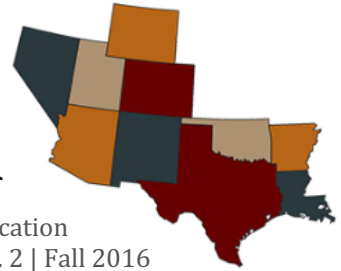


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Citizen Framing of Ferguson in 2015: Visual Representations on Twitter and Facebook

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Abstract

Using a critical race lens and framing theory, this exploratory study of visual representations on Twitter and Facebook explores the cultural narratives citizens used in their framing of the Ferguson riots in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death in 2014. Findings indicate citizens posted photographs, texts, and videos to characterize the incident both positively and negatively using various frames and cultural narratives.

Introduction

In spite of pleas from elected officials and the mobilization of National Guard troops, protestors took to the streets of cities across the United States in disapproval of Prosecutor Robert McCulloch's announcement on November 24, 2014, that the St. Louis County grand jury had voted not to indict White police officer Darren Wilson who fatally shot unarmed Black youth, Michael Brown (C-SPAN, 2014). McCulloch noted (2014):

After a full and impartial examination of all the evidence involved and decided that... after their exhaustive review, the grand jury deliberated and made their final decision. They determined that no probable cause exists to file any charges against Officer Wilson and returned a no true on each of the five indictments. The physical and scientific evidence examined by the grand jury combined with a witness statement supported and substantiated by the physical evidence held the accurate and tragic story of what happened.

Officer Wilson faced charges ranging from first-degree murder to involuntary manslaughter for his role in the shooting more than three months earlier. The event played out not only in traditional media outlets, but social media was ablaze with news of the shooting. #Ferguson was tweeted more than 18,136,000 times in the aftermath of a fatal shooting of the young African American man by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., garnering it the position of the most tweeted hashtag of 2014 ("#JeSuisCharlie tweeted more than five million times," 2015). Lehrman (2014) provides this description of the days following Brown's murder (p. 35):

Twitter was afire with the #Ferguson hashtag and #TheyGunnedMeDown commentary on media portrayals of black victims. To many Twitter users it seemed a repeat of media inattention in the wake of the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, also black, unarmed and a teen, in Florida by a neighborhood vigilante who has been identified as both white and Hispanic. In both cases, the black American community at the heart of the story turned to social media to call attention to the incident and the issues they felt needed airing.

Illustrating the popularity of the case, according to figures from Topsy, a Twitter analytics service, the #Ferguson hashtag was tweeted almost 8 million times in October. Other popular hashtags were (#Black People Matter) and (#Ferguson October), (#HandsUpDontShoot) and (#IfTheyGunnedMeDown) (CBS/AP & Am, 2014).

Issues concerning social media content published on websites such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest often raise questions on what individuals should publish about ongoing events. Previous studies on the protests and social media have looked at websites and social media platforms such as

Facebook and Twitter (e.g., Al-Rawi, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Miladi, 2011; Penney & Dadas, 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Thorson et al., 2013). Such articles often focus on causes in other countries such as election protests, The Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. However, absent from the literature are studies that analyze the latest user-generated content platforms and how they relate to demonstrations, particularly from a critical race lens.

This study builds on the literature with a content analysis of user-generated content that appeared following Brown's murder. Specifically, this analyses looks at Twitter and Facebook posts to assess the content people posted and how it differed across platforms. We used framing theory to explore the cultural narratives citizens used in their framing of the Ferguson riots in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death.

Literature Review

Paul Lester rightly observes how "Culture is a culmination of learned, mutually accepted rules that define communication for a group" (Lester, 2005, p. 102-3). Many of the images and other concepts that the viewer is primed to understand are learned through interaction with social groups. It is where concepts for social norms and social identity are formed through media use and the group's culture (Klein, Shepherd, & Platt, 2009; Macrae, Milne & Bodenhausen, 1994). This highlights the importance of viewer "visual literacy" (Smith, Moriarty, Barbatsis & Kenney, 2011; Kenney, 2009; Fahmy, Bock & Wanta, 2014; Finn, 2012).

Clifford Geertz (1973), often dubbed the father of interpretive (symbolic) anthropology describes culture as a complex system of symbols and meaning that need to be interpreted from within the culture. He explores the complexities of culture in his quote:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (p 5).

Visual literacy enables the observer to get at the essence of culture, make critical and informed analysis of the images they consume. Lester posits the benefits of analytical approaches noting how they are, "...time consuming, (but) valuable because they help you notice the smallest details that make up an image, which often leads to greater, universal truths" (2005, p. 129). Through these generalized truths this study offers a useful analysis of the images and ideas of social media users as they wrestle with the realities of Ferguson.

Social media networks (SNS) or user-generated content sites have created an avenue by which the public can post messages reaching large audiences with both "the minutiae of their day-to-day lives" (Curnutt, 2012). Social media tools include interactive social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as blogs, podcasts, message boards, online videos and picture albums, and mobile telephone alerts (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Another way of thinking about social media is to recognize that they are based on consumer-generated content (Owyang & Toll, 2007).

Schwartzmann, Ross and Berube (2011), term "multi-directional communication" as the ability of a "target audience" to "respond" to crisis communication through digital channels. According to the authors, new media present opportunities for the formation of like-minded communities that offer support and reinforcement to one another through information empowerment (Roundtree, Dorsten & Reif, 2011). Although the focus of this study is the impact of new and social media on crisis communication, it is a relevant discussion to examine how the formation of digital communities, utilizing photos on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook influence communication and organization among online community members, and in the case of this study, how these online communities influence 'real-time' action as in the many demonstrations surrounding the Ferguson shooting.

In another application, Clawson and Trice (2000) conducted a study about the impact of visual images on public attitudes about poverty. In this study, the authors cite that visual frames "impact public attitudes towards affirmative action" and that pictures "provide texture, drama, and detail" (p. 55). Social Media is transforming the role of journalists and the way they go about "doing their jobs." Other scholars such as Howard and Parks (2012) have developed a working definition for the phenomenon presenting that social media:

Consists of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal

messages, news, ideas, that becomes cultural products; and (c) the people, organizations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content (p. 359).

This description of social media will serve as our working definition for this paper. Defining social media becomes important as the social role of transmitting photographs and texts between networks of friends has evolved so that journalists and non-journalists alike are consuming more and more of their information from their mobile devices. News content is one of the fastest growing mediums consumed (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Palilonis (2012), a researcher on social media and the role of emerging multimedia journalist notes, "The Internet has accelerated the circulation of ideas, facilitated vast social networks, and altered economics of media by enabling the distribution of free content (George-Palilonis, 2012, p. 7). Additionally, "social media plays an increasing significant role in the way news and information is distributed" (p. 9). This change is blurring the lines of who is a journalist, what content is newsworthy to be disseminated, and what is the "appropriate" context or frame in which to understand the information being transmitted.

van der Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) wrestled with similar questions in their research that examines the journalistic expectations of citizens in the Netherlands. Citing the seminal research of Johnston, et al (1972), Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) argue there is a shift in the role of the journalist from the traditional "disseminator" of content to a "so-called interpretive role" (Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014, p. 435).

While not explicitly presented, Wurff and Schoenbach (2014) suggest the shift in the traditional journalists role has brought about more nimble journalists that is able to "get factual information as quickly as possible to as large an audience as possible" (p. 435). Traditional journalists and news consumers must remember the depth of the information being present on social media sites is constantly evolving, sometime minute-by-minute. This changing paradigm offers credence to Brad King's perspective of trained and non-trained journalists. (George-Palilonis, 2012, p. 9):

Citizen journalists, have taken to publishing on the web as well, many times using traditional reporting as a jumping off point for publics, to discuss their stories and many cases, defend their points of view. This entire engagement, from private network to public conversation, creates a real-time feedback loop for journalists, one that couldn't exist before the Internet and emerging world of social media. (George-Palilonis, 2012, p. 9)

To this point, the authors have shown how social media has influenced the way and role that journalists go about doing their jobs. What has not been explored is the depth in which social media allows non-credentialed journalists the ability to contribute and publish content. Gordon (2014) and Roller (2014), while from differing content providers, offer more advocate positions to the plight of African Americans their perspectives.

Examining the relationships between social media and political change, Howard & Parks (2012) offer another perspective by positing that, "social media are generally thought to be democratizing and good for democratic institutions" (p. 361). However, they also suggest, the use of social media, "paint(s) a more complicated picture" (p. 361) in different cultural contexts.

User-generated content

Online content has become a new type of social experience. People share links, articles, and videos on their Facebook walls or Twitter feeds as a form of cultural currency. A "rapidly growing number" of users are "personalizing and redistributing content" (Thurman, 2011). Social media networks or user-generated content sites have created an avenue by which the public can post messages reaching large audiences (Curnutt, 2012). Some equate this use of user-generated content as a form of citizen or participatory journalism (Goode, 2009). The definition of "citizen journalism includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events" (Goode, 2009).

Social media users take part in an ongoing process of evaluating what they think is salient but also what they think will be interesting, entertaining, or useful to other members of the social media sphere (Singer, 2013, p.58). Each platform is different and has its own benefits. For instance, Twitter allows users to share posts that are up to 140 characters long (Hutchins, 2011). Conversely, Facebook users can create and customize their own profiles with photos, videos, and information about themselves. Friends can browse the

profiles of other friends and write messages on their pages (PC.net, 2014). Facebook notes its mission is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2014).

User-generated content and activism

More recently, scholarly articles have turned to how citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes. Studies of this nature have become important as young people interact with digital social networks more than ever. Johnson, Tudor and Nuseibeh (2013) list the following five properties that make Twitter an ideal platform to express political protest: 1) it is quick, providing real-time information in 140 characters or less, 2) free, 3) personal, 4) highly mobile and resistant to government control and 5) it can be anonymous.

Early on, Taylor, Kent and White (2001) examined the mediated communication of activist organizations to understand how these groups use their Web sites to build relationships with publics. A study of 100 posts suggested that while most activist organizations meet the technical and design aspects required for dialogic relationship building on the Web, they are not yet fully engaging their publics in two-way communication. More recently, Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth, and García-Albacete (2015) concluded that although individuals used Twitter significantly for political discussion and to communicate protest information, calls for participation were not predominant. In fact, according to study findings, only a small percentage of tweets in their sample focused on protest organizations and coordination issues. Conversely, Cabalin (2014) considered the relationship between new social media and youth political actions during the 2011 Chilean student movement. The content and textual analysis of Facebook’s page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) in 2011 revealed the group used Facebook mainly as a call for protest actions and to highlight the achievements of the movement. However, the scholar also noted that most of the content published on this Facebook page was produced by traditional media, showing that conventional communication strategies of social movements are interrelated with new innovative practices. Similarly, Poell (2014) in their study of 2010 Toronto G-20 summit, concluded the use of social media brings about an acceleration of activist communication, and greatly enhances its visual character.

The Arab Spring & Occupy Wall Street

In an early study of the Arab Spring, Miladi (2011) analyzed the role of new mass media in sustaining the momentum of the Arab revolution by broadcasting uncensored developments on the Internet. The author argues that the popularity of political protests across the Middle East was marked by the development of satellite technology and growth of television channels such as Al-Jazeera, BBC Arabic, France 24 and Al-Hiwar. In a later study, Al-Rawi (2014) traced the influence of the Arab Spring on Iraq as activists staged fervent protests against the corruption, sectarianism, and favoritism of Nouri Maliki’s government. The researcher looked at the use of Facebook and YouTube, which bypassed the government’s attempt to limit the coverage of these protests. The study indicated that Iraqi men between the ages of 25 and 30 were the most active bloggers, while those between the ages of 20 and 24 were the most active commentators during the protests. Iraqis living in the United States and Canada played an important role by posting YouTube clips and comments. A gender disparity was evident; Iraqi men posted more video clips and comments than women.

Harlow (2013) also analyzed online social media’s importance in the Arab Spring. The author conducted a preliminary exploration of the spread of narratives via new media technologies via a textual analysis of Facebook comments and traditional news media stories during the 2011 Egyptian uprisings. Harlow’s (2013) exploration of “memes” suggests that the telling and re-telling, both online and offline, of the principal narrative of a “Facebook revolution” helped involve people in the protests.

Many scholars have looked at the role of social media in the spread of the Occupy Movement. Thorson (2013) looked at videos stored on YouTube to study publics interested in the Occupy movement. A variety of practices were uncovered that link YouTube and Twitter together, including sharing cell phone footage as eyewitness accounts of protest and police activity. Social media was used to find news footage or movie clips posted months and sometimes years before the movement began and to sharing music videos and other entertainment content in the interest of promoting solidarity or sociability among publics created through shared hashtags.

Adding a survey approach, Penney & Dadas (2014) conducted 17 in-depth interviews with people involved in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement in their typology of how Twitter is used in the service of protest. The case study demonstrated how the rapid digital circulation of texts allowed protestors to quickly build a geographically dispersed, networked counterpublic that can articulate a critique of power

outside of the parameters of mainstream media. Furthermore, they concluded the relay of pre-existing material was perceived to be just as meaningful a form of participation as drafting original compositions.

Theoretical Background

Scholarly literature provides many studies on framing; however, most of these studies focus on textual framing and audience reception in the context of the traditional news frame, therefore leaving a void in the application of framing through images and photos (Berger, 1991; Bell 2001; Branter et al, 2011; Rodriguez & Dimitrova 2011). A greater theoretical void also exists in the study of new and social media visual framing, specifically those frames constructed by social media 'users' and not professional journalists. According to landmark framing scholar Erving Goffman (1974), individuals organize experiences in order to make sense of them. Therefore, this active organization or framing by individuals allows them to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" the world around them (p. 10). As a result, the power of visual images can play a critical role in how individuals identify, respond and label a crisis event, such as the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri.

Viewers' schemas can be positive or negative and are modified over time based on experience and education. Racial images are often stereotypical and prejudicial with negative effects on even race-neutral and otherwise positive situations. And unfortunately, African Americans have been primed for many years in the United States to be associated with criminal activity, which creates a racial bias schema in the processing of images of African Americans (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie & Davies, 2004). Even when stereotypical depictions of African Americans are avoided, stereotypes can be perpetuated in subtle, but effective ways through visual imagery that activates previously held racial attitudes and schemas. Previous studies have indicated that the simple presence of African Americans may raise racially based stereotypes and schemas (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Appiah, 2002).

This study uses framing theory to explore user-generated content framing of the Ferguson case. A growing list of researchers has examined media coverage of social problems such as spousal abuse and race issues from a media framing perspective (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Messner & Solomon, 1992; Entman, 1992). Such studies generally support the idea that journalists and editors select, package, disseminate news, and mediate it through organizational processes and ideologies (Watkins, 2001).

The basis of framing theory presumes the prevalent media will focus attention on newsworthy events and place them within a sphere of meaning. In his landmark study, Entman (1992) discussed how journalists embed frames within a text and, thus, influence thinking. He defined the term by noting that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p 52). Frames become an issue during the reporting process as journalists reproduce culturally embedded views of the world (Foucault, 1980) and use cultural codes to distinguish what is significant or valid and who has the standing to say what is true (Dickerson, 2003).

As communication tools, images have symbolic components that can "enhance or mitigate their consequences" (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 215) or overpower the texts associated with the image itself (Wischmann, 1987). The Branter *et. al.* (2011) study of visual framing effects and audience emotional response reinforces the idea that the power of visual images over text, citing that audience members' understanding or cognition of events is faster when visuals are an element of the news story (p. 526).

Visual framing research is a vital element of framing research that Coleman (2010) describes as "an important new direction for theory building and future research" (p. 233). Likewise, Ferguson (2001) finds that when there is conflict between textual and visual framing, individuals often accept the visual frame (Ferguson, 2001). This may be because of the immediate attitudinal and emotional impact that visuals have over text, often "putting viewers in a mood" (Banter *et. al.*, p. 526-527).

The processing that occurs in the analysis and comprehension of visual information is done using heuristics that are based on previously learned schemas. These schemas reduce the cognitive load for the viewer and provide general categories to process information. As the viewer captures and posts images on social media or other communication channels they are putting forth both positive and negative stereotypes about that which they have experienced.

Research Questions

Building on this review of the literature and theoretical implications, this study addresses the following questions:

- RQ1: How do images from Twitter and Facebook compare in the “tone” of their visual framing of the Ferguson case?
- RQ2: What racial and ethnic groups were represented in Twitter and Facebook images?
- RQ3: What messages did citizens communicate using signs during the Brown case?
- RQ4: What types of textual and visual frames emerged in Twitter and Facebook platforms following Michael Brown’s death in 2014?

Methods

To identify key visual themes, researchers conducted a qualitative content analysis of the identified themes to openly code images and text posted on Twitter and Facebook the months following the Ferguson incident (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Twitter and Facebook are of interest because social media was heavily used to help spread the word about peaceful demonstrations and the incident in general. To collect the sample, the researchers used the keywords “#Ferguson,” and #MichaelBrown, to gather 100 of the most popular posts on Twitter and Facebook from August, 2014-March, 2015. This time frame was selected because it captured all of the content after the crises occurred. To assess popularity, the researchers looked at the number of retweets, reposts and interactions. Each tweet and Facebook post was copied and pasted into a Word document. The rationale for analyzing the most popular posts was that they were the most commonly shared content on each platform. They also provide a snapshot of what Americans cared about during the incident. In total, the artifacts for analysis were: 100 tweets and 100 Facebook posts.

Results

Tone of Photographs Posted on Facebook

The first research question explored how images from the various social media platforms compared in the “tone” of their visual framing of the Ferguson case? Of the 100 Facebook posts in our sample, more than half carried one or more hashtags. These hashtags varied from #Ferguson to #Unitedwewin, exposing a diversity of perspectives that literally spanned the globe. A number of visual frames emerged from the Facebook posts, most of which had a neutral tone. The images posted on Facebook largely appeared to present information to persons monitoring those particular hashtags. There were more negatively themed photograph posts than positive ones. The negative posts generally presented African Americans protesting in a violent manner, as criminals, thugs or derelicts in society or in direct conflict with the police.

Many of the photographs posted on Facebook were labeled with more than one hashtag (e.g. #Mikebrown, #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, *et al.*). These signifiers were designed to draw the viewer’s attention to a specific topic of the person posting the image. In analyzing the 100 Facebook posts with the #MikeBrown and/or #Ferguson hashtag, a number of interesting observations were realized. Of the 100 Facebook posts, most were either positive or neutral—

38 of the images posted were coded as having a negative tone, 22 were positive, and 40 were neutral.

Photographs that were noted as having a negative tone were images that generally showed the main subject of the photographs in criminal activities or in the stereotypical category of ghetto, uneducated, of extremely destitute. In the description of Diagram 1, the text under the photograph says, “Ferguson: City under Siege.” The general impression presented from this Facebook post was that this event was one event at one particular time of the protest, and it did not represent the entire Mike Brown movement.

Table: Facebook Tone for Hashtag

Hashtag	Positive	Negative	Neutral
#Ferguson	11	16	23
#Mikebrown	11	22	17
#Michaelbrown			

TABLE 1. EXAMINES HOW 100 FACEBOOK PHOTOGRAPHS WERE RATED REGARDING THE PHOTOGRAPHIC CONTENT

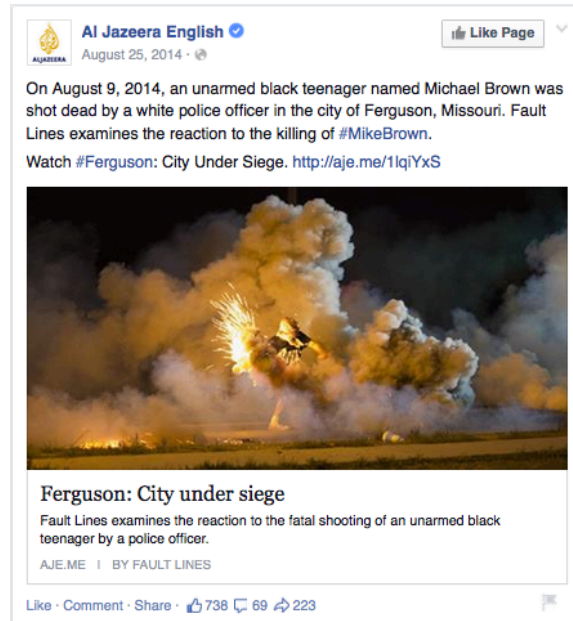


DIAGRAM 1. THE FACEBOOK POST FROM THE NEWS ORGANIZATION AL JAZEERA, USES A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH PHOTOJOURNALIST ROBERT COHEN. THE IMAGE SHOWS A PERSON WITH THEIR HEAD COVERED THROWING A TEAR GAS CANISTER BACK TOWARD THE POLICE.

TONE

Images that were considered to have a positive tone were those that featured images incorporating unity, albeit in racial, cultural, and/or economic tones. Diversity was another key factor that presented an image in a positive light. Consider Diagram 2, two children stand

behind a sign that reads, “My friends deserve to feel as safe and respected as I do.” The boy holding the sign appears to be a young Caucasian with blonde hair. The other boy has brown skin and curly hair. Both of the boys are smiling. This post garnered more than 20,000 likes.



DIAGRAM 2. “MIXED NATION” POSTED THIS PHOTOGRAPH ON ON AUGUST 15, 2014. THE COMMENT ASSOCIATED WITH THE POST READS, “POWERFUL & INSPIRING PHOTO FROM THE FERGUSON PROTESTS. OUT OF MANY, WE ARE ONE! RIP MICHAEL BROWN.

Neutral tone Facebook posts often included an image that was presented for informational purposes (e.g. a news conference, a public meeting, and/or political figure mug shot photograph). These photographs

do not readily cause the viewer to take a stance or challenge the post as overtly negative or positive. Neutral posts were also noted as featuring only words. These posts allowed the viewer to digest the text and construct a visual image.

A post by one Facebook user illustrates how the platform was used to express anxiety in waiting for the #mikebrown verdict (Diagram 3). In the post, the individual metaphorically compares the sense of not knowing when the verdict will be announced to the religious arrival of Jesus Christ and informs Facebook observers to “be ready!” While the post does not overtly express the posters’ religious faith, one who is a Christian or reads the Bible, may reflect on a story in Matthew 25:1-13 where five women were ready and prepared and five other woman were left behind. The lack of a photographic image allowed this image to be posted in the neutral category (See Diagram 3).

Overview of Tweets and Photographs Posted on Twitter

Included in the Twitter sample, were tweets by citizens, celebrities, teachers and politicians. Many of



DIAGRAM 3. THIS IMAGE WAS CODED AS A NEUTRAL BECAUSE IT IS ENCOURAGING CITIZENS TO BE READY ONCE THE VERDICT IS ANNOUNCED. HOWEVER, IF THE POST READER HAS A RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND THE POST MAY CONJURE UP VISUAL IMAGERY THAT WOULD ALLOW A CODER TO CLASSIFY THE POST.

them were accompanied by visual images, but most were not. The tweets often linked to news stories or blogs that included a full-length story about the Ferguson incident. John Legend had two of the most popular posts that Twitter users retweeted. In one tweet, he said, “I believe the cops are trying to inflame the situation. They want excuses.” Neither of these posts included photos. One of the big surprises in this sample was a string of tweets by the leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayollah Seyed Ali Khamenei who weighed in on the civil unrest in Ferguson. He tweeted several times using the #Ferguson hashtag. In two tweets, he stated, “Racial discrimination is still a dilemma” and “You are not alone.” He also referred to previous presidents, the Branch Davidian Standoff, and various other historical events to indicate that there have always been human right’s issues in the United States. Khamenei did not include photos with his posts.

Two tweets from teachers also made that list. One was about Missouri professors who stated in their tweets that professors should teach a whole course on Ferguson. The tweet linked to an article about their efforts to update their course curriculum to include information about the Ferguson case. The other tweet was about a Duncanville, Texas, high school teacher who tweeted, “she doesn’t give a f***” which “dumb duck (sic) ass crackers think about the ongoing tensions in Ferguson, Missouri.” She concluded the tweet by telling those people to “Kill yourselves.” She was placed on leave and later fired. Although she deleted the tweet, it was too late; other users had already retweeted it. The comment was often reposted with her photo shown below. An article that ran in the paper was often linked to the tweet as well.

Tone of tweets

In the sample, researchers looked at whether tweets were positive, negative or neutral. Of the 100 tweets, a majority were negative. Negative pins framed the Ferguson issue in a negative manner by describing its inhabitants as looters and criminals. They also framed Brown negatively by focusing on negative attributes such as drug use and an alleged robbery. Positive posts, on the other hand, often focused positive aspects

such as how people rallied together in support of Brown and how the community participated in peaceful protests. Neutral tweets were objective in nature. For instance, they announced the verdict of the grand jury indictment without stating whether it was good or bad, they posted information on Brown without passing judgment, or they shared information about the case in general.

Theme 1: Twitter Tone for hashtag

Hashtag	Positive	Negative	Neutral
#Ferguson	7	5	22
#Mikebrown #Michaelbrown	11	22	17



Diagram 4: Tweets illustrating Ferguson comparison to Middle East

Race of individuals in sample

The second research question asked what racial and ethnic groups were represented in Twitter and Facebook images? More than half (56) of the 100 Facebook photographs sampled featured African Americans as the main subjects; in 27 Caucasians where the primary subjects; and there were 20 posts in which the researchers were unable to determine the race of the subjects. In a number of the photographs there were both African American and Caucasians that were primary subjects in the post. In this case, both persons were recorded in their respective categories.

Table 4 Theme 2: Facebook and Twitter race of main subject(s) of photograph

Hashtag	Black	White	Unknown/other
#Ferguson (Facebook)	34	12	10
#Mikebrown #Michaelbrown(Facebook)	22	15	10
#Ferguson (Twitter)	42	6	3
#Michaelbrown (Twitter)	7	6	3

Similarly, most of the subjects in Twitter posts were African American, 42 of 51 persons in the tweets containing #Ferguson (Table 4). Conversely, only six of the people in the posts were White, while three were unknown—often because they were not facing the camera. For instance, in one tweet, a person was on the ground with his back facing the camera.

Communicating with Signs

The third research question asked what were the messages that citizens communicated using signs during the Brown case? Protestors used signs to communicate their message in 81 of the 100 Facebook posts. Of these signs there was a limited number of Facebook posts in support of Officer Wilson. Of the 100 posts sampled, few were considered in support of law enforcement. One of the images featured an unidentified Caucasian standing in front of the St. Louis County justice complex holding a neon green sign that reads, "My family & friends Support Officer Wilson and the Police" (See Diagram 8). The post received 3,110 likes and

350 shares. Members of the media surround the lady and one uniformed police officer is shown interacting with the members of the media. One of the respondents notes how, “They (either the police or protestors) made her leave because Mike Brown supporters were starting to confront her!” While additional details are not known of this protestor, this Facebook post brings out an elusive issue.

Theme 2: Communicating with signs

Platform	Yes	no
Facebook	81	19
Twitter	9	91

Twitter Signs

Conversely, protestors only used signs to communicate their message in 9 of 100 posts on Twitter. While the posts discussed protests and the implications of the Brown case, they often did not include images of people holding signs.



Diagram 6: Tweets illustrating the use of signs



Diagram 7: A photo of a football game where fans protested using signs

Other tweets discussed events such as football games where protestors had protested peacefully. To illustrate their point, they often included photos of people holding signs. One post stated, “So protesters chanting #BlackLivesMatter makes you leave the football game but not domestic violence cover ups? Hmmkay.” Diagram 7 illustrates one such image that includes fans holding signs in a stadium during a football game.



Diagram 8: Woman appears to be holding sign in support of Officer Wilson.

Cultural Frames

The fourth research question asked what types of textual and visual frames emerged in Twitter and Facebook platforms following Michael Brown's death in 2014? Wherever one falls in the coding discussion, the images posted on Facebook brought forth a lot of discussion about justice, culture, policing in the United States, the African American experience, crime, poverty, and a multitude of other issues. The more informed a viewer is aware of their personal biases and need for a high visual IQ the better they are dissecting fact from visual mirages.

A number of the Facebook posts offered an international perspective. Social media platforms such as Facebook provided a creative space of expression for all with Internet access and a desire to share their perspectives. During the Ferguson drama, Facebook evolved as a social haven for Ferguson protesters, police officers and persons around the world to share their photographs and perspective, while also visually framing their "issues."

Many of these images were in support of Michael Brown, the residents of Ferguson, and/or the concepts related to human rights and social justice. For example, one photograph featured a group of Tibetan monks with their hands up in air (See Diagram 5). One of the monks is holding a sign that reads, "From Tibet, Justice for Mike Brown." This post had 12,482 likes and 10,465 shares within eight days of the August 9th shooting. The theme of solidarity transcended race, culture, gender, and socio-economic paradigms.

Cultural References



Diagram 5. This post had 12, 482 likes and 10, 465 shares within eight days of the August 9th shooting.

Citizens often used Twitter to post comments that focused on historical references such as slavery and other events in history. They also included racial signs such as nooses or referred to race in general. In this section the authors affirm Paul Lester's earlier observation that culture is a collective set of learned, mutually accepted and applicable thoughts, ideas, standards, and traditions they help groups communicate (Lester, 2005, pp. 102-3). Stuart Hall further aids this study observing culture is concerned with the production and exchanges of meanings (Hall, 1997, p. 2).

Twitter users used the #Ferguson hashtag to spread goodwill. Religious tweets included the idea two separate streams: the idea that White men were being hard on Black men for a reason and the importance of using religion to spread peace. Illustrating the dichotomous nature of these tweets, one person posted, "God is forcing the White man to be ever hard on you because His aim is to separate you from your enemy. Another person posted, "I pray that the racists of every color will one day wake up and realize their hypocrisy.

Limitations and Conclusions

As with any study, this one had limitations. One primary limitation is that researchers looked at a convenience sample of social media content collected strategically. However, even with this limitation, this study is valuable because it provides a snapshot of the pulse of the community, which is one of the primary concerns of this paper. This is a good starting point, as it offers an overview of themes. Future studies might include a larger sample.

It came as no surprise that so much uproar of opinion and expression came from the national public via the Facebook and Twitter social media platforms. In fact, this unrest might suggest that users believe being a part of the United States, a democratic society, entitles them to confront police and to peaceably assemble both in the streets as well as online. On the other hand, these same posts could be categorized as negative as protestors who are arguing with police officers might appear to be disrespecting authority. This discussion highlights the value of visual literacy and mutual respect for diverging perspectives.

In all, social media is redirecting the focus on many other unyielding issues, creating an association between the localized occurrences of injustice taking place, and the national dialogue. Is there a difference in dialogue concerning Ferguson from the view of trained journalists and untrained ones? Most trained journalists would argue that they are best suited and equipped for the role of reporting and interpreting news as it unfolds. But who is to say that trained journalists don't take their news cues from citizen journalists who now, more than ever, are reporting news as they see it unfolding before their very eyes.

While pictures do not lie, they can be misinterpreted. At least that is what researchers argue, particularly when it comes to interpreting depictions of African Americans. As previously stated, racial images are often stereotypical and prejudicial with negative effects on even race-neutral and otherwise positive situations. And unfortunately, African Americans have been primed for many years in the United States to be associated with criminal activity, which creates a racial bias schema in the processing of images of African Americans (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). Even when stereotypical depictions of African Americans are avoided, stereotypes can be perpetuated in subtle, but effective ways through visual imagery that activates previously held racial attitudes and schemas.

In all, clearly a lot of opinions on issues surrounding Ferguson have been voiced via these two social media platforms—Twitter and Facebook. In contrast to citizens and protestors in the 1960s era having only television news reports to rely upon for "quick" news about civil unrest and confrontations with law enforcement, protestors and citizens alike of today can benefit from both television reports produced by trained journalists as well as those that they, themselves, produce and disseminate on social media sites.

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