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# Conversations On Controversy: An Examination Of Internet Discussions On High-Profile Incidents Of Recorded Police Brutality

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**CONVERSATIONS ON CONTROVERSY: AN EXAMINATION OF INTERNET DISCUSSIONS  
ON HIGH-PROFILE INCIDENTS OF RECORDED POLICE BRUTALITY**

by

**BRITTANY JEFFERSON**

**THESIS**

Submitted to the Graduate School of

Wayne State University,

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Advisor

Date

## DEDICATION

To Sean Anthony, Arielle Elisha and Arianna Gabrielle. Thank you for always being everything.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### Background

Initially, there were few headlines when motorist Walter Scott was shot and killed during a traffic stop in North Charleston, South Carolina on April 4, 2015. Officer Daniel Slager pulled Scott over for a malfunctioning turn signal and Scott, who feared he had open warrants, attempted to flee on foot. Slager claimed that when he tried to stop Scott, the motorist grabbed his taser and attempted to use it to subdue the officer. According to the Charleston Post and Courier (Slade, 2015), while being interviewed following his arrest Slager claimed that he feared for his life and decided that he no other choice than to use his service weapon to fire eight rounds into Scott (Knapp, 2015).

The police car dash-cam footage matched Slager's account; the stop went as planned until Scott attempted to flee. Upon a standard investigation, Slager was found to have acted appropriately. The local media reported the incident as the North Charleston police department relayed it to them; a violent and uncooperative criminal was killed during a struggle with an officer who was just doing his job (Pan, 2016).

On the morning of April 4, 2015, Feidin Santana was walking to his job when he noticed Slager on top of Scott and heard the sound of a taser being used. He decided to use his smartphone to record the incident as it unfolded (Bauerlein, 2015). The video begins as Scott is running away from Slager and shows an account that completely conflicts with Slager's version of the events. Santana's video shows that Scott did indeed flee, but the rest of Slager's account was a complete fabrication. Scott never had any weapon of any kind in his possession, Slager's life was not threatened and when the shots were fired, they were fired in to Scott's back as he ran away from Slager. The video even shows Slager dropping a



taser near Scott's body in an effort to set the scene for his lie. As the video ends, Slager is shown speaking into his radio, rather than administering first aid to Scott. It was later revealed that Slager did not use the radio to request an ambulance or any kind of help for the man he has just shot, instead to her further perpetuates his lie about the incident saying "he tried to grab my taser." Another officer Clarence W. Habersham Jr. is also shown on the video, appearing to examine Scott while wearing latex medical gloves, however he did not attempt to offer any aid to Scott (Berman, Lowery & Kindy, 2015).

After coming forward Santana revealed he initially planned to stay silent with the information that he had and the recording in his possession. According to the Wall Street Journal, police officers attempted to detain Santana and he left the scene out of fear of what would happen because of what he witnessed. Santana later told MSNBC.com, "I thought about erasing the video and just getting out of the community, you know Charleston, and living some place else" (Bauerlein, 2015).

But as reports of the traffic stop appeared on the news, Santana was outraged at the erroneous reports that were being taken as fact. Santana was quoted as saying, "And when they continued with the lies I said 'I have to come forward'" (Holt, 2015). Santana initially feared retribution and wanted to remain anonymous, so he gave the recording to a member of the Scott family, who then distributed copies of the recording to the North Charleston Police and several media outlets (Bauerlein).

What began as an unfortunate reality of law enforcement quickly turned into a murder investigation and national news. Scott's death came in the midst of many high profile cases regarding potentially unlawful police shootings and claims of excessive force. But unlike many of the other cases Scott's death was not ambiguous and there were no

protests or calls for justice. Once the video evidence was produced, Slager was immediately arrested. After Slager's arrest he was charged with several crimes including murder, obstruction of justice, violation of civil rights and unlawfully using a weapon during the commission of a crime. Slager was later released on \$500,000 bail and placed on house arrest while awaiting a trial that is slated to begin in October of 2016. In court documents released after his arrest, Slager's account has changed from Scott actually taking the officer's Taser, to him being afraid that the suspect's irrational behavior could lead to producing a weapon at some point in the interaction. He has claimed to feel "threatened" and that he "feared for his life", even as Scott ran away (Rindge, 2015).

Videotaped instances of alleged police brutality have been in the news and the subject of social unrest since at least the early nineties, when victims such as Rodney King and Malice Green were thrust into the spotlight after altercations with law enforcement. The difference is now, a bystander having a camera readily available is no longer an anomaly, it is a given. This has led to a rise in the number of confrontations between civilians and law enforcement being filmed and exposed to public view. These incidents are no longer shrouded in mystery or left to be examined through the lens of first person accounts or immobile dash-cam footage. We are also no longer bound to the 6 o'clock news to view said videos. Instead of going to a news outlet and persuading them to publish the video, eyewitnesses can now simply pull out the smart phone and in a few clicks, record the video and then spread it to millions without even having to leave the scene. Additionally, these incidents and the accompanying videos have become topics of interest for viewers, so they are often sought out by the audience to be viewed and examined.

Videos showcasing purported incidents of police brutality can be useful because they seem to provide irrefutable evidence. However, there are many problems that come with footage. The videos are typically ambiguous, confusing or unclear. The point of view is often limited to the scope of the camera, the camera usually unsteady, the images can be fuzzy and the audio is sometimes nonexistent. Everything that is captured by the camera depends on the discretion of the person holding it. Furthermore, the context of the video is often unknown and completely contingent upon the interpretation the people present during the incident. This is further complicated by the vested interest all sides have in their actions being seen as appropriate and justified.

Analyzing these videos is difficult given the many opportunities for misinterpretation, but even when they are seemingly explicit, they tend to spark intense reactions and heated debates about the actual content, the perceived causes and the larger implications highlighted by the videos. In an attempt to better understand these conversations, I will conduct a content analysis of the comments left on the videos by viewers on various websites.

### **Purpose**

The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the kinds of reactions and conversations sparked in the comments sections of three websites by three high-profile instances of police-civilian interactions. Overall, this paper will seek to describe how viewers comment on the actual content of the videos and the larger social context of the videos so that future research may then analyze the content further.

The three videos that will be included in this analysis are the aforementioned shooting of Walter Scott, a 50-year-old Coast Guard veteran from North Charleston, South

Carolina; the chokehold death of Eric Garner, a 43-year-old man from Staten Island, New York who was killed after being confronted by NYPD officers for selling untaxed cigarettes and the shooting of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy from Cleveland, Ohio who was shot for being suspected of being in possession of a hand gun. These three videos were selected because they were all highly publicized and featured on several different websites that featured comments sections.

The three websites that will be compared are the video-sharing site YouTube, MSNBC.com and NYTimes.com. These three sites were selected because each represents a different venue to view and communicate about the videos. The sites have different ideological perspectives and moderation policies and generally attract different audiences. This analysis will specifically look for the kind of comments made about the actual content of the video, the comments made about the larger social or political context of the video, such as racism or police brutality as well as comments that do not related to the two aforementioned categories.

Several theoretical frameworks will be used to examine the thematic topics of the comments. The primary frameworks will be the dual-process models of persuasion: the heuristic-systematic model and the elaboration likelihood model. This analysis will also use the Spiral of Silence model and theory of framing to explore the prevalence of certain topics and the absence of others.

This analysis found that ultimately that some combination of moderation of the platform, expectations of the community and the specifics of the incident seem to play a role in the topics that are discussed in relation to police brutality videos.

The results show that although several different topics are commonly discussed, most comments focused on small cluster of categories. This suggests that although these incidents spur many kinds of conversation, most commenters are focused on either dissecting the video itself or debating about the larger social issues that cause such incidents.

## CHAPTER 2 Literature Review

### Race and Excessive Force

Police brutality is defined legally as a civil rights violation that occurs when a police officer acts with excessive force by using an amount of force with regards to a civilian that is more than necessary. Excessive force by a law enforcement officer is a violation of a person's right to freedom from the unreasonable interference from law enforcement. This right is also extended to physical safety and protects against injuries inflicted upon civilians by law enforcement officers arbitrarily (Terry V. Ohio, 1968). The Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution protects citizens from unlawful or unreasonable search and seizure. This protection also encompasses a person's physical integrity (Graham V. Connor, 1989). Excessive force is not subject to a precise definition, but it is generally beyond the force a reasonable and prudent law enforcement officer would use under the circumstances (US Legal, 2010). Historically, the African American community has had a tenuous and at times acrimonious relationship with police officers and law enforcements in general. Race has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of a negative attitude towards the police (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999).

Documentation of the distrust that the African American community harbors towards law enforcement dates back to the late 1800s, when violence and lynchings of African Americans at the hands of whites often went unpunished by law enforcement (Tolnay, Deane & Beck, 1996). Civil rights lawsuits against state and federal law enforcement agencies regarding unfair or violent treatment of black citizens and suspects date back to the 1930s (Brown et. al. v. Mississippi, 1936). During the civil rights movement, there were several large-scale clashes between protestors and police officers

that produced the earliest photographic evidence of the treatment that black people encountered when interacting with law enforcement.

Prominent cases of police brutality have occurred several times over the last 30 years (Dowler, 2003; Brunson, 2007), each time reigniting larger conversation about the treatment of black people at the hands police officers. However, beginning in 2012, with the death of Trayvon Martin, there has seemed to be a near constant presence of issues regarding the inherent criminalization of African Americans and the issues that can arise from it. Then in the summer of 2014 in a span of less than a month, three black men were killed during confrontations with law enforcement; Eric Garner in New York on July 17, John Crawford in Ohio on August 5 and Michael Brown in Missouri on August 9. Of these three deaths, civilians observing the incident captured two on video. Over the following year, Freddie Gray from Maryland and Sandra Bland of Texas mysteriously died while in police custody.

There were also incidents of law enforcement officers allegedly assaulting underage children. An off-duty police officer working as a security guard in a South Carolina High School was recorded dragging a female student from a classroom and a McKinney, Texas, police officer drew his weapon on several teens after a complaint of trespassing at a pool. Both of these incidents were recorded and distributed to the masses via YouTube.com and social media sites Facebook.com and Twitter.com. In each case the recording sparked an investigation that may not have occurred if not for the video evidence (Singyangwe, 2016; Fantz, Yan & Shoichet, 2015; Faussett & Southhall & 2015; The Guardian, 2014).

## Focusing Events

Michael Brown's death in the summer in 2014 and the subsequent protests turned the topic of police brutality into a national issue. Brown's death acted as a *focusing event*, a sudden, attention-grabbing event that elevated the topics of police brutality and institutionalized racism within law enforcement to foremost issue socially, politically and (Birkland, 1998).

In terms of Google searches, the amount of people searching for terms "police brutality" and "police brutality videos" nearly doubled between July 2014 and August 2014, the month of Brown's death. During this same time, the number of major news publications that featured stories about police brutality also increased (Google Trends, 2016).

Television news coverage of police brutality incidents also increased during the same time period, with national evening news programs featuring more reports about police brutality that are longer in time and featured earlier in the broadcast (Vanderbilt Archive, 2016) than they have been in the last five years.

While the number of police-related deaths has increased slightly over the years, there has not been a large spike in the deaths or injuries reported, simply a spike in the interest of the topic by both the media and the public. It is not entirely clear if the increase in news coverage of police brutality was the result of a demand for the coverage by media consumers or if the consumers themselves using alternative platforms forced traditional media to pick up the story or be left behind. The theory of agenda-setting posits that the news media influence the public's perception of an issue's importance through the amount and prominence of the coverage that the issue receives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Police brutality and the resulting protests have become a popular news topic, however the root of



that popularity may lie in the social media users pushing these stories to the forefront and demanding mainstream media coverage. The increased interest coupled with the technological capability of recording such events seemingly led to an increase in the number of available number of videos featuring police brutality widely accessible to the public. On Youtube.com alone, there are over 500,000 results for a search of the terms “police brutality”. Most of these videos have never been featured on news sites; however, many instances of police brutality that have not made it the level of national news have been featured on local news broadcasts.

### **Race and Crime**

The primary characteristic that has made most of the recent recorded instances of police brutality controversial is their racial component: the victims have overwhelmingly been African American and the offending officers are usually white. The tenuous relationship between African Americans and the criminal justice system in the United States has been fraught with accusations of racial profiling, harassment, abuse and inequitable treatment (Brunson, 2007).

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, racial profiling is defined as the “discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual's race, ethnicity, religion or national origin” (ACLU, 2004). Racial profiling is further defined in the by *Chavez v. Illinois State Police* as “being generally understood to mean the improper use of race as a basis for taking law enforcement action” (*Chavez v. Illinois State Police*, 2001).

In regard to racial profiling, a large-scale study conducted in Arizona found that African American and Hispanic drivers were much more likely to stopped and searched by

law enforcement. However, these searches and seizures were less likely to result in arrests or recovered contraband than stops that involved white motorists (Driving While Black: Racial Profiling On Our Nation's Highways, 1999; The Persistence Of Racial And Ethnic Profiling In The United States, 2009).

A comprehensive study of racial profiling complaints across the nation by the American Civil Liberties Union found the following;

- Empirical evidence confirms the existence of racial profiling on America's roadways. At the national level, the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that for the year 2005, the most recent data available (Durose & Langton, 2013).
- Police actions taken during a traffic stop were not uniform across racial and ethnic categories (ACLU, 2009).
- Black drivers (4.5%) were twice as likely as White drivers (2.1%) to be arrested during a traffic stop, while Hispanic drivers (65%) were more likely than White (56.2%) or Black (55.8%) drivers to receive a ticket (ACLU, 2009).
- In addition, Whites (9.7%) were more likely than Hispanics (5.9%) to receive a written warning, while Whites (18.6%) were more likely than Blacks (13.7%) to be verbally warned by police (ACLU, 2009).
- When it came to searching minority motorists after a traffic stop, Black (9.5%) and Hispanic (8.8%) motorists stopped by police were searched at higher rates than Whites (3.6%) (ACLU, 1999).
- The likelihood of experiencing a search did not change for Whites, Blacks, or Hispanics from 2002 to 2005 (Durose & Langton, 2013).

The prevalence of racial profiling and the resulting detention and searches of people of color who are subsequently found to not be breaking the law is one reason why some viewers are immediately critical of the actions of law enforcement officers in these situations.

Conversely, the stereotype of deviant, violent black man has endured for many years as what the prototypical criminal appears to be (Welch, 2007). The belief that to be black is to be inherently lawless is a belief that is rooted in harmful caricatures of African

Americans that date back to the pre-Civil War era (Hawkins, Laub, Lauritsen & Cothorn, 2000). Over time these caricatures evolved from African Americans being the cause of petty, senseless mischief and into African Americans being the root of predator crimes such as rape and murder.

In general African Americans are perceived by whites to be more violent, more likely to use drugs and less sensitive to pain (Kennedy, 1997). Studies have also shown that African Americans are often viewed by whites as more aggressive and more likely to commit crime in general (Drummond, 1990).

Although white people commit most crime in the United States and whites make up the largest percentage of inmates, a survey of crime statistics shows that per capita, African Americans males make up larger portion of the criminal justice systems population than other races. There is no conclusive evidence about what causes this phenomenon However, some studies suggest that racial profiling and institutionalized racism that makes it difficult for African American males to receive fair treatment from the criminal justice system (Hawkins, Laub, Lauritsen & Cothorn). This notion is supported by the fact that once African Americans are in the custody of the criminal justice system, they are also more likely to face harsher and longer sentences for the same crimes as whites (Welch, 2007).

### **Implicit Racial Attitudes & Biases**

The pervasiveness of racial profiling and the subsequent arrests and incarcerations that follow is partially explained by the phenomenon of implicit racial attitudes. An implicit racial attitude or association is a subconscious attribution of certain qualities to certain groups of people. Generally, an implicit attitude or association is an automatically activated response that occurs when people are exposed to certain stimuli. Several different

instruments have been devised to measure the way this response influences racial profiling and stereotyping (Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005; Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009).

Traditionally, a person's racial attitudes were measured using self-report, however contemporary the Implicit Association Test measures an individual's subconscious response to members of historically disadvantaged groups by having the test-taker complete a series of tasks that measures the automatic associations that the test-taker makes of certain skin-tones (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009).

These biases are activated unintentionally and can be positive or negative. According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity at the Ohio State University (Stratts & Patton, 2013) there are several features of implicit racial biases that must be considered when evaluating them;

- "Implicit biases are pervasive. Everyone possesses them, even people with avowed commitments to impartiality such as judges."
- "Implicit and explicit biases are related but distinct mental constructs. They are not mutually exclusive and may even reinforce each other."
- "The implicit associations we hold do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect stances we would explicitly endorse."
- "We generally tend to hold implicit biases that favor our own ingroup, though research has shown that we can still hold implicit biases against our ingroup."
- "Implicit biases are malleable. Our brains are incredibly complex, and the implicit associations that we have formed can be gradually unlearned through a variety of debiasing techniques."

Studies have also shown that people who have implicitly racist attitudes towards black people are more likely to have negative interactions with black people (McConnell & Leibold, 2000; Ziegert & Hanges).

The results of this study suggest that those people who previously hold negative attitudes about African Americans may unintentionally foster negative interactions with them in what is essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, these negative interactions may be the result of expecting to have a negative interaction.

The combination of institutionalized racial profiling and implicit negative racial attitudes can be lethal. It has the potential to lead to law-abiding African Americans' being detained for no reason and those interactions being more hostile and more likely to lead to excessive force. These findings give credence to the opinion that the pervasiveness of African Americans being the victims of police shooting is not due to a higher instance of criminality; rather it is the result of subconscious propensity of some law enforcement officers to view African Americans as criminals even when they are not.

Implicit racial biases may also contribute to those who view videos that feature an African American being harmed or killed at the hands of a white police officer finding fault with the victim regardless of context or circumstance or generally viewing the officer's actions as benevolent or appropriate without fully assessing the situation.

Mass media has long played a role in the perceptions that society at large has about the topics of race and crime. Following the race riots of the late 1960s, a federal committee was formed to determine what caused the riots and figure out how to keep them from happening again. The committee was commonly known as the Kerner Commission and produced the *Report Of The National Advisory Commission On Civil Disorders* to explain its findings. Among the many topics that the commission explored was the effect that mass media coverage of the riots had on media consumers. The commission summarized its findings as the following;

“A wide range of interviews with government officials, law enforcement authorities, media personnel and other citizens, including ghetto residents, as well as a quantitative analysis of riot coverage and a special conference with industry representatives, leads us to conclude that:

Despite instances of sensationalism, inaccuracy and distortion, newspapers, radio and television tried on the whole to give a balanced, factual account of the 1967 disorders. Elements of the news media failed to portray accurately the scale and character of the violence that occurred last summer. The overall effect was, we believe, an exaggeration of both mood and event. Important segments of the media failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and on the underlying problems of race relations. They have not communicated to the majority of their audience-- which is white—a sense of the degradation, misery and hopelessness of life in the ghetto.”

(United States Kerner Commission, 1968)

The detached nature of the coverage of the race riots led to the dehumanization of many of the participants and led the largely white audience to view them as violent aggressors as opposed to being partly victims of circumstance.

Entman (1992) found that many local news organizations perpetuated subtle “modern racism” and tended to report on African Americans in such a way that reinforced negative stereotypes. Entman and Rojecki (2001) also found that African Americans were more likely to be associated with negative stories and stories related to criminal activity when they were suspects or perpetrators, but less likely to be reported on when they were the victims of a crime.

These findings reinforce the belief that African Americans are rarely victimized or are often the cause of their own peril. When videos featuring police brutality are viewed through this kind of lens, it can influence the way a viewer interprets the interaction.

### **Online Communities & User-Generated Comments**

The comments featured below a video or news story are often as important as the content itself. The comments section allows users to respond and react to content in a way

that is impossible in any other format and illustrated the interactive nature of new media. These comments sections allow news consumers to interact with the content and with each other in a way that adds to the story and even guide the future practices of new outlets (Lee, 2012). On YouTube, the ability for viewers of content to provide feedback is vital to the website as it seeks to build a community where the audience has a constant and powerful opinion about what is being presented.

User-generated content and comments have become an increasingly important aspect of online journalistic content (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). The ability for media consumers to participate, collaborate and respond to current events has become standard in most online communities. Further, websites that allow and encourage online participation experience significantly more traffic than websites that do not (2008).

The adoption of audience participation also led for a need to control of those who chose to participate. News organizations were now tasked with a need to create a new set of standards and rules for content that commented on content. This led to gate keeping and moderation. Although many editors welcome user-generated comments, they have a need for the “right kind” of user-generated comments. This usually means comments that are informed, insightful and stimulate conversation. Debate is encouraged, arguments are sometimes tolerated but comments that stray off-topic or become personal or offensive are often seen as detrimental to the overall quality of the community that news organizations hope to foster (Janssen & Kies, 2005).

This presents a challenge for editors and moderators, to create a space that allows readers to participate but also allows for a safe, welcoming environment for all readers to communicate. Moderation that is too controlled may suppress the conversation that the

comment sections are intended to inspire (Van Dijck, 2009). One of the larger issues regarding user participation on established news organizations' websites is determining the value of user comments to organization overall. And although participation is considered a positive thing, as participation increases so does the burden of appropriately moderating the participation.

Issues that can be considered controversial present an especially difficult situation for news organizations that allow reader participation because they attract discussions that range from heated to outright offensive (Asakawa, 2013).

Finally, news organizations also have legal considerations. Since the organizations are private entities and what is posted in the comment sections becomes their property they must make sure that content is not libelous or infringing upon copyrighted material (Asakawa, 2013).

This means that news organizations must walk a fine line in fostering a collaborative community that encourages engagement, but also does not push against legal or social boundaries.

New media organizations also face these challenges in unique ways. Although they are not bound the same standards journalistically or legally, they still must determine how to nurture an environment that their users are content with. Platforms such as YouTube.com are even more invested in a thriving community than traditional news organizations are because the success of the platform is largely dependent upon an active and engaged community. The lack of established community standards give sites such as YouTube.com more leeway, but also give them more gray areas.

*YouTube Community*



YouTube is widely considered to be one the first, largest and most enduring examples of a large-scale participatory community (Chatzopoulou, Sheng, & Faloutsos, 2010). YouTube is the Internet's largest video sharing site. YouTube's interface allows for users to create a massive visual conversation that has caused creators of every kind of content imaginable to make themselves accessible via the platform.

According to its parent company Google, YouTube.com logs over 1 billion unique users each month and there are millions of new videos uploaded each day. On average, someone comments on YouTube.com video once every 8 seconds. These comments are essentially the lifeblood of YouTube (Chatzopoulou, Sheng, & Faloutsos). Much like the videos featured on the websites of news organizations, YouTube.com video usually only receive comments from users who feel particularly strong about what they have viewed (Van Dijck, 2009).

Prior research has shown that the most opinionated news consumers generally write user comments and that many readers use the comments to estimate what they believe to be the climate of public opinion about certain issues (Lee, 2012). It is difficult to illuminate the precise motivations of those who choose to actively participate in the comments sections versus those who choose to just observe. However, evidence suggests that those participate do so because it serves certain functions such as allowing them to educate others, express strongly held opinions and allows them to socially interact and feel included in the online community (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003).

However, there is also a subset of users who post inflammatory or offensive comments to be disruptive and make other user uncomfortable and angry. It may never be clear if these users truly believe the things that they are posting or if they simply enjoy

disturbing the online community. It should be noted that this particular analysis does not seek to understand the motivations behind the content posted, only to examine the content itself.

### **Moderation**

It is important to note before beginning this analysis that due to the moderation policies of the various websites, all of the comments submitted may not be available for analysis. The policies for each site differ greatly and will undoubtedly have an effect on the final analysis due to the fact that comments that may be relevant to the analysis have been deleted because they were not inline with moderation policies or community regulations. Of the three websites selected, NYTimes.com has the most restrictive policy;

“We are interested in articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article. Our standards for taste are reflected in the articles we publish in the newspaper and on NYTimes.com; we expect your comments to follow that example. A few things we won't tolerate: personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes), commercial promotion, impersonations, incoherence and SHOUTING (NYTimes.com, 2016)”.

NYTimes.com also chooses comments to display prominently. These “NYT Picks are a selection of comments that represent a range of views and are judged the most interesting and thoughtful. In some cases, NYT Picks may be selected to highlight comments from a particular region, or readers with first-hand knowledge of an issue” (NYTimes.com, 2016).

MSNBC.com also has several guidelines for participation it's community;

“MSNBC.com provides a forum for people to share and discuss topics relating to the news and MSNBC programming. We all want MSNBC.com to be a place to participate in open, thoughtful, and productive dialogue. As a member of the msnbc.com community, you are expected to foster healthy, open discussions by respecting others, avoiding self-promotion, and being

responsible for what you post. The Terms of Service—including Section 8 and this Code of Conduct—are a condition of your use and access to the online services. We reserve the right to moderate posts, suspend or remove users and otherwise take, or refrain from taking, any and all steps available to us once we become aware of any violation of these provisions” (MSNBC.com, 2016).

Alternatively, YouTube.com has no overarching moderation policy, whatsoever. YouTube.com gives users the opportunity to control the comments that appear under the videos that they post, but there is no governing body that can unilaterally determine that a comment is inappropriate and remove it from the website. Thus, YouTube.com largely depends on “self-moderation” from the community to police comments that may be deemed inappropriate. Videos that are posted to YouTube.com are generally considered the property the person who uploaded it. However, YouTube.com is granted a perpetual license to the material. This is pertinent because since YouTube.com does not own the content, they are usually not held legally responsible for it in the same manner that a news organization such as MSNBC.com or NYTimes.com.

This can be considered a positive thing as it relates this analysis; however, there are also negative aspects of this policy. YouTube essentially functions as a social media site, thus the comments a user makes are tied to a larger identity that they may have cultivated throughout the site. This is relevant for two reasons: 1) a user may not freely express their opinions and 2) they may express opinions, but subsequently delete them at a later time. These actions will remove certain comments from the conversation, making it difficult to assess the true nature of what is discussed on YouTube.com.

Overall the potential for comments being deleted is important to acknowledge because it removes content from the comment section. Although most moderation seeks to

only remove comments that are deemed disruptive to the community at large, this is left open to interpretation. On the websites of new organizations, a comment can be reported for review or deletion if someone believes that it violates the moderation policies. This can lead to unpopular opinions being removed because they are upsetting, not disruptive. Comments may also be removed because they contain improperly attributed quotes or links.

Reader comments are important because they represent the other side of digitization of the mainstream news. Over the last 20 years, the entire concept of what is news has changed completely. The audience is no longer limited letters to the editor, or op-ed pieces. Readers are now able to go directly to the source of the news and comment, not days or weeks later, but immediately. News organizations also now have a clearer picture of how their audience feels and they also have to option of responding accordingly. This creates more work for news organizations, but also new opportunities. Reader comments represent a new stage in the relationship between producers of media and consumers of media and allow consumers to take a more active role in the process.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### *Dual Process Theories*

Before comments upon a video, the viewer must first form some kind of opinion or impression about either the content of the video, the context of the video or both. There are many ways that a viewer may evaluate the message they have received. Dual process theories such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion and the heuristic-systematic model of social information processing (HSM) posit that persuasive messages can be processed differently depending upon several different factors (Petty, & Cacioppo,

1986; Petty & Wegener, 1999; Petty, Priester & Brinol, 2002; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004).

The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion describes a process in which potentially persuasive information is processed through one of two potential channels, the central route or the peripheral route. Information processed along the central route is processed logically based on the merit of the information provided. Information that is processed along the peripheral route is processed based on several different attributes that do not relate directly to the merit of the message itself, such as positive or negative cues surrounding the message. The two primary determinants of what route information will be processed along are motivation and ability. That is, how much a person wants to logically evaluate a message and how capable a person is of logically evaluating a message (Petty, & Cacioppo).

The heuristic-systematic model of social information processing posits that this judgment can be formed through one of two processes. When a viewer uses a systematic process, they evaluate the message as a whole and elaborate upon these evaluations to form a judgment. When a viewer uses heuristic processing they use fewer cues or even a single one to arrive at a judgment (Todorov, Chaiken & Henderson, 2002).

These two manners of information processing are relevant to this analysis as they essentially explain the ways that viewers interpret the videos that feature instances of police brutality. The aspect of the models that are most relevant to this research is the finding that messages that are processed heuristically or along the peripheral route are more likely to be judged based on cues that are not relevant to the validity or quality of message. In the context of recorded police-civilian interactions, this means that a viewer

may judge the situation based on their prior feelings regarding African Americans or suspected criminals as opposed to assessing the actions of the individuals in the specific situation. These evaluations can influence the kind of comments that viewers eventually make regarding the videos.

### *The Spiral of Silence*

There is some evidence to support the notice that the users who think their opinions jibe with the opinions of other users will willingly express themselves more than those who may be in the minority (Woong Yun & Park, 2011). It is important to note that the controversial nature of the video may cause many commenters to suppress their true opinions for fear that their unpopular opinions may cause the social media community to ostracize or harshly judge them. This reluctance to express these opinions only drives them further to the fringes creating the “spiral” that makes people even more unlikely to express said opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014).

Spiral of silence functions similarly in mediated environments that support user-generated comments, but there are some significant differences. Most importantly, the theory of selective exposure is more prevalent in online settings. It is much easier for users to search for and find opinions that are inline with their own. This also causes user to perceive the online environment as being more consonant that it truly is, which reduces the fear of isolation. Therefore, if a user does indeed encounter opposing viewpoints on a topic, it may be because they intentionally sought them out (Liu & Fahmy, 2011; Schulz & Roessler, 2012).

Additionally, the relative anonymity provided by social networking sites, such as YouTube.com has not necessarily been proven to neutralize the fear of isolation described

in spiral of silence. Although unpopular opinions may not follow a user into the “real world”, they still may face ostracism within the online community. Thus, the most prevalent predictors of opinion expression were issue importance and willingness to communicate about the issue, much like in non-mediated environments (Gearhart, & Zhang, 2014).

### *Media Framing*

A media frame is defined as “the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration (Tankard, 2001). Framing is further described by Entman, (1993, p.52), “selection and salience. 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 .” The framing and presentation of events and news in the mass media can thus systematically affect how recipients of the news come to understand these events. Framing is not an option. Media outlets and reporters inevitably frame a story when they select certain attributes to describe a person or story.

In the context of this analysis, the manner in which the video is framed by the person or entity posting the content will inevitably affect the way the way that commenters respond to that video. When considering the manner in which the video is presented to viewers, it is important to note that the videos posted to YouTube have significantly different parameters than the ones featured on the websites of the news organizations. Most importantly, the videos posted to the websites of news organizations are posted with

accompanying articles that provide additional context and information. It is possible that viewers may not read the accompanying article; however, if the article is read before viewing the viewer's perception of the video has already been influenced by what they have read. Alternatively, the videos posted to Youtube.com generally do not feature preceding articles. The videos do feature titles and captions that can include whatever text the user who has posted the video has decided to include. The most important thing to note here is that those who post the videos to YouTube have absolutely no standards governing what is placed in the caption. It can include perceptions, opinion or outright lies that may affect the way the viewer interprets and responds to the video that they view.

In addition to the caption, YouTube videos also feature information that tells the viewer how many times the video has been viewed, how many times it has been commented on and how many people have "liked" or "disliked" what they saw. All of these system-generated cues have the ability to influence the way a viewer may respond to what occurs in the video.

In addition to the framing of the video itself, the user-generated comments are also framed in a sense. First, all three websites selected for this analysis give users the opportunity to "like" or "dislike" the comments they read. These statistics are prominently featured near the comment and can potentially influence a user's opinion of a comment before they have had the opportunity to read it. In a sense, a comment that has been "liked" several times may appear to be more valid than one that has been "disliked" several times and a reader may make such a judgment before they take the time to read the comment for themselves. Users are also given the option to view the comments in one of two ways; by date posted or popularity. This means that a person reading the comments may be exposed



to popular comments first, which may also influence how they respond to the comments and even the video itself. For example, NYTimes.com elects certain comments as NYT Picks, which are described as “a selection of comments that represent a range of views and are judged the most interesting and thoughtful” and these are the default comments displayed to users. On YouTube.com, the setting defaults to whatever the user who has posted the video chooses; “top comments,” which are the comments that have received the most “thumbs up” votes or “most recent,” the comments that were most recently posted (NYTimes.com; YouTube.com, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

Thus far, most of the research regarding the comments that users leave is focused on the amount of comments, the frequency of comments or the motivations behind leaving the comment themselves. Generally, there is very little research regarding the thematic nature of the comments themselves. Therefore, the primary goal of this analysis will be to make a thematic evaluation of the available comments and illuminate the topics that are most often discussed by people who have decided to comment in reference to a particular kind of video. The following research questions reflect the goals of this analysis.

**RQ1:** *What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website of the New York Times?*

**RQ2:** *What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website of MSNBC.com?*

**RQ3:** *What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website YouTube?*

**RQ4:** *Are certain thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality more often than others across all platforms?*

**RQ5:** *Do the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality vary according to platform?*

**RQ6:** *Do the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality vary according to the particular instance of alleged police brutality?*

### **CHAPTER 3 Methods Sample**

The three websites selected for this study (NYTimes.com, MSNBC.com and YouTube.com) differ in interface and layout; therefore, a variety of methods were used to generate each sample depending upon the specific case and website being used. Each website has different community guidelines and moderation policies that had to be considered when collecting comments for examination. Further, the number of comments varied greatly depending upon the website and the particular case of police brutality. In addition to the aforementioned differences, there were two platform specific issues that greatly affected the kinds of comments available for analysis on the NYTimes.com and Youtube.com. NYTimes.com closes the comment section of the articles after a certain amount of time, because the comments are manually read by a human moderator and not an automated system. Thus, the sample of comments from NYTimes.com covers roughly 24-48 hours after the article was posted, then the section is closed and readers are encouraged to comment on more recent news. Also, there are several versions of each shooting video available on Youtube.com.

For the purpose of this analysis the videos that were selected were the ones that were closest to the raw video with as little additional commentary as possible because YouTube.com posters are not held to the same standard as journalists and there was no way to verify the information presented in the addition commentary. These variations were taken into consideration when determining which comments were eligible for analysis. Any comments that were not in English or deemed to be unintelligible were excluded from the analysis.

The unit of analysis for this study was the entire comment because the goal of the

study is to examine the comment holistically. Although a full comment can vary greatly in length it represents the thoughts of one commenter and thus, is evaluated entirely.

### **Platforms Examined**

The three platforms that were examined during this analysis were NYTimes.com, YouTube.com and MSNBC.com. The platforms were selected because of their prominence and the amount of traffic they receive from Internet users. Comments from each platform were randomly selected by arranging the comments by date and then selecting every fifth comment for analysis. Only the original comments were sampled, no replies were included in this analysis.

#### *NYTimes.com Comments*

NYTimes.com is the digital version of The New York, which has long been considered the “newspaper of record” in the United States (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Golan, 2006; Zelizer & Gudelunas, 2002). Overall, NYTimes.com is the 5<sup>th</sup> most visited website featuring news content and has a 1.51 share of the audience that reads digital news content (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2011). All three videos featured on the NYTimes.com were accompanied with articles that were on average approximately 2200 words long.

A total of 4,270 comments were available from NYTimes.com. Approximately 20% of those comments were analyzed for a total of 855 comments. There were 585 comments regarding Tamir Rice, of which 195 were analyzed. There were 2843 comments regarding Eric Garner, of which 415 were analyzed. There were 842 comments regarding Walter Scott, of which 260 were analyzed.

#### *Youtube.com Comments*

Youtube.Com is the largest video-sharing website on the Internet. It hosts over a billion unique viewers a year (Rainie, 2008). To collect comments from YouTube.com a search of the name of the victim in each video was conducted. A total of 5,245 comments were available from YouTube.com. Approximately 20% of those comments were analyzed for a total of 926 comments. There were 1,929 comments regarding Tamir Rice, of which 325 were analyzed. There were 603 comments regarding Eric Garner, of which 201 were analyzed. There were 2,713 comments regarding Walter Scott, of which 400 were analyzed.

#### *MSNBC.com Comments*

MSNBC.com is the digital version of the cable television news station MSNBC. It among the most popular websites visited by Internet users looking for information on current events (Olmstead, Mitchell & Rosenstiel). MSNBC bills itself as a “progressive community.” To collect comments from MSNBC.com a search was conducted with the name of each victim entered into the search engine. A total of 1980 comments were available from MSNBC.com. Approximately 20% of those comments were analyzed for a total of 396 comments. There were 446 comments regarding Tamir Rice, of which 90 were analyzed. There were 859 comments regarding Eric Garner, of which 172 were analyzed. There were 675 comments regarding Walter Scott, of which 135 were analyzed.

#### **Incidents Examined**

The following accounts of the incidents that are examined in this analysis were compiled from several different news sources that are cited as needed.

#### *Walter Scott*

Walter Scott was shot and killed April 4, 2015, in North Charleston, South Carolina. Scott was pulled over by officer Michael Slager for having a non-functioning brake light and

attempted to flee the scene because he feared that he was going to be arrested for owing child support. When Slager briefly returned to his patrol car, Scott fled and a chase ensued, (Knapp, 2015). When Slager caught Scott a physical altercation began, with Slager using his Taser to subdue Scott. Scott once again attempted to flee the scene and as he ran away Slager fired his service weapon 8 times, striking Scott 5 times. After Scott was shot, neither Slager nor his partner attempted to administer first aid. Scott died at the scene and was later found to have cocaine and alcohol in his system (Knapp, 2015). Bystander Fiedin Santana recorded Scott's death.

After the video and eyewitness testimony showed that Slager's account was false he was arrested and charged with several state and federal charges (Shoichet & Cuevas, 2015). There were a total of 4,230 comments across all three platforms regarding Walter Scott.

#### *Tamir Rice*

Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old boy who was shot and killed by a Cleveland police officer on November 22, 2014. Security cameras that were installed at the Cudell Recreation Center in Cleveland, Ohio recorded the entire incident. Rice was playing with what was later confirmed to be an airsoft replica gun when a civilian called 911 to report a "black male pointing a gun at people." At two points in the call, the civilian told the dispatcher that he believed the gun to be fake and at another point in the call he said he believed the person with the gun was "probably a juvenile" (Blackwell, 2014).

Timothy Loehmann, 26, and Frank Garmback, 46, were dispatched to the recreation center. Upon arrival at the park, Loehmann fired two shots from the still moving vehicle, one of which struck Rice in the torso. It was later determined that Loehmann fired his weapon less than one second after arriving on the scene (Izadi & Holley, 2014). Loehmann

radioed for an ambulance to assist a “20-year-old” black male, but neither he nor Garmback attempted to administer first aid to Rice. Rice was later pronounced dead at a Cleveland area hospital. Ultimately, a grand jury declined to prosecute Loehmann for his actions and Rice’s family was awarded \$6 million by the city of Cleveland. There were a total of 2,960 comments across all three platforms regarding Tamir Rice.

### *Eric Garner*

Eric Garner died July 17, 2014, after New York City Police officers detained him for illegal selling cigarettes on a street corner. When police officer Daniel Pantaleo attempted to put Garner in handcuffs, Garner swatted his arm away. Once Garner lost consciousness he was rolled onto his side and an ambulance was called (Sullivan, 2014). In the seven minutes that it took for the ambulance to arrive neither Pantaleo nor his partner Justin Damico attempted CPR. Garner was pronounced dead at a New York area hospital an hour later. The medical examiner determined that Garner died from a combination of “compression of neck (choke hold), compression of chest and prone positioning during physical restraint by police” and the death was ruled a homicide (Schram & Predergast, 2014). Bystander Ramsey Orta recorded Garner’s death.

A Grand Jury chose not to indict Pantaleo for his role in Garner’s death, however the city of New York did pay a \$5.9 million settlement to the Garner family (Eversley & James, 2014; Conlon, 2015). There was a total 4,305 comments across all three platforms regarding Eric Garner.

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a systematic, inductive research method that involves attempting to conceptualize new theory from data analysis. The process of using grounded

theory begins with data and then uses an iterative approach to refine the analysis of that data until meaningful concepts emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1965). This process involves using numerous phases of data collection, data analysis and fine-tuning (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Although theory building is often the stated goal of using grounded theory, the method is also useful for exploring any concept that has not been sufficiently studied.

### *Open Coding*

The method of grounded theory generally begins with open coding. Open Coding includes labeling concepts, defining and developing categories based on their properties and dimensions (Khandkar, 2009). Ultimately, the goal of open coding is to categorize the data into smaller subsets so that those categories can be further examined to find properties that typify the subsets (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### **Method of Analysis**

The method of analysis for this study was a content analysis. A content analysis is a "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952). The method is further defined as "a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables" (Kerlinger, 1986).

The kind of content analysis used in this study is conventional content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon, (2005). In this method the sample is examined to derive emergent categories from the text. Once the categories are developed specific definitions from categories are devised and a cohesive code is developed. It is important to note that Grounded theory and open coding were only used to devise the coding scheme for this



study and not for subsequent theory building.

### **Coding Scheme**

The coding was devised by using a similar case of police brutality, the shooting death of 17-year-old LaQuan McDonald by the Chicago Police Department on October 20, 2014. Comments from Youtube.com, MSNBC.com and NYTimes.com were collected and analyzed to find prevalent themes discussed within the comments across all sites. From these comments 16 separate categories were developed; support or defense of the actions of the police officer, support or defense of the actions of civilian, criticism of the actions of the law enforcement, criticism of the actions of the civilian, questions about content, claims that the video is fake or staged, alleged corruption of law enforcement, alleged criminality of civilians or a particular group of civilians, government or political agendas and rants against specific political parties or figures, references to other shootings or shooting victims, conspiracy theories about the purpose the shooting or video such as race wars, racial slurs about the victims or law enforcement officers in the video, non-racial insults about the victims or law enforcement officer in the video, religious proclamations or prayers, advertisements or solicitations not related to the video and other.

### **Coding Procedure**

The comments from each video were coded by each of the four trained coders. Each comment was labeled with the with the screen name of the person who left the comment and the date that the comment was left. The unit of analysis was the entire comment and each comment was analyzed for the presence or absence of each of the aforementioned categories. If the comment contained a particular theme, it was coded as "1." If the comment did not contain the theme it is coded as "0." Once the entire sample was coded,

the total number of times the theme appeared added up to represent a raw count of the frequency of each theme relative to each respective video and platform. A full explanation of the coding categories and the coding instructions is available Appendix B.

### **Inter-coder reliability**

Initial inter-coder reliability was established using percent agreement. Initial percent agreement was found to be 89%, 81%, 91% and 77% respectively between the four coders. Disagreements were settled through discussion. Final inter-coder reliability was established using Krippendorff's alpha and was found to be .81

## CHAPTER 4 Results Research Questions

A total of 11,495 comments were available across all three platforms. YouTube.com that had the largest number of comments ( $n=5,245$ ) and the death of Eric Garner was the incident that generated the most comments ( $n= 4305$ ). Comments left on NYTimes.com were the longest by word count ( $M=119.12, SD=37.7$ ). NYTimes.com also had the most active comment section with an average of 2,135 comments per day. Youtube.com had the shortest comments ( $M=27, SD=9.14$ ). MSNBC.com had the least active comment section with an average of 663 comments per day. The amount of comments per case by platform varied greatly. The Eric Garner case generated the most comments on NYTimes.com and MSNBC.com ( $n=2843; n=859$ ). The Walter Scott case generated the most comments on YouTube.com ( $N=2713$ ).

A total of 2,193 comments were analyzed from all three platforms for the presence and absence of 6 topic categories and 16 thematic subcategories. These categories and subcategories are as follows;

- Content (support or defense of the actions of the police officer, support of defense of the actions of civilian, criticism of the actions of the law enforcement, criticism of the actions of the civilian, questions about content, claims that the video is fake or staged)
- Social Issues (alleged corruption of law enforcement, alleged criminality of civilians or a particular group of civilians, government or political agendas and rants against

specific political parties or figures, references to other shootings or shooting victims, conspiracy theories about the purpose the shooting or video such as race wars),

- Slurs or insults (racial slurs about the victims or law enforcement officers in the video, non-racial insults about the victims or law enforcement officer in the video),
- Religious proclamations or prayers,
- Advertisements or solicitations not related to the video
- Other

The coding categories were devised by using a similar case of police brutality, the shooting death of 17-year-old LaQuan McDonald by the Chicago Police Department on October 20, 2014. Comments from Youtube.com, MSNBC.com and NYTimes.com were collected and analyzed to find prevalent themes discussed within the comments across all sites to determine what would be the coding categories.

The first research question asked, “What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances police brutality on the website of the New York Times?”

The most commonly discussed topics in the NYTimes.com comment section were alleged corruption of law enforcement (26.4%) and alleged criminality/criticism of the African American community (21.1%).

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if certain topics were more likely to be discussed than others within the comment section of NYTimes.com. The test showed that NYTimes.com commenters were more likely to discuss the larger social issues relating to the police brutality deaths,  $X^2 (5, n=870) = 937.43, p<0.0001$ , than any other topics.

The second research question asked, “What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website of MSNBC?”

The most commonly discussed topics on MSNBC.com were criticism of the actions of the officer (17.9%) and criticism of the actions of victim (16.7%).

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if certain topics were indeed more prevalent on MSNBC.com. The results of the test showed that the topics that were most likely to be discussed by MSNBC.com commenters were topics relating to the actual content of the video,  $X^2(5, n=397) = 194.18, p < 0.0001$ .

Table 1.1 Comments by Platform

YouTube	MSNBC	NYTimes	Categories
5.8%	9.6%	12.8%	<i>Support or Defense of the actions of officer or law enforcement</i>
4.7%	11.1%	5.2%	<i>Support or Defense of actions of civilian</i>
12.1%	17.9%	10.9%	<i>Criticism of the actions of officer or law enforcement</i>
11.4%	16.7%	8.1%	<i>Criticism of the actions of civilian</i>
4.3%	7.4%	7.4%	<i>Questions about content</i>
6.1%	1.8%	1.3%	<i>Claims that the video is fake/staged</i>
11.1%	9.4%	26.4%	<i>Alleged corruption of law enforcement</i>
12.8%	8.7%	21.1%	<i>Alleged Criminality of civilians</i>
3.4%	4.7%	1.9%	<i>Government and Political agendas; Rants against specific political figures</i>
4.2%	8.3%	2.5%	<i>References to other shooting/victims</i>
3.4%	0.8%	0.3%	<i>Conspiracy Theories about false flags and race wars</i>
8.7%	0.3%	0.0%	<i>Racial Slurs or Insults</i>
7.1%	1.1%	1.1%	<i>Non-Racial Insults</i>
2.4%	1.2%	1.8%	<i>Religious proclamations or prayers</i>
1.1%	0.1%	0.0%	<i>Advertisements/ Solicitations</i>
1.4%	0.9%	2.1%	<i>Other</i>

The third research question asked, “What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment section of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website YouTube?” The topics most likely to be discussed by commenters on YouTube.com were alleged criminality/criticism of the African American community (12.8%), criticism of the action of the victim (12.1%), criticism of the actions of the officer (11.4%) and alleged corruption in law enforcement (11.1%).

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if certain categorical topics were indeed more prevalent YouTube.com. The results showed that commenters on YouTube.com were most likely to discuss the actual content of the video itself,  $X^2 (5, n=926) = 779.39, p < 0.0001$ .

The fourth research question asked; “Are certain thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality more often than others across all platforms?”

Across all three platforms, the most commonly discussed topic was the overall behavior of the interactants in the videos and the contents of the video itself (43.7%).

Table 1.2 Comments by platform and incident

	Scott	Rice	Garner	Total
YouTube	2713	1929	603	5245
NYTimes	842	585	2843	4270
MSNBC	675	446	859	1980
Total	4230	2960	4305	11495

A chi-square test was also conducted to determine if certain thematic topics were more popular irrespective of platform. The results show that overall the most common

theme discussed by commenters on all three platforms was comments about the behavior of the interactants in the videos.  $X^2 (15, n= 2193) 1698.95, p <0.0001$ .

The fifth research question asked: Do the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality vary according to the particular instance of alleged police brutality?

Regarding the Tamir Rice case, the most frequently discussed topic was criticism of the action of the law enforcement officer (28.2%). The most common theme discussed regarding the Walter Scott case was alleged corruption of law enforcement (31.2%). The most common theme discussed regarding the Eric Garner case was criticism of the actions of civilian (29.4%

A chi-square test was conducted to compare the most commonly discussed categories in respect to the particular instance of police brutality. The most common theme discussed regarding the Tamir Rice case was Criticism of the actions of officer or law enforcement  $X^2 (15, n=610) 295.29, p < 0.0001$ .

The most common theme discussed regarding the Walter Scott case was alleged corruption of law enforcement  $X^2 (15, n=795) 71.4152, p < 0.0001$  and the most discussed theme regarding the Eric Garner case was Criticism of the actions of civilian  $X^2 (15, n=788) 37.5165, p < 0.00001$ .

### **Post-Hoc Analyses**

Several additional analyses were done after the initial research questions were investigated.

The first post-hoc research question asked whether the topics discussed by comments differed depending upon how the victim in each video died.

A chi-square test was conducted to compare the categories discussed with respect to the kind of violence and subsequent cause of death featured in the video (gun shot wound vs. physical restraint). The results of the test showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the kind of violence featured in the video and the kinds of themes discussed in the comments. The videos displaying gun violence were more likely to have comments regarding the actions of the law enforcement officer  $X^2 (15, n=1405) 377.12, p < 0.0001$ .

The second post-hoc question asked: would there be a difference in the themes discussed depending on the degree of punishment that the officer featured in the video received (criminal indictment vs. no criminal indictment). A chi-square test was conducted to compare the themes discussed and the results showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the case that ended with criminal charges and the cases that did not  $X^2 (15, n=1398) 352.24, p < 0.0001$ .

The third post-hoc question asked which incident and platform featured the most comments containing racial slurs? The platform that had the largest percentage of comments containing racial slurs, insults and epithets was YouTube.com with 9.7% of the total comments across all cases containing racially based insults.



## CHAPTER 5 Discussion

### Summary of Findings

This purpose of this study was to explore the general topics discussed in the comment sections of websites that display videos that feature instances of police brutality. A descriptive content analysis was conducted to establish the themes that were most likely to be present. This analysis also examined the way the comments differed depending upon the platform (NYtimes.com, YouTube.com and MSNBC.com) and the specific instance of police brutality (Tamir Rice, Walter Scott and Eric Garner).

Taken as a whole, the results show that although several different topics are commonly discussed, most comments focused on a small cluster of themes. This suggests that although these incidents spur many kinds of conversation, most commenters are focused on either dissecting the video itself or debating about what can be seen as the larger social issues that cause such incidences.

### Research Questions

**RQ1: What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances police brutality on the website of the New York Times?**

Commenters who discussed the police brutality videos on NYTimes.com overwhelmingly discussed larger social issues that may be seen as cause or influences of the incidents. Most commenters discussed how the larger culture of either the law enforcement community or the American/African American community might have contributed to outcomes o police-civilian interactions.

The comments featured on NYTimes.com were on average, much longer than comments found on other platforms. Although these comments were not systematically

analyzed, they seemed to attempt to be well-elaborated argument about the prevailing issues surrounding police brutality.

Here are examples of what a typical NYTimes.com comments featured in both length and content,

*As a resident of the greater Cleveland area I have observed this case with much interest. Indeed, it was a "perfect storm" of events that led to this tragic killing. I am befuddled as to why police officers would drive up to within feet of this young man and almost immediately commence firing. Would it not be prudent to stop the car say one hundred feet away and order the gun to be thrown on the ground? The grand jury and Prosecutor McNty had a tough job; however it appears as though Cuyahoga County Prosecutor McGinty "steered" the jury allowing the police officers to testify before the grand jury. I believe this is most unusual since their task is to examine the facts to determine whether a charge is warranted. McGinty, a democrat, is up for re-election in 2016 and the county Democratic Party has declined to endorse him. There are many fine police officers in the Cleveland Police Department.*

*Why exactly did this situation necessitate that the officer make a "split second decision"? There were several split second decision-making alternatives for the police officer to have considered: Remain in the squad car. Assess the situation. Ask Mr. Rice to empty his pockets, and sit or lie down. Call in a back-up if necessary. Confrontation as a policing strategy almost invariably results in death*

Comparatively, here comments that typically featured on YouTube.com. Which were shorter and had less thoughtful content.

***Come on! Those cops clearly murdered that boy!!***

***The kid was black. Thats why. And im not even black myself, im european, but racism in America is a fact.***

The NYTimes.com moderation policy explicitly states that the community prefers discussions that are in line with the overall reputation of the New York Times as a publication and through extensive moderation allows only comments that meet those

standards to be published. Thus, it appears that NYTimes.com commenters are assimilating to community expectations and attempting to add to the discussion in a meaningful way to ensure that their opinions will be published. The publication of a user's comments seems to validate both the opinion of the user and the user themselves by signaling that they are worthy of inclusion in a conversation that is decidedly exclusive.

**RQ2: What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website of MSNBC?**

Commenters who discussed the incidents on MSNBC.com were most likely to discuss the topics that related directly to the behavior of the interactants in the video. Most of the comments on MSNBC.com were focused on the actions and reactions of the police officer and the civilian.

Overall, MSNBC had fewer comments than all the platforms compared. It is not completely clear why MSNBC.com had significantly less conversation than the other websites. The platform seems to promote and encourage participation from its community members and the platform itself is relatively popular compared to similar websites. There are two possible characteristics possible of the MSNBC.com community that may cause this general lack of participation. One is the seemingly large amount of supporters of the police officers that tend to frequent the community, which may make people with dissenting opinion reluctant to post. One user posted such a comment underneath the Walter Scott video;

***This is why I dont engage with certain trolls, all our regulars take the cop side no matter what, and they all dismiss the obvious mistrust between the people and the police. Conservative orthodoxy demands that all cops must be taken at their word, which is nuts...***

This comment supports the notion that the spiral of silence will cause people with unpopular opinions to not share them. In this case there appears to be frustration related to the lack of open debate, rather than fear of isolation that makes the commenter not want to participate. This suggests that some seek out comment sections to have reasonable discussions about incidents even with dissenting opinions as long as those opinions are logically based. If the community does not support such discussion they may shy away participation, not because of the opinions shared, but because the culture of the community does not fulfill their needs.

Another characteristic of the MSNBC.com community that may suppress participation is that within the larger MSNBC.com community there are groups in which users can post. There may be multiple groups present within the comment section of any one article, thereby dividing the conversation into sections that do not overlap. This differs from the other platforms that allow for one large free flowing conversation. Overall, the MSNBC.com community is more difficult to navigate compared to the other platforms and this may have affected user participation.

**RQ3: What are the general thematic topics discussed within the comment section of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality on the website YouTube?**

Youtube.com featured a more diverse set of topics being discussed. The most common topics discussed on Youtube.com were criticism of the actions of the victim, criticism of the actions of the officer and alleged corruption in law enforcement. On average YouTube comments were the shortest.

Youtube.com comments also featured a larger percentage of comments that contained racial slurs and insults about African Americans and the law enforcement communities.

Youtube.com is unique in that it requires registration that is tied to larger Internet identity through Google. However, it is very easy to establish multiple Google accounts. This gives the user the ability to still maintain anonymity if that is something that they strongly desire.

Although it may seem counterintuitive that the seemingly most inflammatory or divisive comments are posted on the platform that potentially has the least anonymity, this finding is actually explained by the spiral of silence theory. Spiral of silence posits that when a divisive topic is discussed, people who feel that their opinion is unpopular will be less likely to voice that opinion, however if a person feels very strongly about their opinion the spiral of silence no longer has an effect and they will voice it (Noelle-Neumann, Liu, & Fahmy; Schulz, & Roessler). Thus the participation of these individuals may be linked to how strongly they feel about the topic, with the reduced anonymity not having an effect on what the user chooses to post. This may have an effect on the topics that are discussed, however more research would be necessary to decide how the decreased anonymity has an effect of what Youtube.com viewers post related to police brutality videos.

**RQ4: Are certain thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality more often than others across all platforms?**

Across all three platforms, the most commonly discussed topic was the overall behavior of the interactants in the videos and the contents of the video itself (43.7%). Most

users made comments directly related to the behavior of either the victim or the law enforcement officer. On each MSNBC.com (55.3) and YouTube.com (34.3) these behavioral categories had the highest proportion of comments. On NYTimes.com, the behavior categories were the second after social issues (37.1 and 47.5). A chi-square test showed that there was no significant difference across platforms (1.6863.  $p = .430361$ ).

This suggests that many commenters actually watch the videos and perhaps, reserve judgment until they have attempted to gather some kind of impartial information regarding what happened in the interaction and then comment. This suggests the use of systematic processing of the video using primarily the content of the video to judge the interaction. This contrasts with comments regarding the larger social issues that surround the incidents. Although these issues are relevant they are not directly tied to the specific events in each video. Thus these comments may be the result of heuristic processing, with commenters relying upon the larger social issues and viewing the videos through the lens of their established feelings about those issues.

**RQ5: Do the general thematic topics discussed within the comment sections of videos featuring instances of alleged police brutality vary according to the particular instance of alleged police brutality?**

The most commonly discussed topic varied according to the specific case of police brutality. Regarding the Tamir Rice case, the most frequently discussed topic was criticism of the action of the law enforcement officer (28.2%). The most common theme discussed regarding the Walter Scott case was alleged corruption of law enforcement (31.2%). Commenters seemed to focus more heavily in a certain kind of culture that was perpetuated within the law enforcement community that went on to later influence the

officer's actions. The most common theme discussed regarding the Eric Garner case was criticism of the actions of civilian (29.4%).

Of the three cases evaluated, the Walter Scott case was arguably the least ambiguous. Scott was killed while retreating and there was clear evidence that the police officer attempted to conceal his misconduct. The behavior of the officer during and directly after the shooting seemed to make the largest impact on commenters. The Scott case was also the only case that resulting in immediate criminal charges being brought against the officer. The lack of ambiguity and the legal condemnation of the police officer's action may have led to commenters forgoing the discussion of the video itself, since essentially the matter was closed. Here, a YouTube.com commenter discusses how the Scott's own criminal behavior the general dysfunction of the African American community ultimately led to his demise;

***All of this could have been avoided if walter scott paid his child support. why the fuck do blacks have so many children? and then the men abandom them. African americans create their own poverty. my family came ver from india, in poverty. not one went prison or committed crime. there's no excuse for this bullshit. black people, you are your own worse enemy.***

Here another YouTube.com commenter discusses the similarities between the Walter Scott case and the Michael Brown shooting and suggests that pervasive issues with law enforcement culture are to blame for the incidents,

***Purely coincidence that this cop & the cop in Ferguson had the same excuse. "he went for my weapon". He had a nightstick, mace, & a taser, all non lethal, but he chose to murder that guy just because he didn't want to run after him, if it wasn't on camera he would of gotten away with it, & fake News organizations would be calling him a hero. Just like in Ferguson. I've never heard a good excuse to shoot a lethal weapon at an unarmed person probably because there is no excuse especially when***

***your job is to protect ppl not murder them. If anyone else shot an unarmed person they would be in jail for murder but police are somehow held to lower standards than the average citizen & cops always seem to blame their training, which is a great excuse if you're a dog but since you're a human being with logic you don't get to use the same excuse I'd use for my dog if he bit someone. Police are supposed to risk their lives to protect us & yet you're way more likely to be shot by a cop than anyone***

Conversely, both the Tamir Rice and Eric Garner cases eventually resulted in no criminal charges after several months of media coverage. Thus, the unresolved nature of these cases may have led to more attention and debate being focused on the propriety of the actions of the individuals as opposed to the possible social issues that may cause such incidents.

**RQ6: Do the topics discussed by comments differ depending upon how the victim in each video died?**

Both Tamir Rice and Walter Scott died as a result of gunshot wounds. Eric Garner died as a result of asphyxiation from a chokehold. The videos featuring gun violence had more comments related to the general actions of the police officer. Many of the comments that the actions of the officer referenced weapons training or responsibility, however, the comments regarding Eric Garner focused more on the actions of the victim and the larger culture of law enforcement.

Here are two comments discussing issues with law enforcement preparation and training and how that lack of training led to the shooting of Rice.

***JUST LOOK HOW CLOSE THE COPS PULLED UP TO THIS PERSON THAT THEY SAY,THEY THOUGHT HE HAD A REAL GUN !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This ain't brain surgery ,if the cops honestly thought that the gun was real .....WHY THE HELL WOULD THEY STOP THAT CAR RIGHT IN FRONT OF HIM ,LESS THAN 10 FEET AWAY ?????????? IF THAT GUN WAS REAL AND THE PERSON WITH***



***THE GUN, WAS A REAL THREAT TO THEIR LIVES ,HE COULD HAVE KILLED THEM BEFORE THEY GOT OUT OF THEIR CAR***

***If Tamir Rice had a real gun and intended on using it he could have killed both of those cops. They drove right up to an armed individual and were sitting ducks while they were getting out of their cars***

This third comment however focuses squarely on the culture of law enforcement.

***Purely coincidence that this cop & the cop in Ferguson had the same excuse. "he went for my weapon". He had a nightstick, mace, & a taser, all non lethal, but he chose to murder that guy just because he didn't want to run after him, if it wasn't on camera he would of gotten away with it, & fake News organizations would be calling him a hero. Just like in Ferguson. I've never heard a good excuse to shoot a lethal weapon at an unarmed person probably because there is no excuse especially when your job is to protect ppl not murder them. If anyone else shot an unarmed person they would be in jail for murder but police are somehow held to lower standards than the average citizen & cops always seem to blame their training, which is a great excuse if you're a dog but since you're a human being with logic you don't get to use the same excuse I'd use for my dog if he bit someone. Police are supposed to risk their lives to protect us & yet you're way more likely to be shot by a cop than anyone***

**RQ7: Would there be a difference in the themes discussed depending on the degree of punishment that the officer featured in the video received (criminal indictment vs. no criminal indictment)?**

Of the three cases discussed in this paper, only one led to the law enforcement officer involved actually being charged with a crime. Officer Slager was charged with first-degree murder, as well as many other felonies and currently awaits trial for the death of Walter Scott. The officers involved with the deaths of Eric Garner and Tamir Rice were not charged with any crime, but both families were “compensated” with settlements that were approximately \$6 million.

A chi-square test was conducted to compare the themes discussed and the results showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the case that ended with criminal charges and the cases that did not  $X^2 (15, n=1398) 352.24, p < 0.0001$ .

As previously noted, the Walter Scott case gained national attention when it was discovered that the police officer involved had lied about his actions during the confrontation. The shooting took place April 4, 2015. The video that prompted the investigation was released April 5, and Slager was arrested and charged on April 7, which is also the date that the story was published by CNN.com and NYTimes.com, amongst other national publications. The story was initially featured on national television broadcast on April 7, as well. (Vanderbilt Archive, 2016) Therefore, he had been legally held accountable when most people learned about the incident. In both the Tamir Rice and Eric Garner case, the public was engaged as the investigation was occurring and this may have had an impact on what commenters chose to discuss. In these cases, the results suggest that the uncertainty of what the outcome would be encouraged the conversation topics rather than the outcome itself. In other words, since the authorities had not yet decided whether or not the police officer was wrong, the public was left with more room to speculate about incident.

**RQ8: Which incident and platform featured the most comments containing racial slurs?**

The platform that had the largest percentage of comments containing racial slurs, insults and epithets was YouTube.com with 9.7% of the total comments across all cases containing racially based insults. Because there were almost no racially based slurs or insults

on neither MSNBC.com nor NYTimes.com, a more comprehensive statistical test could not be performed to determine the significance of this finding.

This finding is probably the result of the considerably more lax moderation policies of YouTube.com compared to the other platforms studied as opposed to being the result of YouTube.com commenters being inherently more likely to use racial slurs. In essence, since YouTube.com allows the use of such language, it appears more often. However, it is possible that people wishing to use such language may go to YouTube.com to express themselves in a way that is not allowed on other platforms.

### **Moderation and Spiral of Silence**

The results of the study and my observations suggest the platforms studied may have an established culture that attracts certain participants who would like to share their opinions in a certain manner. This culture is often explicitly stated per moderation policies and also implicitly enforced using the spiral of silence.

Although studies (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; McDevitt, Kiouisis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003) suggest that the spiral of silence model functions similarly in online environments, this primarily refers to opinions about certain issues and willingness to share those opinions. It is possible that that fear of isolation in certain online environments/communities may even drive what topics regarding certain issues a person may be willing to discuss.

In many ways, online communities function in similar ways to real life communities, with social expectations shaping the behavior of community members (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). The results also suggest that each respective platform seems to attract a certain kind of conversation.

It can be argued that even though the overall topic of police brutality is controversial, all aspects of the topic are not equally controversial. Further, the specific details of certain cases may cause certain aspects to be seen as more controversial as well, some commenters may openly discuss some topics in a particular venue, but not broach others because it is considered a more delicate topic. This along with platform specific moderation policies may account for the occurrence of certain topics being more commonly discussed than others across platforms and incidents.

Ultimately, it appears that some combination of moderation of the platform, expectations of the community and the specifics of the incident seem to play a role in the topics that are discussed in relation to police brutality videos. More specifically, it seems the more ambiguous a particular aspect of an incident is, the more it shall be debated. For example, since the actions and the outcome of the Walter Scott case was less ambiguous than the other cases, conversation mainly focused on the issue of police corruption and criminality, i.e., contextual issues. Comparatively, the Tamir Rice case featured a video that was without sound and difficult to see. At the time of the videos publication there was a question about whether the officer involved would be charged. Because of this, more of the discussion focused on actually actions, propriety and responsibility, i.e., content issues of the incident itself. Further, the degree to which these opinions are elaborated seem to be related to the demand and expectations of the platform and community.

There is no way of knowing how well certain users are acquainted with each platform or its community rules, but there is a possibility that the commenters understand the culture of the platform and assimilate to it as to not be disruptive or be punished for being disruptive.

NYTimes.com intentionally uses moderation policies that strongly control the kind of conversations that take place, providing what seems to be a “safe space” for thoughtful discussion regarding current events. Since there is no way to know what comments are not permitted to be published or how fair the policies are applied, it is difficult to determine how much of an effect these policies actually have on the content that is posted by community members.

Conversely, YouTube.com depends largely on self-moderation and expects the community itself to determine what is appropriate participation. Further study of the actual content of the comments is necessary to determine if there is a true relationship between moderation policies and the kind of the comments that are actually left.

### **Framing the Conversation**

The fact that certain themes were more prevalent on certain platforms and certain incidents are also partially explained by the theory of framing. The comments on a video do not exist in vacuum; they essentially function as a large conversation with many different participants. When a reader joins the conversation they are inevitably guided by where it has already gone, thus the comments that have already been made may direct where the conversation goes next. In other words, the future of the conversation is partially framed by its past. Although a user can comment however they choose, the existing comments and what they discuss may have an effect on how new commenters choose to engage. Therefore, the conversations and themes may be self-perpetuating. The comments have the power to function in the same way as editorial framing in respect to selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration. Further study would be necessary to completely conceptualize

how user generated conversations develop chronologically and to determine if the prior themes discussed influence the subsequent discussion.

### **Implications For Future Research**

Overall, the findings of this study provide many directions for future research. Although many differences were noted, there is no explanation for why these differences exist. Thus, subsequent research should focus on first determining if these results are anomalous and if not, what could be the potential factors that lead to these results.

Once an adequate description of the comment section has been constructed, the next natural step would be to try to understand how commenters are talking about the various topics that have been identified and what encourages commenters to share the thoughts that they share. There are several Internet platforms that could provide an interesting sample for such research, such as more sensationalist publications such as the DailyMail.com or message boards that require registration and allow users to post news content from other sites. These different platforms could allow observations about how much of an effect that stated and unstated community standards have on discussions. Internet forums that allow content from other sites to be posted may also make it possible to examine how one community reacts to content from multiple sources in an effort to establish what the communities standards and expectations are.

Although it may be difficult to get clear information due to the limitations posed by online communication, this may be the best opportunity to truly understand how the general public feels about such a “hot-button” topic that has far reaching implications.

Participant observation at an online site or as the member of an online forum could also be used to illuminate the opinions of viewers. However, general observation may be

better, there is a thin line that the researcher must not cross to ensure that conversation develops organically. Conversely, a researcher could attempt to intentionally guide conversation in a particular direction to measure how user respond to provocative comments in an effort to understand how the community responds to potentially disruptive behavior.

From an experimental approach, it may be possible to design an experiment that gives participants stimuli and allows them to participate in an online discussion by leaving a comment and then later asking them why they commented in the nature that they did.

### **Limitations**

There were limitations to this study that affected the data that was collected and analyzed. The primary limitation of this study was that a number of comments were no longer available due to deletion either by the site administrator or the person who left the comment. Both NYTimes.com and MSNBC.com have moderation policies that allow moderators or administrators to delete comments that are deemed problematic by the community. Although each site has explicit rules in place, it is ultimately up to the people in charge to determine if a comment is allowed to remain and be viewed by others.

Another limitation that was presented was the fact that NYTimes.com limits the amount of time a story is open to be commented on. NYTimes.com has a site-wide policy that mandates all comment sections closed after roughly 24-48 hours. This policy is in place to allow readers to discuss a topic while it is timely, and then move on to more recent stories. Because of this policy, comments on NYtimes.com are from a very concentrated time period, which does not allow comments regarding the outcome of the incidents. This

limitation was accounted for by modifying the sampling frame to a similar time period for all platforms.

Another possible limitation is that some commenters may have not actually viewed the video before commenting upon it. These commenters may have form opinions based upon other news they have heard regarding the incident or little to no information directly relating to the specific incident at all. However, these commenters are still a valuable part of the conversation, particularly because people who comment without viewing the video likely represent a portion of commenters who form their opinions heuristically. Although, this possible limitation was considered, it was decided that this would not negatively affect the outcome of this analysis, because all opinions are valid parts of the discussion.

Despite the potential limitations, this analysis has provided a viable starting of point for understanding the how controversial issues like police brutality are discussed in online environment and understanding how the public at large feels about these issues.



## APPENDIX A

### Moderation Policies

#### Full Platform Moderation Policies

##### MSNBC.com

MSNBC.com provides a forum for people to share and discuss topics relating to the news and MSNBC programming. We all want MSNBC.com to be a place to participate in open, thoughtful, and productive dialogue. As a member of the MSNBC.com community, you are expected to foster healthy, open discussions by respecting others, avoiding self-promotion, and being responsible for what you post. The Terms of Service—including Section 8 and this Code of Conduct—are a condition of your use and access to the online services. We reserve the right to moderate posts, suspend or remove users and otherwise take, or refrain from taking, any and all steps available to us once we become aware of any violation of these provisions.

1) Above all else, **respect others**. Address issues and arguments and refrain from making personal attacks toward authors, MSNBC employees, and fellow commenters. If you see something disrespectful or inappropriate, don't respond, report it, using our "Report Abuse" form. If a comment contains a personal attack or other Code of Conduct violation, it may be deleted—regardless of the quality or nature of the rest of the comment. Users are welcome to re-post moderated comments without the offending portion(s).

a) MSNBC values and encourages debate, but will not tolerate hate speech or content that supports violence against people or entities based on, but not limited to, race, religion, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

b) Harassment and/or intimidation of others on MSNBC will not be tolerated, and patterns of such behavior may result in account cancellation. Adding a personal attack to an otherwise valuable comment or article serves only to render that contribution invalid in its entirety.

c) MSNBC reserves the right to remove any content deemed inappropriate, including but not limited to offensive language, vulgar, or profane content of any kind.

d) Comments that are off-topic may be deleted at our discretion.

2) Advertising: Self-promotion, seeding links to your own site(s), and advertising are not allowed.

a) Do not seed links to any sites you're affiliated with, especially if they are marketing efforts unrelated to the actual conversation.

b) Do not post links to drive traffic elsewhere for personal or financial gain.

3) Be responsible for the content you post.

a) If you did not write something, do not portray it as your own (use the 'reply' button when quoting other commenters, the 'blockquote' button for quotes from others, and cite your source by linking to the original content). If you do not have the right to republish the content in question, do not post it to MSNBC.

b) Do not impersonate any person/entity or falsely state your affiliation with any person or entity.

4) MSNBC encourages the founding, fostering, and joining of Groups. As a Group administrator and member, you are expected establish and maintain respectful behavior within your group.

a) Groups that expressly violate the Terms of Use or Code of Conduct in name or via the content posted by group members may be removed from the site.

b) Groups that exhibit malicious behavior or whose members consistently violate the Terms of Use or Code of Conduct within the Group may be removed. Users that are part of a group that have been removed due to violations, may create or join a new Group that abides by MSNBC.com's Terms of Service

and Code of Conduct

5) Acts that run contrary to the spirit and purpose of MSNBC, including attempts to circumvent the Community Rules, are not allowed.

A user's participation on MSNBC is judged as a whole. Recurring counterproductive behavior or negative contributions such as taunting or detracting provocations - even if not specifically addressed in the Community Rules - may still warrant deletion or removal of that person from the MSNBC Community.

We also ask that users do not engage with this type of commenter. Reacting to provocations only draws more attention to the disruptive behavior, and derails from productive dialogue. If we see users "feeding" a problematic community member, we will remove both their comments and users' responses. Instead, we encourage reporting counterproductive behavior through the "report" button which can be found on every comment.

6) We are firm believers in second chances, but after repeated offensive or disrespectful behavior you may be banned from further participation.

#### REPORTING ABUSE

If you see something on our site that you believe violates our terms, you should report it to us. Please do not report comments based on disagreement or difference of opinion on an issue being discussed. Because of the diverse nature of our community, we offer you the option of ignoring a person via their avatar usercard.

## YOUTUBE.com

Moderate comments on your channel

Take action on comments

When someone comments on your video, you'll get a notification. Click the arrow in the upper right of the comment to manage comments:

- **Remove:** Take down the comment and replies from YouTube.
- **Report spam or abuse:** Report comments that you believe are spam or abuse to the YouTube team.

**Hide from channel:** Block the user from posting comments on videos on your channel. If you change your mind, you can remove the user from the hidden users list in your community settings.

If someone leaves a comment that looks like spam, you'll see a blue banner on the channel or video. You can review, approve, or delete these comments.

You can require that all new comments get approved before they're posted to your video or channel.

Video comments

- Find the video in the Video Manager.
- Under the video, click **Edit**.
- Click **Advanced Settings**.
- Under "Allow comments," select **Approved**.

You can change the default view of comments for individual videos that you upload. Choose **Newest first** if you prefer comments to appear sorted by time, or select **Top comments** to have comments ranked algorithmically.

View comments on videos

To view comments on a video, just scroll down the video's page. Replies are threaded to make it easy to follow conversations. All comments on YouTube are public and anyone can reply to a comment that you post.

Change what comments show first

On the web, you can change how comments show under a video. Just use the drop-down menu to choose **Top comments** or **Newest comments**:

- **Top comments first:** Show comments in a ranked view that highlights comments such as those from the video creator, comments generating discussion from the viewers, and comments that have been voted up by the community.

**Newest comments first:** Show the most recent comments at the top.

Posting Comments

All comments on YouTube are public and anyone can reply to a comment that you post. If you're a Google Apps account user, any comment you post on YouTube is publicly visible to users outside of your domain.

Edit or remove your comment

- **On the web:** Hover over the top-right of your comment and click the arrow that appears. Then choose **Edit** or **Remove this comment**.

**Android and iOS apps:** Tap your comment to see your options for editing or removing comments.

## NYTimes.com

### Comments

**1. What kind of comments are you looking for?** [Back to top](#) We are interested in articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article. We welcome your advice, your criticism and your unique insights into the issues of the day. Our standards for taste are reflected in the articles we publish in the newspaper and on NYTimes.com; we expect your comments to follow that example. A few things we won't tolerate: personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes), commercial promotion, impersonations, incoherence and SHOUTING.

**2. Why do you moderate readers' comments?** [Back to top](#) Our goal is to provide substantive commentary for a general readership. By screening submissions, we have created a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of our news and information. While most comments will be posted if they are on-topic and not abusive, moderating decisions are subjective. We will make them as carefully and consistently as we can. Because of the volume of reader comments, we cannot review individual moderation decisions with readers and generally cannot alter a comment once it is posted.

**3. How do I write a comment?** [Back to top](#) The first time you write a comment, you will be asked to complete a quick registration process. It should take you no more than one minute. You will be asked for a display name and your location. Both of these items will be displayed publicly on NYTimes.com. If you are writing a comment, please be thoughtful, civil and articulate. In the vast majority of cases, we only accept comments written in English; foreign language comments will be rejected.

**4. Why are comments closed on an article?** [Back to top](#) The vast majority of comments are reviewed by a human moderator. Because of this, the number of comments that we are capable of moderating each day is limited. Typically, comment threads are open for 24 hours. After that point, we move to newer news. It is unfortunate that some of these discussions do not have the chance to further evolve, but the benefit is that we're able to host a civil comments section.

**5. Why do I have to register?** Back to top We ask you to complete the simple NYTimes.com registration process to ensure that you are a "real" person and that you accept our terms and conditions. The registration process serves to facilitate the development of our online community, and ensure that members take responsibility for their writings. For more information, please see our Registration FAQ.

**6. When and where will my comment be displayed?** Back to top Since comments are moderated, they do not appear on the site until they have been approved. Comments are typically posted faster during business hours. Moderation can be less frequent in the evening and on weekends. Comments by Verified Commenters appear on the site without prior moderation. Comments are displayed directly below articles and blog posts. We reserve the right to display comments in a variety of ways, including within the text of articles or in advertisements.

**7. Do you edit comments?** Back to top No. Comments are either approved or rejected. We reserve the right to edit a comment that is quoted or excerpted on NYTimes.com or on our affiliate blogs. In those cases, we may fix spelling, grammar or punctuation.

**8. What are NYT Picks?** Back to top NYT Picks are a selection of comments that represent a range of views and are judged the most interesting and thoughtful. In some cases, NYT Picks may be selected to highlight comments from a particular region, or readers with first-hand knowledge of an issue.

**9. I found an inappropriate comment. What do I do?** Back to top Click **Flag** to the right of a comment, select the reasons you believe it should be removed and submit the report. Our moderation staff will review the comment again.

**10. Should I use my real name when making a comment?** Back to top Using your real name is not required, but it is encouraged — we have found that people who use their names carry on more engaging, respectful conversations. We recommend against posting your full email address, for security reasons. A reminder: Once your comment is published, it can be found in search results on websites like Google and Yahoo. A New York Times reporter may occasionally use the email address you have listed in the My Account area for a follow-up interview. For more information, please see our Privacy Policy. **Note:** We no longer require Verified Commenters to use their real names. For more information, see the Verified Commenters FAQ.

**11. What about criticism of The Times?** Back to top We welcome strong opinions and criticism of our work, and do not hesitate to approve critical comments. However, personal attacks against our staff will not be permitted, and any criticism should relate to the article in question. Generally, we will not allow comments to become bogged down with discussions of our moderation policies, and we will moderate accordingly.

**12. Why didn't I get my confirmation email?** Back to top The confirmation email is sent automatically, but it may take a little while before it arrives in your Inbox. Also, you may want to make sure that we have your current email address associated with your registration. To check this, please go to [www.nytimes.com/email](http://www.nytimes.com/email) in the My Account area. If the confirmation email was sent to an outdated address, or you did not receive it after 24 hours, please contact us. If you think you are having problems receiving email from NYTimes.com, please read our Email FAQ.

**13. Can I use a different display name for some comments?** Back to top You are free to change your display name, but these changes will apply to all of your past comments.

**14. Should I post new information about a breaking news story? What if I see an error in a blog post or article? What is the best way to suggest a correction?** Back to top We appreciate it when readers and people quoted in articles or blog posts point out errors of fact or emphasis and will investigate all assertions. These suggestions should be sent by email. Many of our blogs provide specific email addresses for feedback and corrections. To avoid distracting other readers, we won't publish comments that suggest a correction. Instead, corrections will be made in a blog post or at the top of an article, and also can be found on the main Corrections page. To send a message about news coverage, email [nytnews@nytimes.com](mailto:nytnews@nytimes.com) or call toll-free at 1-888-NYT-NEWS (1-888-698-6397). Comments on editorials may be emailed to [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com) or faxed to (212) 556-3622. Readers dissatisfied with

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journalistic integrity may reach the public editor at

**15. What if I have more questions?** Back to top If you have additional questions regarding comments on NYTimes.com, please contact us.

## APPENDIX B

### Codebook Instructions & Examples

#### Codebook Instruction for User Comments Analysis of Police Brutality Videos

This study examines the nature of the comments that are left underneath videos that display police brutality. This study will attempt to determine the nature of the general comments that left beneath videos after Internet users have viewed them. The purpose of this study is to determine how often certain themes are discussed within the comments section. To do this, a raw count of the comments that contain each theme will be taken.

Each video has been previously assigned a video code and each comment has been assigned a comment code, together these are the content code. On the appropriate spreadsheet, note the content code before coding the comment.

An example of how to code a comment is below:

#### Full Comment

I don't see anything wrong. The thug never dropped his weapon and continued to hold it after he went down. If we do not allow the police to be able to quickly bring down those people with weapons who refuse to drop or give them up, we will become no better than Syria or Iraq.

#### Coded Comment

I don't see anything wrong. = 1

The thug never dropped his weapon and continued to hold it after he went down. = 4

If we do not allow the police to be able to quickly bring down those people with weapons who refuse to drop or give them up, we will become no better than Syria or Iraq.= 8

This comment would then be recorded on the spreadsheet as having themes 1,4 and 8 (see sample spread sheet and category definitions). If a certain theme is present in a comment, it is coded as "1". If a certain theme is not present in a comment, it is coded as "0"

## Category Definitions, Explanations & Examples

### ***Content of the Video (Categories 1,2,3,4,5,6)***

This category includes user comments about the actual content of the video footage. This includes the actions of the people the videos, suggested reasons for the actions, explanations for the actions, speculations about things that may have occurred off camera or that are hard to make out on camera that may have influenced the actions or suggested motivations of the people in the video, implied or expressed guilt of civilian;

Judgments made about the people in the video based on content of the videos. This includes; call for arrests, arraignment, conviction or acquittal, justification of actions, praise of actions, criticism of actions of individuals or the larger group that the individuals represent

Statements about objects in the videos, possible bystanders, the person filming video;

Question or comments about; if this is the complete video, about what may have happened before or after the filming began, quality of the video, angles or viewpoint;

Claims that the video is fake or staged; claims that the civilian was actually not harmed

### ***Social Commentary or Criticism (Categories 7,8,9,10,11)***

This category includes any criticism of law enforcement or the criminal justice system. This includes; allegations of police corruption, allegations inadequate police training, allegations racism in law enforcement

This category also includes comments about criminality of civilians. This includes; suggestions that certain people commit more crime, general comments about violence of criminals, claims that the victim would have gone on to commit more crimes

This category also includes comments about political beliefs of agendas. This includes; supposed supports of certain action by certain political parties, such as conservative, liberals, republicans, democrats

This category also includes comments that are classified as conspiracy theories. This includes; claims that the video is intended to start a race war or inspire discontent, racial disharmony, fear or anger or that there is some larger agency or body responsible for making the video

References to other cases of police brutality by name or location

Speculation about what the public may do in response to the video or shooting

### ***Slurs & Insults (Categories 12 & 13)***

These are comments that feature recognizable slurs and insults about the individuals in the video and/or the larger groups of people represented by those in the video. These may be racial or non-racial insults. This include any variation of the following

This category also includes references to slavery, Jim Crow laws or any other race-based discrimination.

***Religious proclamations or prayers (Category 14)***

This category includes religious Proclamations or prayer; comments about God, Jesus, Allah, Father or any other higher power; Religious scripture or references to religious scripture.

***Advertisements or solicitations (Category 15)***

This category includes comments that are advertisements for other YouTube channels, video or websites; requests for users to click a link; request for users to download software or music; requests for user to purchase an item or service.

***Other (Category 16)***

Any comments that do not fall into the previously described categories will be coded as "16".



## Category Examples

### Content related themes

- 1 – Support or defense of the officer - The officer made the right decision. He had no idea what the guy was capable of.
- 2 – Criticism of the officer - There was no reason to put him in a choke hold
- 3 – Support of defense of the victim - He was running away in the other direction, so he was no longer a threat
- 4 – Criticism of the victim - He was in public brandishing a realistic looking gun, he should expect to get shot
- 5 – Questions about content - I'm not sure what I'm looking at here, the video is too blurry.
- 6 – Claims that the video is fake or staged - This video is obviously fake. There is almost no blood or evidence of a wound

### Context related themes

- 7 – Alleged corruption in law enforcement - Video proof of the corruption of the average police officer. Imagine what would have happened if the video didn't exist. Imagine how many times its happened before.
- 8 - Criticism of criminals behavior or the African American community - This is what happens when you have millions of kids with criminal fathers and no structure running wild. If he hadn't been killed he probably would have been jailbird like his parents
- 9 – When you have a racist like Obama in office, things like this are bound to happen
- 10 –References to other excessive force deaths -This is just like what happened in Ferguson
- 11 – Conspiracy theories - I don't trust all these "shootings". They are trying to rile us up because want a race war and martial law

### Slurs and Insults

- 12 – Racial insults – Not gonna shed tears over a porch monkey
- 13 – Non-racial insults- Worthless pigs!

### Religious proclamations, prayer or scriptures

- 14 –Religious proclamations or prayer - This world is evil, I'm praying for us all

### Solicitation or advertising

- 15 – Solicitation or advertising If you like this, watch my video
- 16 – Other – Spam, comments not written in English

## APPENDIX C

Table 1.3 Tamir Rice Comments

	Officer Criticism	Civilian Criticism	Civilian Criminality	Officer Corruptions	Others
NYTimes	27.8	19.2	14.1	11.7	27.2
YouTube	23.4	18.6	16.1	12.9	29.1
MSNBC	33.5	19.4	15.3	11.5	20.3

Table 1.4 Walter Scott Comments

	Corruption	Civilian Criticism	Officer Support	Civilian Crime	Others
NYTimes	37.4	17.3	15.4	10.9	19.2
YouTube	26.3	21.8	16.1	14.7	21.1
MSNBC	29.8	21.4	15.6	14.8	18.4

Table 1.5 Eric Garner Comments

	CRITICISM OF CIVILIAN	CRITICISM OF OFFICER	SUPPORT OF CIVILIAN	CRIMINALITY OF CIVILIANS	Other
NYTimes	27.3	17.3	16.8	14.9	23.7
YouTube	36.3	15.9	14.1	13.3	20.4
MSNBC	24.7	24.1	17.9	14.1	19.2

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**ABSTRACT****CONVERSATIONS ON CONTROVERSY: AN EXAMINATION OF INTERNET  
DISCUSSIONS ON HIGH-PROFILE INCIDENTS OF RECORDED POLICE  
BRUTALITY**

by

**BRITTANY JEFFERSON****August 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Frederick Vultee**Major:** Media Studies**Degree:** Master of Arts

The purpose of this study is to examine the conversations that Internet user have when discussing publicized, recorded incidents of police brutality. This study examined the deaths of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner and Walter Scott and the subsequent discussions about the incidents on YouTube.com, MSNBC.com and NYTimes.com. This was accomplished by using an exploratory content analysis to establish what are the general topics of these discussions. This analysis found that there are 2 major themes that are discussed by Internet users when they comment; the content of the video and the social context of the incident itself. However, the popularity of these themes vary by platform and incident. The variation in the themes discussed was found to be caused by a combination of moderation policies, community expectations and the specific details of each incident. Recommendations for future research include temporal observation of discussion development, examinations of discussions in additional communities and explanatory analyses of how internet users discuss these themes.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I am a graduate student in journalism and mass communication with research interests that focus on the interaction between mediated content and the audience. I examine these topics by looking at audience reactions, attitudes and participation in regard to news and media content. I am currently pursuing my doctorate in communication studies at the University of Georgia.