

# Citizen Framing of #Ferguson on Twitter

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## *Abstract*

This textual analysis examined the framing of Ferguson, Missouri, that emerged following Michael Brown's death in 2014. The analysis indicates tweets focused on the protests that followed and the racial nature of the incident. The most salient themes characterized Ferguson within the context of "bigger picture" issues, "otherness" narratives and "protest" frames. Many tweets transmitted a racialized tone, characterizing Ferguson as a "less than desirable town with mostly Black residents and low-life

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thugs.” This study provides support for the use of textual analysis in studies of social media platforms and indicates it is imperative to look at representations of race, power and cultural narratives in popular mass media messages.

**A**lmost immediately following the killing of Michael Brown by Police Officer Darren Wilson in 2014, individuals assembled in Ferguson, Missouri, to demand an explanation for why an unarmed 18-year-old Black male had been seemingly executed while reportedly holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Ferguson, located in the outskirts of St. Louis, is a relatively small city of 21,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, 2015). The community became the focus of the media’s attention, as protestors from around the world met there to participate in demonstrations calling for the arrest of Wilson, who faced charges ranging from first-degree murder to involuntary manslaughter, for his role in Brown’s shooting (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

Tensions erupted again on November 23, 2014, when Prosecutor Robert McCulloch announced that the St. Louis County grand jury voted not to bring criminal charges against Wilson. Protestors flooded the streets across the United States in disapproval of the decision. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and other news outlets chronicled the aftermath of the riots following the grand jury announcement. “It looks just like a storm blew through here. A storm of people,” one distraught business-owner remarked (Rothman, 2014). The protests were fueled not only by the announcement and Brown’s case; pro-

testors were also concerned about McCulloch's previous record of absolving police officers of killing Black suspects. A Pew Research Center analysis of media coverage of Ferguson protests found that the story emerged on Twitter before cable TV, but attention quickly peaked on both mediums the day after two journalists were arrested and protests turned more violent (Hitlin & Comments, 2014).

Twitter demonstrates the role social media platforms can play in a breaking news story. In this case, Twitter was used for frequent updates from citizens and journalists as protests across the United States erupted over the announcement of the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Wilson for the fatal shooting of Michael Brown.

This textual analysis examined #Ferguson tweets that emerged following Brown's death in 2014 to assess how citizens characterized Ferguson. Twitter estimates that citizens posted more than 3.5 million tweets mentioning #Ferguson in the three hours after the jury's decision announcement (Doreen, 2015). Scholars have analyzed the framing of the town from many perspectives including riots and "hashtag activism" (e.g., Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Bowen, 2015). For instance, Bowen (2015) concluded that news segments offered details about the riots and unrest resulting from the shooting first, followed by the facts of the case. His study findings indicate the most overarching frame was the conflict between the Black community and authorities. In their article on "hashtag activism," Bonilla and Rosa (2014) concluded social media platforms have become powerful tools for recording and inspiring episodes of police brutality. Twitter users experienced participating in a social movement using #Ferguson, as they tweeted in

real time about the unfolding events. As opposed to someone who might post about Ferguson on Facebook or other social media platforms, users on Twitter rallied supporters to join various hashtag campaigns.

Researchers have examined media coverage of social problems such as spousal abuse and racial issues from a media framing perspective (see Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Messner & Solomon, 1993). Such studies generally support the idea that journalists and editors select, package and disseminate news through organizational processes and ideologies (Watkins, 2001). In their exploration of news narrative structures repeated over time, Bennett and Edelman (1985) argued that most news stories maintain the status quo by presenting social problems within comfortable cognitive frames that disallow the entry of alternative renditions. Recently scholars have added citizen framing of various issues.

Studies of this nature are important for several reasons. First, they add to the literature a description of the recurrent storylines and characterizations of Ferguson in Twitter posts after the death of Brown. Social media played a key role in sharing information on the incident. When looking at the framing of an incident, it is worth looking beyond traditional media as audiences are increasingly relying on social media for news (Anderson, & Caumont, 2014). Second, Twitter is noteworthy because it offers a platform for alternative voices. Twitter, often referred to as “Black Twitter,” offers an outlet for Black people to express their ideas and opinions publicly (Florini, 2014). Black Twitter has created an online culture of Black intellectuals, trendsetters, and “talking heads” offering a platform to many issues that historically would have re-

mained hidden from the mainstream radar (Williams, 2015).

The murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, the reality of street harassment, the racial crisis brewing in the Dominican Republic—these are all stories that became of major importance because Black Twitter made sure the world understood what was happening. And with popular hashtags like #YouOKSis and #BringBackOurGirls becoming recognized all over the world, it's impossible to ignore how Black Twitter has been able to affect change and raise awareness (Williams, 2005).

Third, such studies are important as they offer a look at citizen framing of popular news stories. Among smartphone owners, 78 percent report using their device to get news in the last week (Media Insight Project, 2014). Respondents also reported they use tablets to access online news. This has implications for incidents such as Ferguson where individuals used social media platforms to share information about the actions. While Blacks still access the internet at lower rates than the general population, those on the internet are more likely to use social networks such as Twitter, according to 2012 surveys from the Pew Research Center (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). However, the digital gap separating Blacks from other ethnic groups for the Internet is narrowing (Perrin & Duggan, 2015).

Also worth noting according to a 2015 Pew study, the percentage of Blacks online who use Twitter is higher than the population overall with 28% of Blacks reporting they use it compared to 20% of white respondents (Duggan, 2015). Finally, Twitter has become an inexpensive and convenient way for journalists to gather news and

information (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Twitter often triggers news stories and plays a role in what is covered. For instance, #BlackLivesMatter began as a Twitter hashtag, but now represents a social movement for communities (Valasek, 2015). Broersma and Graham (2013) argued this new practice alters the balance of power between journalists and sources as Twitter triggers news coverage. They noted reporters increasingly gather information online and embed it in news content; therefore, the Twitter platform can alter critical discourse on controversial topics.

## Literature Review

To help guide this exploratory study on citizen representations of Ferguson on Twitter, this study unfolds in a review of the literature in two areas explored in the next section: (1) Twitter and citizen framing of towns and protest and (2) the socio-cultural context of Ferguson, Missouri. Framing refers to “the process through which individuals or groups make sense of their external environment” (Boettcher, 2004, p. 332). In his landmark study, Entman (1992) defined framing as the process of selecting “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). Recent scholarship in communication emphasizes the place of power and ideology within the construction of frames, especially those constructed by media (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Durham, 2001). These studies suggest returning to framing’s sociological roots (Gitlin, 1980), which emphasize framing processes “within the con-

text of the distribution of political and social power” (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 214). Frames are not merely story topics but “construct particular meanings concerning issues by their patterns of emphasis, interpretation and exclusion” (Carragee & Roefs, 2004, p. 217).

Media coverage or citizen sharing of an issue has the potential to affect public opinion through the “frames” provided for making sense of the event and of the issues involved. For example, frames that emphasize the idea that continued economic problems have kept many residents from thriving might lead to increased support for social welfare policy. In one example, race-coded anti-welfare rhetoric propelled Congress to eliminate the federal entitlement to cash relief in 1996 (Reese, 2005).

### **Framing of Towns**

Previous studies on the framing of cities and towns have focused on portrayals in traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, magazines and books. For instance, Jonesboro, Arkansas, was framed as a Bible Belt community that was once immune to the evils of a larger society until a March 24, 1998, incident in which two boys opened fire on their classmates. The boys allegedly pulled the fire alarm, causing 125 students and several teachers to exit the building. As the students and teachers exited the building, the two boys opened fire from nearby bushes. A study of newspapers by Lasswell, Toven and Aeaker (1998) concluded the media’s attention toward Jonesboro’s size is a clear frame intended to evoke an emotional response from the audience. Phrases such as “bullet-pocked walls,” “spraying of gunfire” and “military maneuvers” were prevalent throughout the media’s coverage (Lasswell

et al., 1998).

Throughout history, mass media outlets have framed Texas towns as backwards and its residents as traditional, self-righteous and simple-minded (Schneider, 2007). Common are narratives of Texans as gun-toting, racist, separatists, on one hand, and God-fearing, land and family-loving, on the other (Burleson, 2004). Journalists used these dichotomous cultural narratives to typecast Jasper as a racist community following the death of James Byrd, Jr., a Black man who was dragged to his death from the back of a pickup truck. Burleson (2004) concluded that reporters characterized Jasper as a rural section of Texas known for its Klan activity. Out-of-town reporters fueled rumors Byrd's death was a warning from the Ku Klux Klan. In 1993, Waco, Texas, was framed negatively once again following the Branch Davidian standoff, which attracted international attention and cries of injustice, fraudulent law enforcement and mistreatment at the hands of law enforcement (Wessinger, 2009).

Following Hurricane Katrina, journalists framed the city of New Orleans in intricate stories of murder, rape and violence. Such framing of the town was often taken out of context (Brunken, 2006). Rodríguez and Dynes (2006) found that New Orleans was presented as a disorganized city on the brink of collapse, less from the storm than from its residents. On September 2, 2005, using a war frame, *The Army Times* reported that "combat operations are now underway on the streets.... This place is going to look like little Somalia... We're going to go out and take the city back." The lead comment by the commander of the Louisiana National Guard's Joint Task Force was "This will be a combat operation to get this city under con-



trol” (Brunsma, Overfelt, & Picou, 2010).

Several weeks after the storm, the following themes emerged: finding damage, finding death, finding help, finding authority and finding the “bad guys” (Jacobs, 2011). The author noted that it is important to consider how urban communities are not often grouped in the sociological distinction of “towns” (Jacobs, 2011). Black people who reside within a city are often categorized as “urban.” Thus, the issues related to the “urban” or the Black experience are generally considered negative. Such narratives addressing the sociological tropes of cities versus towns and racial dynamics are important as they help advance the principles of framing.

Contemporary studies on race and emerging media platforms are important because ideology is conveyed through messages tied to cultural narratives that help to legitimate societies’ structures (Hall, 1980). As indicated in these studies, power places an important role in such studies as representations of “other” often emerge. Stereotyping occurs “where there are gross inequalities of power” and that “[p]ower is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group” (Hall, 1980, p. 258).

### **Social Media and Activism**

Each social media platform is different and has its own benefits. For instance, Twitter allows users to share posts that are up to 140 characters long. Television reporters, online journalists and bloggers are increasingly using Twitter and online new media as sources for their stories without undertaking outside verification of the information (Hutchins, 2011). Similarly, Kent and Taylor (2010) concluded that social media sites, such as Twitter and

blogs, might be very valuable in modern PR strategies. On the receiver side, 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).

The literature has begun to suggest that individuals use Twitter messages to frame issues, policies and information. Most of these studies are concerned with identifying frames related to a particular event, often examining dominant frames used in the discussion of a topic and in many cases, researchers look at how individuals are discussing an issue (e.g., Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Page, 2013). Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011) describe how hashtag use allows for the development of many-to-many communication, even among those who are strangers. On Twitter, an individual is contributing to or viewing a larger conversation that goes beyond those in his or her own network. Many of these hashtags, or frames, may originate from elites, but other studies have found that most Twitter users are not engaging with traditional elites, and are instead getting political information indirectly from others (Nielsen & Schroder, 2014; Nielsen & Vaccari, 2013). Because of the lack of top-down information flow, the universe of Twitter messages on a single issue is likely to contain a number of competitive and counter frames.

The protest literature often discusses how citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes (e.g. Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Miladi, 2011; Poell, 2014; Sousa & Ivanova, 2012). Taylor, Kent and White (2001) examined the mediated communication of activist organizations to understand how these groups use

their websites to build relationships with publics. The study suggested that while most activist organizations meet the technical and design aspects required of dialogic relationship building on the Web, they were not yet fully engaging their publics in two-way communication. Similarly, Poell (2014) explored the dynamics of activist social media via a case study on the social media reporting efforts of the Toronto Community Mobilization Network, which coordinated and facilitated the protests against the 2010 Toronto G-20 summit. The activist network urged followers to report about the protests using Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr, tagging their contributions #g20report. The investigation found that the use of social media brings about an acceleration of activist communication, and greatly enhances its visual character.

Scholars of protests/activism have turned their attention to how citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes (Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Miladi, 2011). Sousa and Ivanova (2012) concluded Twitter is often seen as a venue for civic activism or as an active facilitator of deficit-based Black cultural stereotypes. “Twitter’s combination of brevity, multi-platform access, and feedback mechanisms has enabled it to gain mindshare far out of proportion to its actual user base, including an extraordinary number of Black users” (Brock, 2012, p. 529). Cabalin’s (2014) content and textual analysis of Facebook’s page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) in 2011 revealed the group utilized Facebook mainly to call for protest actions, to highlight the achievements of the movement, and to indict their opponents. Howard and Parks (2012) examined the relationships between social media and political change.

The two concluded, the Internet—as a platform—has become a vehicle for voice in marginalized communities. The web has become one of the most powerful ways to bypass mainstream media (Howard & Parks, 2012).

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. A variety of practices were uncovered that link YouTube and Twitter together, including: sharing cell phone footage and eyewitness accounts of protest (and police) activity and the sharing of content created through shared hashtags.

Previous studies on the framing of Ferguson and other cities/towns offer great insight; however, absent from the literature are critical race analyses that look specifically at the framing Ferguson on social media platforms. This study fills the void with an analysis of Twitter posts after the death of Brown. Building on this review of the literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What frames emerged in #Ferguson tweets following the death of Michael Brown?

**RQ2:** How did Twitter users build on previous cultural narratives to frame Ferguson?

## Methodology

An exploratory textual analysis of #Ferguson tweets was conducted following Brown's death to establish the overarching themes that were present in the framing of the town. Using the keyword, “#Ferguson,” a sample of 500 tweets was collected via the Twitter website, downloaded and placed in a Word document. The search

term “#Ferguson,” was selected because of an interest in how individuals framed the city—not Michael Brown’s murder. Tweets that did not focus on Ferguson were eliminated, as they were not relevant to the study on the framing of the town. “Top” tweets were selected to analyze, as these were the posts that individuals were more likely to share or retweet online. When searching on *twitter.com*, individuals may filter results by clicking “top” tweet, which are popular posts that many other Twitter users have engaged with and thought were useful. These tweets were most commonly shared across social media platforms. The identified tweets also provide a snapshot of what Americans cared and shared about during the incident, which is important as individuals used Twitter heavily to help spread the word about the death of Brown. The time-frame of the tweets included the date of the shooting, August 9, 2014, through the date of the announcement of the grand jury verdict on November 24, 2014.

A three-step analyst triangulation process was used to analyze the tweets. First, the primary and secondary researcher read the tweets several times to find overarching themes. The unit of analysis was the entire tweet. To identify frames, the investigators analyzed the tweets for patterns of thought to answer the question, “how do the tweets want you to think about Ferguson.” Campbell and Wiggins (2014) noted in the typology for distinguishing frames from topics and themes, frames can be determined by asking, “Specifically, how does the columnist want the reader to think about the topic and theme? . . . [A]nswering how refers to the perspective and context that generates meaning. Direction of thinking is key in determining the frame” (p. 4). The salient patterns in the

Table 1  
*Framing of #Ferguson*

Frame	Description
<b>The Bigger Picture</b>	After a tragedy of this size, media outlets often discuss the implications (Lasswell et al., 1998). The five main premises the media used were: the social implications of the killing, not allowing history to repeat itself, the alienation of minorities, and the epidemic of Blacks killed by White police officers.
<b>“Otherness” narratives</b>	Hall (1997, p. 235) asserts that humans “need ‘difference’ because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the ‘other’” (1997, p. 235). This need was prevalent in Twitter posts in which users chose “otherness” narratives (van Dijk, 1991) to compare persons of different ethnic groups.
<b>Protest Frames</b>	Focused on the themes of protest, social justice, protestors, police officers and a broken criminal justice system (Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Miladi, 2011; Poell, 2014).

themes were determined to be the frames. This approach, adapted from Campbell and Wiggins (2014), worked particularly well because of the brevity and multiple thoughts included in the tweets.

Following a second round of readings, we organized the tweets into categories and asked our co-authors to gauge the validity of the categories (Miles & Huberman,

Table 2  
*Themes, Catchphrases and Frames in #Ferguson  
 Tweets Following Brown's Death*

Theme	Catchphrases/ hashtags	Frame
<b>The Bigger Picture</b>		<p>—Brown was not the first          —Black man killed by a          White police officer who          did not receive justice          —A continuation of his-          torical subordination of          Black people akin to and          slavery          —Not as serious as Black          on-Black crime</p>
<b>Other- ness Us vs. Them</b>	<p>#BlackLivesMatter,          #HandsUpDontShoot and          #IfTheyGunnedMeDown</p>	<p>—White police officers, in          general, are “getting away          with killing Black men”—          and this is either “positive          or negative.”</p>
	<p>#crimingwhile          white</p>	<p>—White people wanted to          disown White America</p> <p>—Brown's killing was em-          barrassing to White peo-          ple and unforgivable.</p>
<b>Protest</b>	<p>To #Ferguson          from          #Palestine          #IslamicState          and #Coming</p>	<p>—Ferguson looks like a          war zone          —Is this Ferguson or the          Middle East or another          country?</p>

1984). In evaluating the tweets repeatedly, themes emerged that were agreed upon to characterize Ferguson immediately following the death of Michael Brown (Table 2).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Characterizing Ferguson**

Founded in 1888, Ferguson is comprised of mostly middle- and working-class people, much like the surrounding communities (Smith, 2015). Ferguson was one of the first bedroom communities near St. Louis, with easy rail access into the city (Coy, 2014). However, its demographics changed after manufacturing moved offshore and wealthier residents moved west (Smith, 2015). As recently as 1970, the population of Ferguson was almost entirely White, and in 1990, that portion was still 74%. By 2010, the population had shifted to approximately 67% Black, with 29% identifying as White. Today, St. Louis County is divided into 91 municipalities with accumulations of populations in unincorporated areas (Smith, 2015). Communities set themselves up as municipalities to claim tax revenue from local businesses, to avoid paying taxes to support poorer neighbors, and/or to exclude Black populations. This practice has resulted in a county that includes small towns that, according to Coy (2014), are highly stratified by race and income. Before Ferguson made national news after Brown's death, citizens had prepared a white paper that accused Ferguson and two other municipalities in St. Louis County of stopping, fining and jailing Black drivers disproportionately for traffic violations. The paper was almost finished when Wilson shot and killed Brown (Coy, 2015).



Brown's death triggered a nationwide debate on the issue of racial disparity in the U.S. justice system. The discussions that ensued encompassed many facets of American society, as accusations were lobbied; citizens got involved. The media, including traditional and new media, were the main conduit of exchanges (Quiah, 2015). The media also became a part of the story with reporters noting the importance of Twitter and other social media outlets in sparking social movements and encouraging citizens to share their viewpoints. McIntyre (2014) posted an article, which stated, "if you have only been obtaining your information through formal media outlets and network news channels, you are missing huge, terrifying swaths of the story" (McIntyre, 2014, n.p.).

Years of frustration and anger surfaced in many communities after grand juries voted not to indict Wilson. While the #BlackLivesMatter movement, founded by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, was formed in 2012, after Trayvon Martin's murder, the undertaking did not firmly take root until after Brown's death. #BlackLivesMatters and #Ferguson hashtags provided a call to action and a response to virulent anti-Black racism in the United States. Twitter users often used Brown's death, to discuss the fatalities of other Black men killed by White police officers. According to MappingViolence.org ("National Trends," 2016), police killed at least 102 unarmed Black people in 2015, more than any other race. Nearly one in three Black people killed by police officers in 2015 were identified as unarmed and 37% of unarmed people killed by police were Black in 2015 despite Black people being only 13% of the U.S. population ("Police killed more than 100 unarmed black people in 2015," 2016).

## Bigger Picture

After a tragedy of this scale, journalists often discuss the implications within the context of the “bigger picture” (Lasswell et al., 1998). In this case, the five main themes that emerged in Twitter content were: the social implications of the killing, not allowing history to repeat itself, the alienation of minorities, and the epidemic of Blacks killed by White police officers (Table 2). Tweets on the topic linked to blog entries, videos, newspaper articles and other content that provided a bigger picture of the case.

Individuals such as Corey Jones, Freddie Gray, and Jessica Hernandez, were listed as just three of at least 1,425 people killed by police after Brown’s shooting, according to Fatal Encounters, a non-profit organization that has tracked deaths through police interaction in the United States since Jan. 1, 2000. Tweets often featured an interactive map containing dates of the number of killings by law enforcement since the Brown shooting. Tweets also stressed the permanence of racism in society or suggested that racism controls every aspect of society, including political, social, and economic realms. Hashtags such as #BlackPeopleMatter, #FergusonOctober, #HandsUpDontShoot and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown underscored how Trayvon Martin and Brown were the impetus that helped society begin to think about the large number of Black men who were murdered by White police officers. One person posted, “Shot 16x and armed only with a sandwich? Is this real life?” Another person posted, “Young Black Males are 21 Times More Likely to be Shot DEAD by the Police.”

To relate Brown's death to the "bigger picture," of what was going on in society—both past and present—during this period, tweets also referenced historical events and movements. Common were references to the Branch Davidian standoff, the Ku Klux Klan and the slavery era. Catchphrases and references to racial signs were used to make a point. For instance, many people discussed "cross burning" or the Ku Klux Klan. One such post featured an image of a male slave who has several large welts on his back. Another featured a Black man with a noose on his neck.

### **Protest Frames**

After the grand jury announcement, many tweets focused on the themes of protest and a broken criminal justice system. For instance, tweets identified in this study featured maps that depicted Twitter activity in and around the United States during the announcement of the grand jury's decision to not indict Wilson for the fatal shooting of Brown. Other common tweets depicted protesters participating in peaceful protests, often emphasizing sit-ins and "die-ins," and "hands up don't shoot." Posts in this category often quoted Dr. Martin Luther King. One tweet stated, "You can try to paint this as Black folks being mad but look at the diversity here. Everyone coming together to say #BlackLivesMatter." Citizens also discussed the sacrifices made by protestors and pointed out that well-known individuals such as Dr. Cornel West and a 90-year-old woman had been arrested while protesting. Several tweets implored people to "Call the Richmond Heights Police Department and demand the release of peaceful protestors," while other posts issued a call to ac-

tion asking followers to call police officers and ask why the police were lying about protesters throwing rocks.

Tweets discussed events such as football games where protestors had protested peacefully. One post stated, “So protestors chanting #BlackLivesMatter makes you leave the football game but not domestic violence cover ups? Hmmkay.” Tweets also discussed how Black and White protestors were treated differently. Police officers were more likely to be armed and fully outfitted in officer’s gear in preparation for a protest that includes Black people. In this same vein, individuals used the Ferguson incident as an opportunity to focus on previous injustices in the United States and other countries. Much like the framing of New Orleans following Hurricane Rita (Jacobs, 2011), one of the most common frames communicated by Twitter users was the idea that Ferguson looked like a war zone after the Brown tragedy. One tweet linked to an article titled, “War zone: Media in town where Black teen was shot told to leave or face arrest.” It described the escalation in Ferguson as police officers are out in “droves after widespread rioting and looting resulted in major damage to local businesses” (Nal, 2015).

Twitter users often described Ferguson as being “rocked by protests and at least one night of looting, with police officers turning out in force with assault rifles, dogs, and tear gas and dressed in riot gear” (Menzie, 2014). Citizens often asked, “is this Ferguson or the Middle East or another country?” “To #Ferguson from #Palestine” tweets also emerged on Twitter, in which Palestinians shared advice about issues such as civil war and unrest. Later, the U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of Illinois warned that ISIS terrorists were trying to use social media to re-

cruit disillusioned Americans who are engaged in protesting in Ferguson. Other common hashtags include #IslamicState and #Coming (Huston, 2014).

The support for the Black community from Palestinian activists was highly visible. Interestingly, the protests prompted a global conversation between activists around the world on the challenge and contours of state violence in diverse locations (Morris, 2015). Palestinian activists took to social media to show their solidarity for the Ferguson protests. Images circulated on Twitter, for example, of Palestinian civilians tweeting advice to Ferguson protestors about how to handle being tear gassed by the police. Another example featured an image of a young girl holding up a small placard that simply read: "From Gaza to Ferguson Love, Palestine" (Morris, 2015). These tweets were reposted on the website titled, "Reverse Racism," which includes a collection of what it called "trivial topics and events that some may perceive to be racist, racially discriminative, and/or biased towards those with privilege in the U.S." The Reverse Racism website highlighted retweets by John Legend in which he stated, "Twitter: Oh my God, Ferguson is like the Middle East."

Additionally, a string of tweets by the leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei correlated the civil unrest in Ferguson with other incidents. He tweeted several times using the #Ferguson hashtag that stated, "Racial discrimination is still a dilemma" and "You are not alone." He also referred to previous incidents such as the Branch Davidian standoff and various other historical events to indicate that there have always been human rights issues in the United States. Khamenei did not include photos with his posts. The "war

zone” frame also focused on the excessive force that police officers used to keep protestors at bay. Many tweets emphasized police brutality and the idea that police officers fired tear gas at protestors several nights in a row in Ferguson. Several tweets offered advice on what a person should do if he or she has tear gas in the eyes. The hashtag to signify this advice was: “#Ferguson from #Palestine,” indicating it was also part of the campaign mentioned earlier. Tweets focused on the safety of rubber bullets—concluding that they are not safe. To illustrate the unsafe nature of rubber bullets, tweets included images of protestors and clergy displaying wounds received from them. Other users retweeted a post that included a statement by police officers who claimed rubber bullets are harmless.

In response to the Ferguson case and other shootings of Black men and women, United Nations experts on minority issues, racism, people of African descent, and the right to peaceful assembly released a news release on Dec. 5, 2014, that revealed “legitimate concerns” (Section, 2014). The report focused on concerns about the broader pattern reflected in the grand jury decisions not to bring to trial the case of Eric Garner and Michael Brown (Section, 2014). The authors stressed that international laws allow the use of lethal force only where it is absolutely necessary to protect life. The laws of many U.S. states are much more permissive, creating an atmosphere where there are not enough constraints on the use of force. The report concluded that comprehensive review of the system is needed to assess the enabling laws, the kinds of weapons the police use, the training they receive, and the use of technology such as on-body cameras to ensure accountability.

### Themes of Otherness

Hall (1997, p. 235) asserted that humans “need ‘difference’ because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the ‘other’” (1997, p. 235). This need was prevalent in Twitter posts in which users chose “otherness” narratives to compare persons of different ethnic groups (van Dijk, 1991). Tweets reflected racial tensions established in past racial encounters and frames that depict prevailing stereotypes about the ‘other’ race. Individuals often characterized Ferguson as a less than desirable town with low-life thugs. Sample tweets included: “the Grand Jury is probably stalling to properly plan out their escape from that moral wasteland” and “If the low life scum protesters don’t loot or burn anymore— all will be well.” Tweets using this frame also focused on the idea that the Ferguson looters were thugs who used the event as an opportunity to steal from local establishments. “Because there hasn’t been some good lootin’ and riotin’ for awhile. They all needed an excuse,” and “Too bad kids don’t join a community college instead of a gang. But bettering one’s self takes work.” A smaller percentage focused on the idea that Brown was a thug/criminal/lowlife.

A discussion on “Meet the Press” provides a similar perspective. Mayor Rudy Giuliani stated that the real problem facing Black communities is not brutality at the hands of White cops, but brutality in the grips of Black thugs. He cited the fact that 93% of Black murder victims are killed by a member of his or her race. Twitter users also used the Ferguson hashtag to spread the idea that White men were being hard on Black men for a reason and

the importance of using religion to spread peace. Illustrating this theory, the person posted, “God is forcing the White man to be ever hard on you because His aim is to separate you from your enemy.” Posts also focused on Brown’s parents and blamed them for not teaching him manners. For instance, one tweet in our sample stated, “I’m sorry #Ferguson but Michael Brown is not a martyr. His actions of being aggressive and a thief are the cause of what happened.” To support this claim, tweets featured evidence photos released by the St. Louis County Prosecutor’s Office, which showed Wilson after his exchange with Brown. He had a 2-inch pinkish bruise on his right cheek and a slightly bruised lip, but with no major injuries were visible.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This textual analysis on #Ferguson and the framing of the town in which Michael Brown was killed in 2014 reflects how various frames of the city were created, shared and replicated in the year following his death. Brown’s death has had a long-term effect on society as indicated by the popularity of the Ferguson hashtag. Similar to the towns mentioned in the literature review (e.g. Brunken, 2006; Lasswell et al., 1998; Rodríguez & Dynes, 2006; Wessinger, 2009), citizens framed Ferguson in a manner that depicted the city and its residents using historical cultural narratives. The Black teenager’s death provided an opportunity for citizens to use “bigger picture” and otherness narratives to portray Ferguson within the historical context of other societal ills, such as the Middle East crisis and the growing number of Blacks killed by police officers.



This analysis provides support for the use of textual analysis in studies of social media platforms, as it indicates it is imperative to look at the representations of race as they emerge in various societal issues. Race quickly surfaced in the coverage of Brown's death, as it occurred in the midst of #BlackLivesMatter protests. Using Twitter, citizens emphasized the undesirable qualities of Ferguson's inhabitants, poverty and its criminal element. Such descriptions transmit a racialized tone, as they focus on the racial nature of the tragedy with the most salient themes characterizing Ferguson as a "less than desirable town with mostly black residents and low-life thugs."

This study echoes the findings of studies that indicate social media platforms provide a thriving platform for protest frames (Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014; Harlow, 2013; Miladi, 2011; Poell, 2014). Twitter users were strategic in creating and distributing messages to help end social injustices. For instance, in response to tweets on Black-on-Black violence, individuals posted opposing viewpoints. For instance, they often highlighted the idea that the Blacks who murder one another often go to jail, unlike White cops who kill Black people. One person posted that "the city is nearly 70% Black and low income. NO HOMICIDE ALL. YEAR. UNTIL #MikeBrown...". Tweets also discussed the media framing of Black people, as well as the unfair nature of some news outlets that purposely choose photos that depict Black individuals negatively. One commonly retweeted post featured a teenage boy volunteering at an elementary school and one of him sitting on his bed. It included the caption, "#iftheygunnedmedown what picture would they use?" Another photo that appeared frequently in Twitter posts was an image of a man

with money in his mouth and a gun in his hand and the statement, “I’m sure Michael Brown is innocent and misunderstood. I’m sure he is a pillar of the Ferguson community.” KCTV5 reported that a police officer posted the photo of the man who turned out not to be Michael Brown (Collier, 2014). “Kansas City police officer Marc Catron will face an internal review after posting controversial images of Michael Brown, the 18-year-old shot six times and killed by a Ferguson police officer, to Facebook” (Collier, 2014).

In sum, tweets provided a platform to introduce frames on advancing social justice, human rights and curbing racial profiling. Twitter content was dichotomous in nature; on one hand, scalding the reputation of Ferguson and its residents—and on the other, allowing citizens to share their feelings of public distrust toward law enforcement and public officials, which spurred the many protests. In response to negative portrayals, citizens posted content containing counter narratives that emphasized distrust in the criminal justice and court system. These findings are important as they further the research in the areas of race, framing of towns and the expansion of social media activism. Future analyses might use this study as a springboard to look at other racially charged incidents in which social media serves as a platform to share messages.

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