories and themes were developed. The researcher approached the material as a social and behavioural researcher interested in moral judgement, responsibility, and digitally mediated interactions, while remaining conscious that this orientation could draw attention towards particular interpretations of the discussion. Reflexive memoing was therefore used throughout the analysis to record assumptions, emerging interpretations, points of uncertainty, and alternative readings of the comments. Particular care was taken not to treat the initial allegation as established fact or to privilege condemnation, compassion, or contextual explanation as inherently correct responses.

Analytical rigour was supported by an audit trail linking retained comments to initial codes, conceptual categories, and final themes. Comment identifiers provided a consistent means of tracing analytical claims to the underlying corpus without reproducing identifying information. During theme development, comments that challenged or complicated emerging interpretations were retained and considered alongside more readily fitting examples. These included strong condemnations of the woman, scepticism about the authenticity of the incident, and comments rejecting compassionate or contextual explanations. Such cases were used to refine theme boundaries and guard against reducing the discussion to a single pattern of audience response.

The movement from initial codes to final themes was iterative rather than linear. Codes were revisited as their relationships became clearer, categories were compared across the corpus, and candidate themes were refined against both supporting and contradictory material. The final interpretation emerged through repeated engagement with the comments and consideration of how the themes converged around changing attributions of responsibility. Blame Reorientation therefore represents an interpretive synthesis of the corpus rather than a category assumed in advance.

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, before the study was conducted (Research Committee Assigned Number: UIL/PSYREC/02/07/026/17). The study analysed publicly available Facebook content and did not involve recruitment, direct interaction with, or contact with commenters. No attempt was made to identify, contact, or obtain additional information about individuals who posted the comments.

Usernames and other identifying information were removed during data preparation. Each retained comment was assigned an analytical identifier (e.g., CC1603) solely for data management and audit purposes. Although the comments were publicly accessible, the analysis treated them as potentially sensitive expressions of personal and moral judgement rather than as unrestricted personal information. Quotations were therefore selected and presented with attention to privacy and traceability, while avoiding usernames and other details that could facilitate identification of individual accounts. The analysis focused on the content of publicly expressed discourse rather than the identities or personal characteristics of commenters.

Reporting Conceptual Framework

Findings are presented thematically around the seven final themes and their contribution to the Blame Reorientation Conceptual Framework (see Figure 1). Theme frequencies are reported descriptively to indicate relative prominence within the corpus rather than statistical prevalence. Because multiple coding was applied, individual comments could contribute to more than one theme, and aggregated percentages exceed 100%. This study does not seek to determine whether the alleged incident occurred or assign objective responsibility to any individual involved. Rather, it examines how digital publics construct, negotiate, and redistribute moral responsibility when responding to morally ambiguous events within networked communication environments (Table 3-4).

Data Availability Statement

All the underlying source materials and analytic records are retained by the corresponding author and are available upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy considerations.

RESULTS

The analysis of the 2,200-item corpus produced 40 open codes, 12 conceptual categories, and 7 empirical themes, which were integrated into the higher-order concept of blame reorientation (See Table 1). Because multiple coding was applied, individual comments could contribute to more than one theme. Privacy and Ethical Concerns was the most frequently coded theme, appearing in 1,550 comments (70.5%), followed by Compassion and Humanitarian Responses in 1,360 (61.8%) and Moral Judgement and Accountability in 760 (34.5%). Economic Hardship as Explanation occurred in 535 comments (24.3%), while Practical Support and Assistance, Psychological and Health Explanations, and Authenticity and Content Creation appeared in 172 (7.8%), 148 (6.7%), and 46 (2.1%), respectively (See Table 2).

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Table 1: Coding Overview and Analytical Progression of the Facebook Comment Corpus

Analytical stage	Output
Facebook comments analysed	2,200
Initial open codes	40
Conceptual categories developed	12
Final empirical themes	7
Higher-order conceptual process	Blame reorientation

Note: The analysis progressed from the screened comment corpus through open coding and category development to seven empirical themes and the higher-order concept of blame reorientation.

The distribution of the seven themes is presented in Table 2. The frequencies indicate the number of comments assigned to each theme and are descriptive rather than mutually exclusive because multiple coding was permitted.

Table 2: Distribution of the Seven Empirical Themes Identified from the Facebook Comment Corpus (N = 2,200 items)

S/N	Theme	n (coded comments)	% of comments	Summary description
1.	Privacy and Ethical Concerns	1,550	70.5	Concerns regarding recording, public exposure, privacy, dignity, and the ethics of digital dissemination.
2.	Compassion and Humanitarian Responses	1,360	61.8	Expressions of empathy, mercy, forgiveness, dignity, and concern for the woman's wellbeing.
3.	Moral Judgement and Accountability	760	34.5	Recognition that the alleged minor theft was wrong while maintaining expectations of accountability.
4.	Economic Hardship as Explanation	535	24.3	References to poverty, hunger, unemployment, and hardship as contextual explanations.
5.	Practical Support and Assistance	172	7.8	Calls for financial help, community support, counselling, and restorative alternatives.
6.	Psychological and Health Explanations	148	6.7	Interpretations involving distress, vulnerability, impaired judgement, and need for support.
7.	Authenticity and Content Creation	46	2.1	Concerns regarding staging, exaggeration, attention-seeking, and content production motives.

Note: Multiple coding was applied, so individual comments could contribute to more than one theme. Percentages were calculated using the full item-corpus (N = 2,200) as the denominator and therefore do not sum to 100%.

Privacy and Ethical Concerns

Privacy and Ethical Concerns was the most frequently coded theme. Comments questioned the decision to record and circulate the incident publicly. One commenter asked, *"Camera woman, you no fear God? You don catch her, collect your Milo, why record everything?"* (CC7). *Another stated, "Instead of posting her online, you should have spoken with her privately"* (CC25). A further comment expressed the concern more directly: *"Please don't use her as public entertainment. Collect your goods and let her go"* (CC32). These comments treated recording and public dissemination as matters requiring separate moral consideration from addressing the alleged theft.

Compassion and Humanitarian Responses

Compassion and Humanitarian Responses captured expressions of mercy, empathy, dignity, and concern for the woman's circumstances. One commenter wrote*, "Mercy is important. What she did was wrong, but justice should come with compassion"* (CC39). *Another stated, "Oh my! Please show mercy. We don't know what she is going through"* (CC51). These responses introduced concern for the woman's circumstances alongside recognition of the alleged wrongdoing.

Moral Judgement and Accountability

Moral Judgement and Accountability reflected continued recognition that the alleged theft was wrong, together with questions about how accountability should be exercised. One commenter stated, *"We don't know her struggles. Stealing food is wrong, but public disgrace is also excessive"* (CC57). *Another observed, "People deserve consequences, but they also deserve the chance to move forward"* (CC164). *A further comment stated, "Stealing should never be encouraged, yet public humiliation feels unnecessary"* (CC1603). The comments retained concern about the alleged act while questioning whether public exposure was a proportionate form of accountability.

Economic Hardship as Explanation

Economic Hardship as Explanation involved references to hunger, poverty, and difficult living conditions as possible explanations for the woman's behaviour. One commenter wrote, *"Because of ordinary Milo? Na hunger. They should leave the poor woman"* (CC3). Another observed, *"Hunger can push people into decisions they would never normally make"* (CC1602). These comments located the alleged behaviour within circumstances that commenters considered relevant to its interpretation.

Practical Support and Assistance

Practical Support and Assistance comprised offers or suggestions of direct help to the woman. One commenter stated, *"I want to pay for your Milo"* (CC2), *while another asked, "Can someone help me locate this woman?"* (CC24). Such responses moved beyond evaluating the alleged theft towards possible assistance.

Psychological and Health Explanations

Psychological and Health Explanations included comments concerning emotional vulnerability and the possible effects of public exposure. One commenter observed, *"Watching the crowd cheer while someone breaks down emotionally is difficult to defend"* (CC94). *Another stated, "Sometimes people need accountability; other times they need someone willing to show a little grace. This situation needed both"* (CC122). These comments extended consideration beyond the alleged act to the possible emotional consequences of the incident and its public circulation.

Authenticity and Content Creation

Authenticity and Content Creation was the least frequently coded theme. Comments questioned whether the recording and circulation of the incident were motivated solely by accountability or also by attention and content production. One commenter asked, *"Is this content creation or a real situation?"* (CC30). *Another remarked, "una dey overdo things because of likes"* (CC93). These responses extended scrutiny to the motives surrounding the production and circulation of the content.

Integration of the themes

Across the seven themes, moral evaluation extended beyond the alleged theft to the woman's circumstances, the decision to record and disseminate the incident, and the possible consequences of public exposure. Some comments maintained that the alleged act was wrong while questioning how it was made public. Others introduced hardship, compassion, practical assistance, emotional vulnerability, or concerns about content creation. The pattern was therefore not a simple transfer of blame from the alleged offender to another individual. Rather, moral attention was distributed across the alleged act, its circumstances, the recording and dissemination of the incident, and the consequences attributed to those practices. This pattern formed the basis for the higher-order conceptualisation of blame reorientation.

Table 3: Attributional Asymmetry in Moral Evaluation

Analytical dimension	Alleged minor theft	Recording and uploading
Attribution	Hunger, hardship, desperation, and contextual vulnerability	Deliberate decision subject to ethical scrutiny
Responsibility	Considered in relation to individual behaviour and surrounding circumstances	Responsibility extended to the recorder and others who disseminated the content
Agency	Behaviour often interpreted in relation to circumstances	Recording and dissemination generally treated as deliberate actions
Moral evaluation	Wrong but potentially understandable	Frequently questioned as excessive or disproportionate
Dominant blame orientation	Moderated through contextual explanations	Intensified through ethical criticism

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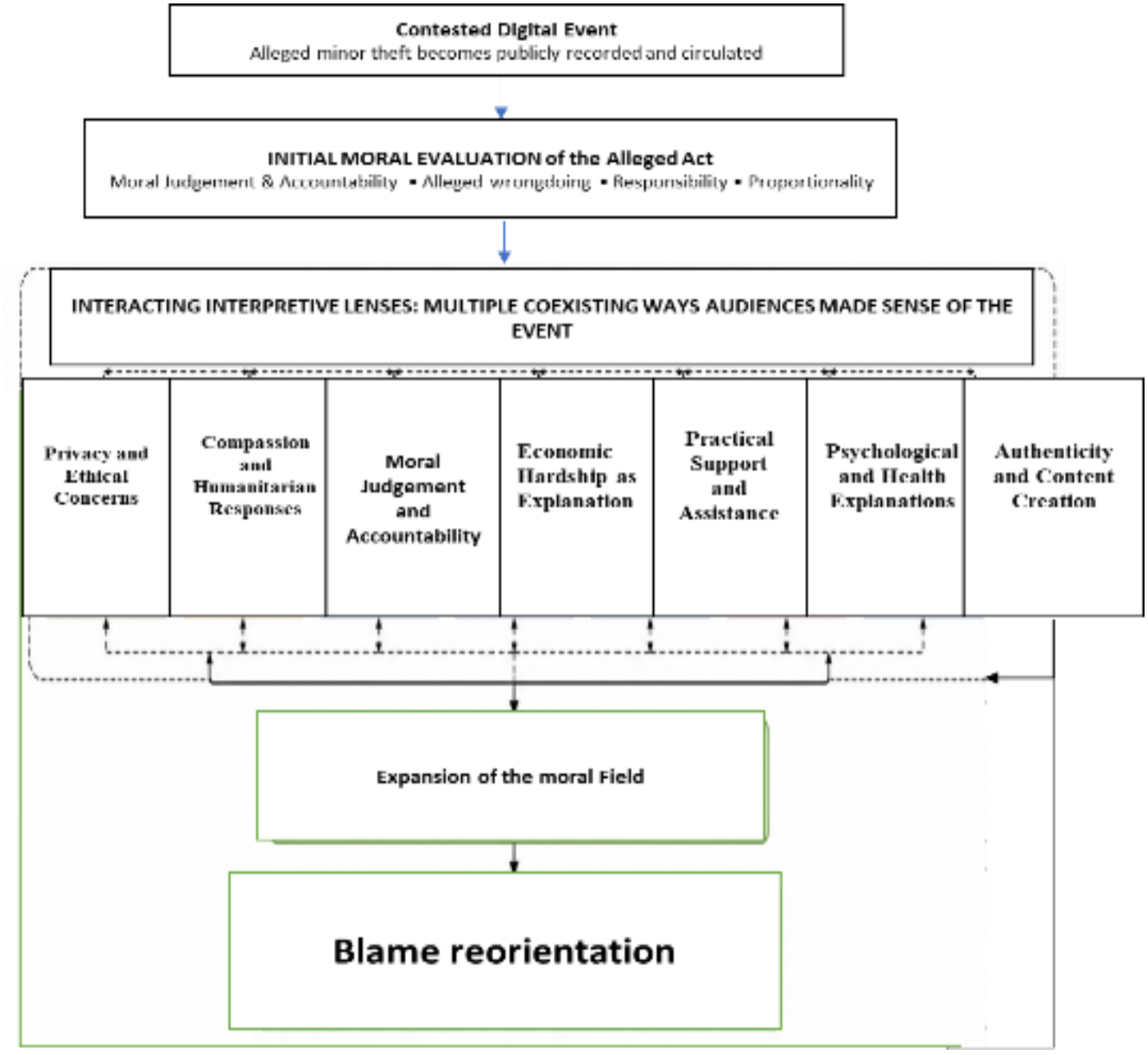
Table 4: Integrated Pattern of Blame Reorientation

Analytical movement	Interpretive consequence
Contextualisation through hardship and vulnerability	Reduced exclusive blame directed towards the alleged offender
Compassion alongside accountability	Moderated condemnation without removing responsibility
Ethical scrutiny of recording and public exposure	Extended moral attention to the recorder and uploader
Practical and psychological responses	Shifted attention towards support, vulnerability, and repair
Scrutiny of content motives and digital practices	Extended moral evaluation beyond the immediate incident
Integration across themes	Blame reorientation: redistribution of moral attention across actors, circumstances, and digital practices

Table 4 indicates that blame reorientation involved a broadening of moral attention rather than a simple transfer of blame from the alleged offender to another actor. Contextual explanations and expressions of compassion moderated condemnation, while ethical scrutiny of recording and public exposure extended responsibility to those involved in producing and disseminating the content. Practical and psychological responses shifted attention towards support and vulnerability, while concerns about content motives extended moral evaluation to digital practices. As illustrated in Figure 1, these patterns converged around a broader distribution of moral attention across actors, circumstances, and actions within the contested event.

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Figure 1: Blame Reorientation in Digital Moral Judgement: An Integrated Conceptual Framework



Note: The framework represents an interpretive synthesis of the seven empirical themes. The connecting lines indicate conceptual relationships rather than a fixed or sequential process. Individual comments could contain multiple interpretive positions.

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DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Digital Ethics and the Redistribution of Moral Attention

A central finding was the strong attention given to recording and public dissemination. Privacy and Ethical Concerns was the most frequently coded theme, indicating that commenters treated digital exposure as a moral issue distinct from the alleged theft. Although the alleged act remained subject to condemnation, attention also shifted to whether recording, uploading, and circulating the incident constituted a proportionate response. This finding extends research on online shaming, digital vigilantism, and networked moral judgement, which shows how digital platforms increase the visibility, persistence, and reach of moral controversies (Ng, 2020; Trottier, 2017, 2025). In the present corpus, increased visibility also became an object of scrutiny. Commenters distinguished between addressing alleged wrongdoing and making an individual's circumstances publicly visible, treating recording and dissemination as actions requiring moral justification rather than neutral extensions of efforts to address the alleged theft.

This interpretation is consistent with Lerner's (1980) theory of justice and deservingness, particularly concerns about whether outcomes and responses are proportionate. Questions about public humiliation, dignity, and appropriate responses extended evaluation beyond the initial allegation to how the incident was handled. This also complements research on digital vigilantism, in which public condemnation can generate disputes about fairness and legitimacy (Trottier, 2017; Brady et al., 2020). Although less frequent, concerns about authenticity and content creation extended this scrutiny to possible motives for recording and circulation, including attention and engagement.

Cultural Narratives, Humour, and Everyday Moral Reasoning

Religious references and humour did not constitute independent final themes but appeared within comments addressing compassion, accountability, exposure, and social conditions. Appeals to mercy, forgiveness, prayer, and divine judgement provided culturally familiar ways of expressing moral concern while maintaining that wrongdoing should not simply be disregarded. Humour, sarcasm, irony, and colloquial expressions similarly enabled commenters to criticise public exposure, question motives, and comment on wider social conditions. These forms of expression show that moral evaluation was communicated through everyday cultural language as well as explicit ethical argument.

Blame Reorientation as an Emergent Concept

The findings indicate that moral evaluation extended beyond the alleged theft to encompass the woman's circumstances, the decision to record and circulate the incident, possible motives for exposure, and the consequences attributed to public dissemination. Attribution theory helps explain how these judgements were shaped by perceptions of causality, intentionality, controllability, and circumstance (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985). In this corpus, however, attributional processes operated across several elements of the same event rather than remaining focused exclusively on the alleged offender.

The pattern was not a simple transfer of blame. Comments could continue to regard the alleged theft as wrong while interpreting it through hardship or vulnerability, questioning the manner of public exposure, or considering whether assistance would be more appropriate than punishment. Blame reorientation therefore captures a broader redistribution of evaluative attention across the alleged act, its circumstances, the practices through which it was made visible, and their attributed consequences. These orientations were neither independent nor sequential. Individual comments could combine recognition of wrongdoing with compassion, contextual explanation, criticism of public exposure, or support for a restorative response. The seven themes therefore represent connected dimensions of audience reasoning rather than stages through which every commenter progressed. The higher-order concept emerged from the convergence of these interpretive patterns across the corpus.

The findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that blame reorientation is a universal feature of online moral judgement. Its expression in this corpus may have been shaped by the nature of the alleged offence, interpretations of socioeconomic hardship, and the affordances of Facebook. Different controversies, offences, cultural settings, or platforms may produce different patterns of responsibility attribution. Future research should therefore examine the conditions under which moral attention broadens beyond an initial transgression and when it remains concentrated on the original actor.

Theoretical Implications

The findings make three related theoretical contributions. First, they extend attribution theory by showing that responsibility judgements within a digitally mediated controversy may encompass several attributional targets within the same event, including the alleged act, its circumstances, the practices through which it is exposed, and their attributed consequences. Second, they qualify accounts of digital morality that emphasise amplification, condemnation, and norm enforcement by showing that public visibility can also make recording, dissemination, and public exposure available for moral scrutiny. Third, they indicate that online moral judgement concerns not only who is responsible but also what constitutes an appropriate response: appeals for dignity, assistance, repair, and proportionality show that audiences may negotiate between punitive and restorative orientations while retaining recognition that the alleged wrongdoing was problematic.

These contributions position blame reorientation as a conceptual account of how the scope of moral evaluation can expand within a digitally mediated controversy. The concept does not imply that the initial actor is absolved of responsibility; rather, it captures how responsibility can become distributed across the alleged act, its circumstances, the practices through which it is exposed, and their attributed consequences.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study examined comments associated with a single Facebook incident, so the findings should not be generalised to online moral judgement more broadly. The nature of the alleged offence, the socioeconomic meanings attached to it, and Facebook's platform affordances may have influenced the observed pattern. Although the corpus provides substantial evidence of expressed public

discourse, it does not capture the views of people who did not comment. The analysis concerned expressed moral reasoning rather than private beliefs or offline behaviour. It examined public interpretations of a circulated video and did not establish whether the alleged event occurred or determine objective responsibility for those involved. The findings therefore concern how responsibility was interpreted and negotiated within the online discourse.

Future studies could examine similar controversies across platforms, cultural settings, and types of alleged wrongdoing. Comparative research may clarify when audiences contextualise alleged wrongdoing, support restorative responses, redirect moral scrutiny towards digital practices, or maintain concentrated condemnation.

Conclusion

Analysis of 2,200 retained Facebook items showed that moral judgement extended beyond the alleged theft to encompass the woman's circumstances, the treatment of the alleged wrongdoing, the recording and dissemination of the incident, and the consequences attributed to public exposure. Condemnation and contextual understanding could therefore coexist within the same online discussion rather than function as mutually exclusive responses. For practice, the findings highlight that responses to publicly exposed wrongdoing may themselves generate ethical concerns when recording, dissemination, and humiliation become part of the controversy. Future research should establish whether similar patterns occur across other platforms, cultural settings, and forms of alleged wrongdoing.

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