**‘ONLY PPL RIOTING IN STL ARE THE POLICE’: Activists’ responses to accusations of violence in the Ferguson unrest.**

**Abstract**:

In the last decade, protests against police brutality toward People of African Descent have gained widespread support through the Black Lives Matter movement. However, in some cases, protests have turned into civil unrest, including episodes of violence. Incidents of this kind have allowed the movement’s opponents to label protests as ‘riots,’ shifting the debate from the protesters’ grievances to the nature of the protests. In turn, activists have countered these claims by using social media. The use of social networking platforms such as Twitter by social movements allows us to examine various activist points of view on contentious events as they unfold. While studies on civil unrest have frequently focused on explaining why protestors resort to violence, this paper explores how activists respond to attempts to delegitimize their protests by casting them as violent riots. Based on Stanly Cohen’s work on the mechanisms of denial, this paper demonstrates how activists have utilized different types of denial to counter claims that their protests were ‘riots’ during the Ferguson unrest of August 2014. A qualitative analysis of 4201 tweets by three crowdsources elites who participated in the protests was performed. The findings reveal that activists used two types of denial – implicatory and interpretive – and positively represented the protests. Focusing on activists’ accounts on Twitter, this paper offers a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing the counterclaims of movements in similar circumstances.

Key Words: *Accounts, Civil Unrest*, *Denial, Ferguson, Twitter, Violence*

# Introduction

In the last decade, protests against state-sanction violence toward People of African Descent have gained widespread support through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. However, in some cases where protests have turned into civil unrest and witnessed episodes of violence (e.g., clashes with police, looting), the movement’s opponents have been emboldened to delegitimize the movement by shifting the debate from the source of the protester’s grievances to the nature of the protests, labeling them as ‘riots.’ This debate leads activists to face a crucial dilemma. They cannot deny that violence occurred and risk being denounced as unreliable, nor can they condone the violence for fear of being blamed for incitement. At the same time, if they condemn violence, they risk reinforcing their opponents’ narratives and shifting the focus from their original claims. To understand how activists navigate these dilemmas, this paper examines accounts of the events provided by leading activists and shows how they used intricate forms of denial, acknowledging violence but isolating it, minimizing its significance, and shifting focus to other issues.

Using Stanly Cohen’s (2001) work on official accounts of denial, this paper aims to demonstrate how activists turned to Twitter to counter claims that the protests against police brutality were violent riots during the Ferguson unrest of August 2014. Over 17 days[[1]](#endnote-1), protesters utilized various accounts of denial to counter the labeling of the protest as violent, expose racially motivated state-sanction violence against their community, justify their grievances and mobilize support. To examine the use of denial by activists, a qualitative analysis was performed of 4201 tweets posted by three crowdsources elites who participated in the protests between August 9 and 25, 2014.

While Cohen’s work on denial has mainly been used to analyze official discourses of denial by governments and corporations responding to allegations of human rights violations and crimes (e.g., al Weswasi, 2019; Bryant et al., 2018), this paper demonstrates how activists use similar denial techniques to expose racial discrimination and state-sanctioned violence and mobilize support. For this reason, this paper makes innovative use of Cohen’s framework. Moreover, while the existing literature on civil unrest has thus far focused on explaining why protestors resort to violence during contentious events, the contribution of this paper is its focus on analyzing activist outlooks regarding these events. Moreover, this paper focuses on social media, currently the main arena for debate between social movements and their adversaries. As this dynamic of claims and counterclaims concerning violence during protests has been repeated in many cases over the last decade in the US and globally, this case study also offers a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing such events.

In the first two sections, I explain the theoretical framework on accounts of denial and review past research on civil unrest. The third section will briefly review the events that led to the August 2014 Ferguson unrest. After introducing my data and methods, I present my analysis of the main accounts identified in my material.

# Theoretical framework: Accounts of denial

The concept of *accounts* has been the focus of various sociological studies. Terri Orbuch (1997) divides the use of accounts by sociologists into two categories. The first is to explain behaviors that are deviant from social norms. The second emphasizes the different ways in which people explain events while putting less emphasis on the way accounts are constructed. This paper aligns with the second approach and examines how protesters utilized their accounts to explain violence while navigating contentious issues.

Erving Goffman (1959, 1971) explored how accounts can protect one’s image or sustain good standing. Goffman view accounts as a part of remedial work that function ‘to change the meanings that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable’ (Goffman, 1971, p. 109). According to Goffman, a ‘good’ account successfully alters the offensive meaning of an act. More explicitly, Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968) define an account as ‘a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior whether that behavior is his own or that of others’ (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Scott and Lyman classify two main categories of accounts: excuses and justifications. Both function by neutralizing an act or its questionable results. Accordingly, accounts are not simply explanations since they must relate to untoward acts.

Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) explored these techniques and examined the spectrum of responses used to account for delinquency. These responses include the denial of responsibility – claiming the act is out of an individual’s control; the denial of injury – questioning the severity of the act; the denial of the victim – claiming that there is no actual victim; the condemnation of the condemners – delegitimizing those who disapprove of the act, and, finally, the appeal to higher loyalties – claiming the deviant act is done for a greater cause or due to pressing reason (Sykes & Matza, 1957). This spectrum of accounts is used to neutralize deviant behavior and directly relates to internalized norms that allow behaviors to be accepted by those who engage in them.

Building on these theories of naturalization and denial techniques, Stanley Cohen (2001) further investigates official accounts by governments and their responses to atrocities and human rights violations. Cohen distinguished between three forms of official accounts of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory denials. *Literal denial* is when governments completely deny the facts they are accused of, asserting that nothing has happened. While authoritarian regimes usually employ this type of denial, it can also be found in democratic countries. *Interpretive denial* occurs when officials admit that something has happened but deny the interpretive framework of the accusation. This form of denial includes partially admitting some of the accusations but identifying them as isolated or unusual events. Interpretive denial can also be achieved by means of euphemism and by raising the issue of the legality of the actions. Other interpretive denial techniques include denial of responsibility, framing the act as a countermove, or self-defense. Interpretive denial is not denying that an event occurred but rationalizing, justifying, or evading the accusations.

Finally*, implicatory denial* is when the implications of the acts are denied. Cohen argues that it focuses not on the knowledge of the acts but on how it is used. This type of denial may be achieved in several ways, such as appealing to higher loyalty – the circumstances made any other course of action impossible; denial of the victim – blaming the other side; contextualization and claiming that the circumstances were unique; defending accusations by arguing that the details of the event complicate the situation and denying the applicability of universal standards, and, finally, advantageous comparisons – comparing moral compasses by accusing the accusers of being hypocrites, comparing their wrongdoing to one’s own, and condemning the condemners. According to Cohen, other official forms of denial include various counteroffensive techniques such as accepting partial responsibility for an action but denying that it is a policy or accepting blame but vowing to correct the situation.

Previous research has utilized Cohen’s framework on accounts of denial in various ways. Some focused on the denial of atrocities and human rights violations by governments and perpetrators to maintain a positive self-image by minimizing their involvement in human rights crimes (Bryant et al., 2018). Others (Siddiqui et al., 2019) demonstrated how the use of denial accounts has contributed to a culture of denial in a society where human rights violations are ignored

A different set of studies utilized Cohen’s work to explain how private corporations respond to criminal scandals. These studies demonstrate how corporations often use denial to project a positive image to maintain their business activities. Corporations may use implicatory denial to justify their actions by appealing to a higher loyalty (al Weswasi, 2019). They may also use interpretive denial to reframe criminal activities to gain public support, either by claiming responsible capitalism credentials (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2016) or by using denial and other positive statements to highlight their social contribution (Whyte, 2016). These studies also underscore how the use of denial interacts with the values and norms of public discourse (Whyte, 2016).

While the studies above focus on formal accounts of denial, Cohen’s work is also used to explore accounts of denial from an individual perspective. Hanna Paul and Matthew Adams (2019) revealed how sustainability tourists use denial to account for their choice to use unsustainable means of transportation (e.g., flying) by using implicatory denial to justify their choices and define themselves as sustainable tourists (Paul & Adams, 2019). Moreover, Efrat Shoham (2012) demonstrated how online talkback posts published in response to police brutality used accounts of denial to minimize the negative meaning of violent acts. Shoham highlighted the denial of bystanders, another interest of Cohen, who were able to legitimize their support of police use of violence. Both studies demonstrated how official denial is used to explain individual accounts of denial from the point of view of the self and bystanders.

This study focuses on accounts by activists who are both participants and bystanders. While Shoham demonstrated how talkback posts reacted to events by outsiders, in Ferguson, activists had to account for the violence as both bystanders and participants in the protests. Although they were not involved directly in the violent acts, the activists had to account for them to counter their opponents, gain support and mobilize others. Therefore, denial had the dual purpose of reframing the protests as non-violent and exposing the underlying causes of the protesters’ grievance – state-sanctioned violence against People of African Descent.

# Civil unrest: Understanding the use of violence in contentious events

Civil unrest has been a common practice to air grievances and demand change throughout history. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, studies on contentious politics have explored civil unrest from various perspectives. Researchers have explored the causes of civil unrest, identifying flashpoints that trigger unrest (Waddington, 2010). Different studies have also tried to identify ideological motivations that catalyze civil unrest (Marx, 1970). Some focused on the causes contributing to the differences between unrest events, their intensity, and the patterns they manifest (Abu-Lughod, 2007; Schneider, 2014). These studies focus on revealing the underlining causes of the unrest and the different ways to predict them while explaining variations between them.

Other scholars have tried to provide a novel outlook on civil unrest by focusing on its political meaning and function. Studies of this kind focus on the political ethos of unrest (Sokhi-Bulley, 2015, 2016). Some argue that civil unrest is an act that demands visibility from the state and its institutions by rejecting the norms of ‘respectable politics.’ Thus, it provides its participants, who are often excluded from the political sphere, tools to fight their marginalization (Kaulingfreks, 2008; Vinthagen, 2006). Others have suggested that we should understand the antagonism that unrest reveals. Imogine Tyler (2013), for example, used the double meaning of the word revolt to explain how British neo-liberalism led to the creation of ‘revolting subjects.’ These subjects are perceived as a revolting underclass (in both senses of the word), leading to a lack of public support for their protest action. Coherent with this line of thinking, some scholars have suggested that the Ferguson unrest challenged the norms of protesting by African Americans, moving away from a romantic view of the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s toward a new form of struggle that rejects the ‘right way’ to protest (Glaude, 2014; Smith, 2014). Moreover, these studies provided the background for other studies focusing on the participants of unrest.

Various studies on civil unrest focus on the different motivations that lead individuals to use violence as a means of protest. Juta Kawalerowicz and Michael Bigs (2015) focused on the socioeconomic background of the protesters as motivation for using violence and argue that the lack of social infrastructure creates alienation and frustration, leading to the use of violence. Yair Yassan (2021) argued that the choice to use violence during protests can be understood by protesters in several ways: as a reaction to police violence, as a cost-beneficial act that raises awareness of social problems of marginalized groups, and as an act that questions the legitimacy of the state. Like Yassan, Mattias Wahlström (2011) also focused on protesters’ narratives of retrospective accounts of violent confrontations with the police. Wahlström demonstrated how narratives of provocation were used to redefine violent clashes.

However, unlike Yassan and Wahlström, this study focuses on the immediate response to the protests and the accounts of the events as they unfolded. Moreover, by focusing on immediate reactions to violence by non-violent participants in the Ferguson unrest, this paper aims to expose how activists utilized accounts of denial to navigate between the need to counter the labeling of the protests as violent, to mobilize support and to expose the source of their grievance, which is the violence enacted by the state daily.

# The Ferguson unrest: Context and background

On August 9, officer Darren Wilson stopped Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson for jaywalking. According to Wilson’s testimony before a grand jury, he suspected the two were involved in a theft from a nearby convenience store. However, it was not clear if Wilson was aware of this at that time (Department of Justice (DOJ) Report, 2015; State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, 2014; Millitzer & Culley, 2014; Siddiqui & McCormack, 2015). According to Wilson’s testimony, an altercation developed between him and Brown resulting in Wilson shooting and killing Brown, who was unarmed (Buchanan et al., 2015; DOJ, 2015). After the authorities failed to remove Brown’s body for four hours, about 200 residents gathered around Brown’s body, enraged by the authorities’ behavior. In response, police forces, including SWAT teams, arrived at the scene. However, that evening concluded peacefully (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015).

The next day, after the Ferguson police department refused to publish Wilson’s name, further frustration from locals grew, followed by protests in several locations across town. As tension grew, more police forces headed to Ferguson and confronted protesters. That night 30 protesters were arrested, and violence erupted; a convenience store was set on fire, local businesses were looted, and several police cars were damaged. The police used riot gear, tear gas, dogs, and armed vehicles to disperse the protesters (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015; Siddiqui & McCormack, 2015). For the next several days, protests vacillated between peaceful during the day and eruptions of violence and standoffs with police forces during the night (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015). By August 16, Missouri governor Jay Nixon declared a state of emergency and called in the local National Guard, who were gradually removed three days later (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015). The major protests ended on August 25, the day of Brown’s funeral, at his family’s request (Siddiqui & McCormack, 2015).

During the 17 days of protests, as a direct response to their conduct during the protests, protesters, locals, and journalists accused the police of misconduct, illegal arrests, use of excessive force, provoking violence, and violations of freedom of speech and the right to protest. Following these accusations, Ferguson police requested the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services at the DOJ for an assessment report to review its conduct. The report sided with some of the accusations. Moreover, it also highlighted that Brown’s death was merely a trigger that exposed years of tense police relations with the community (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015). Further investigation into the Ferguson police department, initiated by the DOJ, revealed systematic racial discrimination within the justice system of Ferguson and St. Louis County, which targeted the community of People of African Descent (Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department, 2015). Following the report’s conclusions, the DOJ filed a lawsuit against the Ferguson police department and demanded the implementation of extensive changes to its justice system.

The Ferguson unrest exposed a troubled history of racial relations in St. Louis County, which local activists helped to expose by utilizing social media. However, they also could not ignore the violence that occurred during the protests, which was instrumentalized by those opposed to the demonstrations to discredit the protesters (Freelon et al., 2016). Activists turned to Twitter to bring attention to what happened in Ferguson and to account for the events as they unfolded.

# Data and method

Over the last two decades, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become essential tools for activists, allowing them to mobilize, organize, gain visibility, and promote their messages locally and globally (Gerbaudo, 2012; LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2018; Neumayer & Rossi, 2018; Penney & Dadas, 2014; Rane & Salem, 2012). Social media affect how contentious events are perceived by those who participate in them and by observers (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Studies have shown that Twitter enabled ordinary citizens to reframe and counter the narratives provided by other media outlets while allowing marginalized voices to be heard (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016; Moody-Ramirez et al., 2016). For this reason, Twitter is a useful source of data for exploring how activists respond to state-sanction violence. During the Ferguson unrest, local activists used Twitter as a prominent tool, exposing the source of their grievances and capturing people’s attention in the US and the wider world (Carr, 2014).

To examine how activists navigated between gaining support for their struggle while accounting for the violence that erupted during the protests, this research utilized thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of Twitter’s timeline of three crowdsource elite activists. Unlike other studies that have utilized random samples based on hashtags or keywords related to the Ferguson unrest (e.g., Blackstone et al., 2017; LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2018), this paper focuses on the full Twitter timeline of three activists who participated in the protests and used the social media platform to describe their accounts of the events. A detailed analysis of protesters’ timeline between August 9, 2014, the day of Michael Brown’s death, and August 25, 2014, the end of the major protests, allowed me to expose more nuanced conversations about the unrest. This level of detail is not possible using sample data based on hashtags. Moreover, focusing on a full timeline and not on sample tweets also allowed me to track changes in dynamics and strategies as events unfolded concerning the police investigation into the death of Brown, mainstream media reports, and actions taken by local authorities.

The three activists whose Twitter feeds were analyzed are Antonio French, Johnetta Elzie, and DeRay Mckesson. They have been recognized by previous research and national media as crowdsource elites within the Ferguson Twitter network, gaining tens of thousands of followers during the days of the unrest (LeFebvre & Armstrong, 2018; Mandaro, 2014; They Helped Make Twitter Matter in Ferguson Protests, 2015). Each protester’s Twitter timeline was chronologically archived and then coded. In total, 4201 tweets were coded, including tweets and retweets by the three activists.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The codes were then thematically sorted by different types of accounts. Out of these themes, three major accounts of the violent acts during the protest arose: interpretive denial, implicatory denial, and positive representations of the protests, including highlighting peaceful demonstrations and supporting the local community and protesters (e.g., mobilizing clean-up and food drives). These responses allowed the activists to respond credibly to the framing of the unrest by the mainstream media as riots and their participants as troublemakers (Blackstone et al., 2017; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). They were also able to mobilize support by exposing police misconduct during the protests and highlighting state-sanctioned violence that had led to the unrest. Therefore, accounting for violent acts was crucial in maintaining momentum for the protests and avoiding the protesters’ claims being obscured or misrepresented.

# Interpretive denial: ‘THIS IS NOT A RIOT!’

According to Cohen (2001), interpretive denial responds to accusations not by challenging the facts but by offering a different interpretation of the events or practices in question. French and Elzie initially addressed the various acts of violence and did not ignore them. French, for example, posted images of a broken ATM and the convenience store QuickTrip on fire (French, 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, Elzie mentioned vandalizing local businesses (Elzie, 2014a). This amounts to an admission of the use of violence but not accounting for them. However, as the days went by, as all three took an active role in the demonstrations and in reporting them on Twitter, the use of interpretive denial became more apparent as all three used various framings to account for violent acts such as looting, arson, and property damage.

One form of Interpretive denial took the form of an outright rejection of the label of ‘riot.’ Elzie, for example, rejected the labeling by tweeting:

THIS IS NOT A RIOT! (Elzie, 2014b).

RT @FLOCKAfierce: Some people have a fundamental misunderstanding of what a RIOT is (Elzie, 2014c).

Another way of resisting the riot label was by explaining what is ‘really going on’, for example:

no rioting in #Ferguson when we got down here. Just angry citizens telling the police to leave their neighborhood @kushdonmarley (Elzie, 2014i).

This tweet uses interpretive denial to clearly distinguish between grievance and the use of violence. Here the use of denial allows us to reframe the situation and highlight the source of the protest, the citizens’ anger.

Another way of avoiding the labeling of a riot was by minimizing the occurrence of violent acts and highlighting the protests.

I’d like people to stop calling this the #Ferguson riots. No rioting happened. Lots of protesting and pockets of looting (Mckesson, 2014k).

In this tweet, rioting and looting are not perceived as the same, and looting is minimized to singular events in contrast to ongoing demonstrations. While there is an admission that violence occurred, it is marked as an out-of-the-ordinary event.

The following tweet also gives a different meaning to what may seem like a violent act:

Protestors escape tear gas, break window at McDonald’s. No looting. #Ferguson #MikeBrown (French, 2014h).

Here, French de-criminalized what may seem like a violent act by reinterpreting it as self-defense against police violence.

A different form of interpretive denial aimed to distinguish legitimate protesters and those who used violence. Whether describing those who used violence as ‘not protesters’ (French, 2014f), as opportunists that are not aligned with protest goals (French, 2014g), or as people who exploit the situation for personal gain (Mckesson, 2014f). These tweets framed the violence and the protests as two different events and differentiated between two types of participants: protesters and ‘fighters’ that, in some cases, were also distinguished by location (French, 2014j). The use of denial in these tweets helped to delineate a clear boundary between violent acts and demonstrations.

In Ferguson, the interpretive denial employed by activists provided a counter-narrative to mainstream media reports, mostly focused on violent acts and not peaceful demonstrations. By acknowledging that violence did occur but distancing the protests from it, activists could reframe the events as legitimate, justify their participation, and, more importantly, gain support in their calls for justice for Brown.

# Implicatory denial: ‘Only Ppl Rioting in STL are the Police’

The dominant type of denial within all three Twitter feeds was implicatory denial. As Cohen (2001) notes, this type of denial does not refute the deviant act or the knowledge about it but focuses on how it is used. During the protests, the three activists used implicatory denial in several ways: appealing to higher loyalty, contextualization, and advantageous comparisons.

**Appealing to higher loyalty**

Denial by appealing to higher loyalty provided an instrumental point of view of labeling the protest as riots. In this case, the activists’ focus was refuting the idea of riots as senseless violence:

I won’t talk bad about the looters. Or rioters. That’s what caused all the cameras & media to pay attention to the murder of #MikeBrown (Elzie, 2014l).

RT @zellieimani: Stop demonizing riots. Without riots you’d still be working 10-12 hours six days a week (Elzie, 2014g).

In these two tweets, there is no attempt to avoid the labeling of riots. Instead, they are depicted as useful acts that may bring positive change, whether by gaining attention for the source of the grievance –the killing of Brown– or by connecting them to historical moments of positive change, such as labor movements. Even here, the activists did not endorse the violence as such but seemed to treat it as a necessary evil.

**Contextualization**

Contextualization was employed to highlight that the violent acts did not come ‘out of nowhere’ but were a reaction to a history of troubled relations between Ferguson’s residents and law enforcement that led to Brown’s death. Moreover, contextualization helped to negate the claims that the violence was senseless or predatory. For example, these types of claims came in President Obama’s statement in response to the events. Obama argued: ‘There is never an excuse for violence against police, or for those who would use this tragedy as a cover for vandalism or looting’ (Welker & McClam, 2014). While recognizing Brown’s death as a tragedy, Obama’s statement framed violence as being perpetrated by predatory criminals without addressing its underlying causes.

The following tweets demonstrate the use of contextualization to explain the violence as a reaction to these causes:

#Ferguson is why we need Civilian Review Boards. Anger, frustration & potential violence comes when ppl lack faith that they’ll get justice. (French, 2014c).

I don’t condone looting, but I respect your anger. I respect your pain. And I respect how long you’ve waited to be seen. #Ferguson (Mckesson, 2014e).

These tweets explain the context of why some choose to employ violence while highlighting the source of the grievance. Here, denial is used to expose the problematic nature of police-community relations in Ferguson and the distrust between residents and the justice system that goes beyond Brown’s killing. The sources of these problematic relations were revealed months later in the DOJ investigation (Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department, 2015).

Other tweets that provided contextualization referred to the source of the violent acts – the anger, the fear, and the frustration that led to the use of violence. In these tweets, activists highlighted that this type of outlet is understandable because there was no other choice:

The question is what outlet can we give these young men to let out their (justified) anger in a non-violent, constructive manner. Ideas? (French, 2014d).

Here, French implies that there was no way to avoid violence since there were no other serious political outlets. Furthermore, Elzie highlights that the anger is a result of a hopeless situation:

This anger is justified. What else is there to do?? Keep getting harassed? Keep getting killed?! (Elzie, 2014f).

In this tweet, implicatory denial is tapped into the source of the grievance and utilized to expose the dire situation of state-sanctioned violence that People of African Descent face daily in Ferguson.

The three activists used contextualization to deny the source of the violence. By reframing and highlighting the underlying causes that led to the use of violence, they were able to counter the claims of those who framed the violence as senseless or predatory. In this way, they could acknowledge the use of violence and its reason while not fully supporting it.

**Advantageous comparisons**

*Comparing moral compasses*

Another way the activists used implicatory denial was by comparing the morality of killing Brown to the morality of violent acts such as looting or arson. For example, Elzie’s tweets criticized those who condemn looting and arson but not Brown’s killing:

QT CAN REBUILD! Nobody can bring this child back. Nobody. (Elzie, 2014d).

!!! RT @TheBlackVoice: This boy was slain in cold blood and they left his body out for four hours. And you’re upset at some looting? (Elzie, 2014e).

Mckesson reinforced this comparison by revealing the ontological perception behind Brown’s death – the dehumanization of People of African Descent:

This is America finally acknowledging that black bodies are seen as weapons, as inherent threats, in America. #mikebrown #neverforget (Mckesson, 2014a).

This example exposes the ontological perception of the Black body as non-human, as a threat, and reinforces the moral comparison between Brown’s death and property damage by exposing the hypocrisy of those who treat property the same way as human life. Moreover, comparing moral compasses was, again, a way to expose the origin of the violence – the state and its agents.

*Condemning the condemner*

Many tweets that employed implicatory denial focused on police forces and their use of violence against protesters. In the following example, Elzie attached the labeled the police as rioters:

ONLY PPL RIOTING IN STL ARE THE POLICE. #STL #FERGUSON #FergusonMO (Elzie, 2014j).

Other tweets blamed the police for provoking violence by using rubber bullets or tear gas against protesters and violating constitutional rights (Elzie, 2014k; Mckesson, 2014b; French, 2014i). In some tweets, police were depicted as acting like they were in a war zone (Elzie, 2014m). Mckesson also highlighted state-sanctioned violence by attaching images of tear gas shells or describing illegal arrests with the words ‘This is America’ (Mckesson, 2014g, 2014j). Moreover, tweets regarding the police focused on the sheer numbers of police officers and the use of military equipment such as armored cars (Mckesson, 2014h). Tweets like this aimed to minimize the violence perpetrated by protestors by comparing it to the inordinate militarized response of the authorities.

Condemning the police shifted the focus of the violence away from the protesters and exposed a greater problem of police militarization and the problematic use of tactics to suppress protests used against civilians. Here, denial was used for two purposes: to cast the police as the brutal party and shift the label of violence from the protesters. In so doing, they could expose state-sanction violence employed by the police – the source of the grievance of the protests.

# Shifting focus: Positive representations of the protests

While accounts of denial were a tool that helped activists to navigate between addressing the violence and mobilizing support, they were not the only tactics that activists used. Along with the use of denial, the three activists also focused on positive representations of the protests, such as peaceful demonstrations, clean-ups, protecting local businesses, supporting other protesters by providing food and medical support, and helping to de-escalate volatile situations. These tweets bolstered the use of denial by creating a counter-narrative to the labeling of the demonstrations as violent. Moreover, focusing on the positive aspects of the protests helped the activists legitimize their participation in the demonstrations.

Other than underscoring the peaceful aspect of the protests, the activists also highlighted a strong sense of mutuality and solidarity among locals and protestors by using the ethos of the community. Elzie and Mckesson, for example, described unity among residents:

Don’t let anybody fool you into thinking that these aren’t peaceful protests. There’s an incredible sense of community here. #Ferguson (Mckesson, 2014d).

Tension is high. it’s clear who EVERYONE is mad at. when I say EVERYONE I mean the entire community. Black/White/Asian/Latino #Ferguson (Elzie, 2014h).

In these two examples, the community provided a unifying source demonstrating vast support for the protests and their grievances, which helped to justify the demonstrations.

Finally, another element that helped to employ a positive outlook of the protests was by describing their atmosphere. In these tweets, the activists used positive emotions such as love and joy to describe the protests (Mckesson, 2014i). For example, Mckesson (2014c) quoted a protester describing the protests as ‘a block party’ and in another tweet, French (2014e) described a protest as beautiful. These tweets helped to contrast the reports on violence and contributed to the interpretive denial that the activists used by reframing the protests as a positive event. By using emotions, the protests became beautiful, and peaceful, with provoked positivity, while encounters with police were war-like, and evoked fear and tension. These contrasting atmospheres reinforce the use of denial to expose the ‘true nature’ of the protests and allowed the protests to be reframed as non-violent as well as to mobilize support from outsiders.

# Conclusions

This paper explored how activists navigated between labeling the protests as violent and mobilizing support from the public during the Ferguson unrest in August 2014. By employing Stanly Cohen’s framework of official denial (2001), this paper demonstrated how three crowdsource elite activists utilized various forms of denial during the Ferguson protests to navigate dilemmas that arose from the use of violence during the protests. Activists had to address the violence to avoid alienating supporters and evoking criticism from their opponents. Moreover, denial was utilized to expose racially motivated state-sanctioned violence against their community, thus justifying their grievances and gaining support nationally and globally.

Each form of denial was employed for different purposes. Interpretive denial was primarily used to create a counter-narrative to the mainstream media and other critics for focusing on the violence during the protests. This set of tweets rejected labeling the protests as ‘riots’ and used to separate between violent acts and protests. Furthermore, all three protesters also promoted positive representations of the demonstrations by highlighting their peaceful aspects. Combined with interpretive denial, the activists could gain support for their struggle and divert the narrative from predatory violence such as looting, which also relates to personal rather than collective gain.

Implicatory denial served to expose state-sanctioned violence used by police during the protests. Here, activists used various accounts of denial – contextualizing the violent reaction by some of the protesters, comparing the morality of Brown’s death and property damage but mainly highlighting the problematic and violent behavior of the police during the protests. Implicatory denial served as a response to accusations regarding useless and predatory violence. However, it later exposed the racially discriminatory nature of policing and the justice system in Ferguson and St. Louis County. Exposing state-sanctioned violence against the community of People of African Descent in Ferguson helped mobilize others and contributed to transforming BLM from an online campaign into a mass movement in the US and across the world.

This study allowed us to gain a nuanced perspective into how activists can justify their actions and grievances while accounting for controversy. The study also demonstrated how activists utilized methods similar to official discourses of denial that governments and corporations usually use to deny their wrongdoing and how they use them to expose state oppression and violence against their community. Moreover, this paper adds to the existing literature on civil unrest by shifting the conversation away from the use of violence or its meaning by focusing on how activists can navigate it while still achieving their goals. This dynamic has been repeated in many cases, from protests that included monuments toppling to recent activism against climate change. This study offers a theoretical and methodological framework for analysis that can be applied to different struggles and contentious repertoires.

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1. This initial wave of protests started a day after Brown's death and ended on August 25th, 2014. Another civil unrest was sparked in November after the grand jury decided not to indict the officer who shot Brown. However, this unrest was far shorter, and local authorities anticipated the protester’s reaction. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The analysis did not include video content that French and Mckesson uploaded via Vine (a total of 479 tweets). Vine users could post up to six-second videos and share them on Twitter and other social media platforms. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)