"Them Cuffs Keep Them Quiet":
Facebook Users' Reactions to Live Arrests During Racial Justice Protests

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This study examines public, digitally focused reactions to civilian arrests in the aftermath of the police killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in July 2016. We employ a qualitative content analysis to investigate 302 comments from six Facebook Live videos streamed by local news organizations during racial justice protests following Sterling's death. We first categorize users' comments according to two broad and divergent themes around appeals for authoritarian order and for social justice. From these themes, analyses revealed subthemes that illustrate the bases for commenters' ideological alignments in the immediate aftermath of Sterling's shooting and the protests that followed. Our findings suggest that online comments reflect existing social inequalities and offline divisions that are still felt in Baton Rouge, a functionally segregated city in the Southern United States. This research contributes to our understanding of *online distant witnessing* as opposing groups react to live-streamed videos of arrests by police on one of the nation's most divisive issues.

Keywords: civil unrest, intergroup conflict, policing, Facebook Live, qualitative content analysis

On the night of July 5, 2016, the police-shooting of Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old Black man, shocked the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Just before the shooting, two Baton Rouge Police Department (BRPD) officers responding to a 911 disturbance call accosted Sterling, who was selling CDs outside a neighborhood convenience store, and tackled him to the ground (Fausset, Pérez-Peña, & Robertson, 2016).

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In the ensuing altercation, officer Blane Salamoni felt a gun in Sterling's pocket, yelled, "He's got a gun! Gun!" and fatally shot Sterling six times in the chest at point-blank range (Fausset, Pérez-Peña, & Robertson, 2016, para. 26). Surveillance cameras and police body cameras recorded the incident in its entirety. Within a few hours, a graphic cell phone video of the incident, captured by an unknown bystander, was shared widely across Internet platforms. The two BRPD officers were immediately placed on administrative leave, and Salamoni was eventually fired in March 2018 for violating use of force policies (Fausset, 2018).

Sterling's killing at the hands of police sparked several days of social unrest and protests against police brutality and racial inequality in the streets of Baton Rouge and neighboring cities in Louisiana (Fausset, 2018). Many local print and broadcast news organizations covered the protests live directly from reporters' cell phones through the then new interactive video feature Facebook Live. Taking advantage of the audiovisual and interactive affordances of the Facebook Live utility (Colussi & Rocha, 2020), reporters delivered an unfiltered view of the protests, documented hundreds of civilian arrests, and interviewed local activists and community leaders.

This study examines public, digitally focused reactions to intergroup conflict by analyzing how Facebook users witnessed and commented on controversial civilian arrests while engaging in contentious and, at times, racist and violent conversations with other online users. The protests that took place in the aftermath of Sterling's death, and the digital discourse they prompted, provide an important opportunity for studying public discourse amid crisis for several reasons. First, although Sterling's shooting stirred outrage in Baton Rouge and neighboring cities, the resulting protests and law enforcement response unfolded at a time when the nation reeled from a series of officer-involved shootings of often unarmed African Americans. Second, Sterling's killing highlighted deep racial divisions and pronounced intergroup conflict between and among White and Black residents of Baton Rouge, a functionally segregated city in the Southern United States. Third, new forms of video-mediated communication enabled by the Facebook Live utility deeply affected the online distant witnessing experience (Martini, 2018) of users who were following the events in Baton Rouge from their personal devices. Facebook Live as a means of social struggle has arguably contributed to the acknowledgement of police wrongdoings while giving voice to disadvantaged minorities and historically oppressed groups. Fourth, academic research has seldom examined the connection between heated offline events and online reactions (i.e., the "second" screen) in real time. Linking first and second screens (Chadwick, 2013; Shah, Hanna, Bucy, Wells, & Quevedo, 2015) provides a useful way to explore the impact of live-streaming technologies on viewers and the potential connection between offline and online public opinion on racial justice and policing.

According to a recent report from Pew Research Center (2019), Facebook is among the most widely used social media platforms in the United States. In addition to using Facebook as a source of news, Facebook users create content, share information, make social connections, and engage in interpersonal exchanges (Hampton, 2016; Hampton, Sessions, & Ja Her, 2011). In recent years, Facebook has incorporated a video functionality allowing users to stream real-time content within a social media post. Therefore, we conceptualize Facebook according to the sociotechnical affordances it offers for spontaneous public debate and commentary on its Live utility, specifically about users' participatory visual experience and reactions to the events linked to the shooting.

We employ a qualitative content analysis of Facebook Live comments to investigate controversial reactions to Sterling's killing and to the protests against police brutality. Only a handful of studies have examined how Facebook Live affects how users witness social events from their personal devices. Thanks to the rapidly growing mobile device industry giving access to affordable cameras capable of streaming, Facebook Live provides the unprecedented opportunity for journalists to connect with their audiences in their reporting and to establish a relationship of visual intimacy. And in this case, the audiovisual content streamed live on Facebook opened new paths of content consumption (Colussi & Rocha, 2020) while offering a glimpse into how users reacted extemporaneously to controversial arrests of local residents during racial justice protests.

Our theoretical contribution is twofold. First, this study extends prior research on the idealized public sphere (Habermas, 1996) by focusing on how social media platforms affect modern democratic deliberation and political participation amid crisis. We expect that people used Facebook Live as a suitable medium to convey their concerns and respond to the tragic events that occurred in 2016. Immersive, digitally interconnected experiences, such as those made possible by the Facebook Live utility, have become viable storytelling options for journalists and media workers while quickly eroding the barrier of entry into spaces once reserved only for established media organizations. We reflect on how new digital modes and audiovisual technologies have extended public discourse on race and even questioned the legitimacy of societal power structures. Second, our study yields valuable insights on what happens when contexts collapse (boyd, 2002, 2010; Ellison & boyd, 2013) as different groups find themselves deliberating within a shared online public space and in a context that calls them to confront a community's most controversial, longstanding divisions.

Ultimately, this analysis functions under the auspices of grappling with impromptu reactions to real-time arrests streamed on Facebook Live during a time when several U.S. cities experienced patterns of police brutality followed by heated protests and civilian arrests. Findings from the qualitative content analysis reveal two broad themes around appeals for authoritarian order and for social justice, thus suggesting that Facebook Live comments largely reflected sharp offline divisions and propagated simultaneous uncivil contestations over racial inequality and police brutality.

Reshaping the Public Sphere

To understand the interactions that took place on Facebook Live, it is important to consider virtual public forums as part of the modern public sphere. In participatory democracies, the public sphere theoretically requires forums for individuals to exchange ideas and deliberate on matters of public concern (Albrecht, 2006; Habermas, 1996). With the rapid expansion of the Internet and the proliferation of digital platforms, the interactive public sphere now reflects increased availability of and accessibility to new avenues of political expression to foster reasoned discourse and affect the social environment (Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Papacharissi, 2010).

Social media can facilitate connections among people from otherwise opposing groups and bring them together into a virtual common space through a second screen. Gil de Zúñiga, García-Perdomo, and McGregor (2015) define second screening as

> a process in which individuals watching television use an additional electronic device or "screen" to access the Internet or social networking sites to obtain more information about the program or event they are watching or to discuss it in real time. (p. 5)

Through its Live feature, Facebook incorporates the second screen into one medium and embeds the offline second-screening experience in an online, shared space (Choi & Jung, 2016; Shah et al., 2015). Users access live content on their portable media devices, discussing and interacting with that content without being confined to narrow temporal or geographical spaces. This renders online distant witnessing compelling, urging users to take a stance on events happening elsewhere.

A growing body of literature suggests that visuals have the potential to generate strong emotional reactions and to affect social and political processes (Corrigall-Brown & Wilkes, 2012). In a study of newspaper photographs of a case of collective action in Canada, Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes (2012) found that the images used by the media to frame the protests of the 1990 Oka crisis created a communal visual language and helped represent authorities and protesters equally. This finding confirmed that visuals play a key role in the protest paradigm (McLeod, 2007), a pattern of reporting that tends to marginalize protesters while legitimizing authorities. In this sense, visuals offer the advantage of mobilizing viewers in mass contentious activities like social movements and protests. Applied to this study, users' engagement with visual journalism through Facebook Live may reveal the ideological energies undergirding the protests and their perceptions among Facebook users.

Social media present new opportunities for concerted action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been lauded in contentious political events (e.g., the Arab Spring, the Indignados, and Occupy Wall Street) for their potential to reduce barriers of access and to foster connections among dispersed individuals (e.g., DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). Ample academic research indicates that online participation enhances opportunities for political and civic engagement (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012), enabling individuals to network, organize, and coordinate mobilization in powerful ways (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2017; Norris, 2001; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). For instance, in a cross-national comparison of social media use in the U.K. and the United States, Saldaña, McGregor, and Gil de Zúñiga (2015) found that online platforms contribute to a more informed society and enhance opportunities to be politically and civically engaged. Users can learn online how to recruit staff, raise money for a specific cause, and mobilize people in a quick and cost-effective manner.

Moreover, video-related practices and live-streaming processes have been found to affect the role of mediated communication. Exposure to powerful images caught live on camera has altered the experience of online viewers while providing them with remote access to witness shared offline events, including social justice protests (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Martini, 2018). In many instances, video-mediated practices have been strategically employed to denounce or build support for specific issues, such as the killing of Libya's former dictator Muammar Gaddafi (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013) and street opposition movements during the 2011 Arab uprisings (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). Taken together, these studies suggest that the ways these media are used and the technological affordances they provide allow for coordination of communities of common interest at relatively low costs and minimal barriers to entry (Tufekci, 2017).

Talking About Contentious Issues

Online deliberation among social media users with competing values can be highly toxic and fuel uncivil discourse (Papacharissi, 2004; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012), particularly on mobile devices (Groshek & Cutino, 2016). Even though Facebook adopts an authentic-name policy aimed at enhancing accountability and honest self-presentation (Meltzer, 2015), hostility, profanity, threats, and personal attacks are common features of online conversations, especially in a shared space affording a level of anonymity not available in traditional forms of communication. Indeed, social media make it easier to voice disagreement and to circumvent offline civil communication norms. A recent report from Pew Research Center (2017) indicates that roughly 40% of online users have experienced online harassment, with nearly one in five subjected to serious forms of such behavior, including stalking, sexual harassment, and physical threats.

A rich academic literature has investigated uncivil discourse on social media and its implications for democratic societies. For instance, Papacharissi (2004) analyzed discussion threads in online political newsgroups and found that users often disregard fundamental social norms of civility in online exchanges. Moreover, Papacharissi's (2015) work on affective publics (i.e., networked formations organized through expressions of social sentiment) suggests that intense emotions shape online conversations in unpredictable ways. More crucially, disagreement can hinder self-expression, thus limiting the ability to engage in meaningful conversations with incompatible individuals (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). As research on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) proposes, individuals refrain from expressing divergent opinions when they perceive a hostile environment, which in turn could affect the overall deliberative experience (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018).

Disagreement can sometimes devolve into deleterious, antisocial trolling and cyberbullying. Legal scholars have investigated the effects of these practices (Citron, 2014; Lidsky, 2011) and users' experiences with discrimination in digital spaces (Hammack, Pilecki, & Merrilees, 2014). As Lidsky (2011) notes, online users can spur toxic messages over extensive spaces in real time, thus fomenting harmful behavior and, in some cases, violent political extremism. And even though previous research provides useful insights on online deliberation, many questions remain about how social media shape interactions in highly contentious times and environments (Georgakopoulou, 2014; Kim, Fishkin, & Luskin, 2018; Steiner, Jaramillo, Maia, & Mameli, 2017). Extant literature has seldom examined confrontational encounters among users in real time, often because such engagements are difficult to capture and place in proper context. More crucially, little is known about the way online users converse digitally via second screens such as the Facebook Live utility studied here.

Talking About Racial Inequality

Recent shootings of unarmed Black individuals by police have resurrected existing controversies revolving around mass incarceration, police brutality, and racial inequality in the United States. Many scholars have documented the link between historical racial oppression and the disproportionate overrepresentation of African Americans in U.S. prisons (Alexander, 2010) as well as the use of brutal policing practices to suppress social justice movements (Hirschfield, 2015). The case of Alton Sterling and the protests that followed provide a unique opportunity to investigate conversations around racial justice and policing in online spaces.

Even though the Internet may provide an opportunity for interracial dialogue, video-sharing platforms such as Facebook Live may spark antagonistic political discussions among different users who find themselves deliberating on the same topic in the aftermath of a traumatic event or crisis, through what boyd (2002) refers to as "context collapse" (p. 28). This may exacerbate the offline racial divide and enable expression of established forms of racism and race-related conflicts through open-ended textual comments (Gilroy, 2012; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). Such comments can be posted by anyone granted access to specific content (e.g., a group or a page) and often elicit negative reactions, thus allowing the escalation of antagonism and the advancement of racist ideologies (Harlow, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004). In this case, substantial differences may result in disagreement and hinder the civility of the overall conversation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Harlow, 2015; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). As Chau and Xu (2007) note, interracial dialogue may intensify disinhibition and harassment and, in some cases, trigger group-based stereotypes.

Protest research has extensively investigated racialized discourse on Facebook groups and pages (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013), but, to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the prevalence and modes of racialized discourse on Facebook Live, especially under such extreme circumstances. Given its logic and affordances, Facebook can fuel both covert and overt racist commentary, thus acting like an amplifier of offline discourses and pervasive social structures in which Blackness and hopelessness are tightly linked (e.g., Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Walsh, 2007; Wilson, 1987).

Studies in this area have mainly focused on Twitter to provide data on the frequency and quantity of tweets arising during social justice protests (e.g., Groshek & Tandoc, 2017). However, these studies have largely employed computational methods to investigate the formation and consequent development of networks of users engaged in protests from a quantitative methodological perspective rather than focusing on the messages that users wanted to send to the broader Twitter community. Although important, this line of research does not capture the deliberative nature of the real-time discourse produced in online spaces during social justice protests.

Our study bridges this gap in the literature and sheds some light on intergroup dialogue around racial inequality in a synchronous online discussion. Through the integration of text and live broadcasted videos, Facebook Live affords an opportunity to analyze the deliberative outcomes of video-mediated communication and its effects on users' perceived proximity to the protests in Baton Rouge and neighboring cities in Louisiana. Accordingly, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1:   *How, if at all, do Facebook Live comments reflect offline racial divisions and stereotypes during racial justice protests?*

RQ2:   *What dominant themes characterize online reactions to civilian arrests during racial justice protests?*

Method

Since qualitative studies tend to focus on language characteristics and contextual meanings, a qualitative approach is appropriate for answering our research questions and for identifying meaning in the comments. To this end, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of Facebook Live comments that

appeared at the very moment an arrest was depicted in the video (see Figure 1). We specifically focused on the moments of the arrests because arrests constituted moments when the heightened tensions between protesters and law enforcement officers were manifested physically and visually during the protests that followed Sterling's killing. Moreover, past studies have found that heightened violence often results in increased reactions in online spaces (e.g., Mooijman, Hoover, Lin, Ji, & Dehghani, 2018).
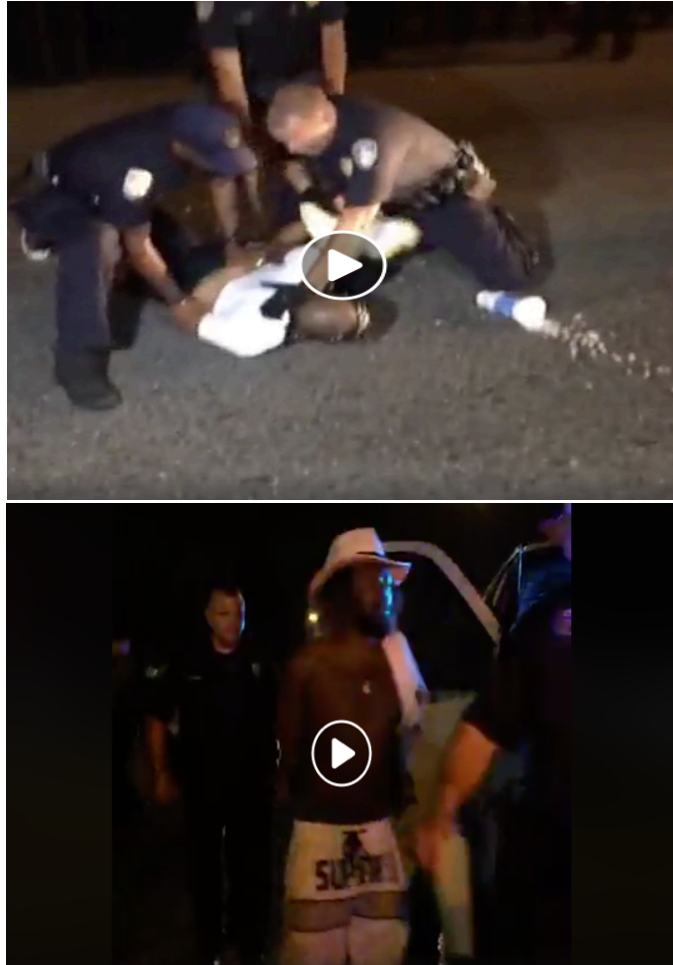

Figure 1. Screenshots of live arrests caught on Facebook Live.

Data Collection

To gather our data, we initially searched the Facebook Live video sections for broadcast news channels and print news organizations from the Baton Rouge area (e.g., WAFB and *The Advocate*). We located several videos that featured the July 2016 protests in Baton Rouge, but we excluded videos that documented events beyond the protests, including official press conferences and interviews with local

community members. This yielded a total of 31 Facebook Live videos broadcasted by local news reporters with comment totals ranging from 105 to 39,536. Video lengths ranged from 27:03 minutes to 1:25:54 minutes with an average length of 51:58 minutes. We watched all 31 videos over a four-month period (from February 2019 to May 2019) and captured only videos showing real-time arrests of protesters. Six out of the 31 videos live-streamed at least one arrest of a local protester.

To organize the six videos, we collected the following information: (a) title of the Facebook Live video, (b) link to Facebook, (c) setting/location of arrest(s), (d) context (e.g., impromptu vs. organized protest), (e) brief description of subjects displayed in the video (e.g., perceived gender and race), and (f) degree of violence displayed (i.e., violent vs. nonviolent arrests). This information was essential to examine the content of the videos, who was involved, and the circumstances surrounding each arrest. We also coded for whether comments were posted while the video was live or after the video ended. We found that the vast majority of the comments (about 70%) we analyzed were made while the video was streaming but did not find any meaningful difference between this type of comments and after-the-fact comments. Comments in both categories were similar in content and tone and fit nicely within our coding themes. Following this, we looked for all comments posted in the Facebook Live comment section while an arrest was on screen. Comments were captured from the moment an arrest was being performed by police to 30 seconds after the arrest had been concluded. The final sample included 302 unfiltered comments.

Data Analysis

We began by carefully reading all arrest-related comments several times, paying attention to whether there were any emerging themes. This approach allowed us to focus on the "underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240) and to develop a coherent coding system. In addition to the literal, plain meaning of the words, we focused on the surrounding context to identify the main analytic dimensions and patterned relations embedded within the text. This approach attempted to step "into the mind of another person to see and experience the world as they do" (McCracken, 1988, p. 9) through their online comments.

The coding process took place in three phases. In the first phase, we took brief descriptive notes and developed preliminary themes. We purposely excluded comments conventionally defined as "background noise," meaning an incomprehensible amount of voices that were irrelevant to the scope of this study. Despite the severity of Sterling's killing by police, which horrified the national public, we identified roughly 23% of the comments as background noise as they bore no rational relationship to users' reactions to the protests and live arrests. An example of this type of comment is, "Check out The Tailgate Party search us on Facebook. Like and Share our page, we are a New Sports Talk show! We will have giveaways soon!!" The vast majority of these comments did not have a clear meaning (e.g., "haha") or were hard to contextualize and, in many cases, involved salutations among users (e.g., "Hey Darrell" and "Hey auntie Barbara!"). As a qualitative effort, our content analysis is limited in its ability to reveal complicated cognitive, motivational, and psychological processes behind second screening and, therefore, does not aim to describe the intentionality of online commenters and their use of irrelevant content while witnessing livestreamed events. However, it is important to note how much noise enters even the most critical spaces of online interaction and whether this is a strategy to cope with the issue at hand.

In the second phase of the coding process, we reanalyzed descriptive notes and refined the main themes using a "constant comparative method" (Johnson, 2000, p. 79) and merging similar themes. We specifically focused on themes that would best illustrate spontaneous reactions to ascertain whether online comments mirrored the offline animus stemming from the streets of Baton Rouge. This coding stage yielded two broad themes. The first was an authoritarian theme, which included (a) comments vilifying individual protesters, (b) comments dismissing the protests (e.g., references to All Lives Matter), (c) police solidarity comments (e.g., references to Blue Lives Matter), and (d) users' hostile comments inciting incivility. The second theme was a social justice theme, which comprised (a) comments supporting the aims of the protests (e.g., references to Black Lives Matter), (b) police antipathy comments, and (c) users' open calls for peace. Each theme and corresponding subthemes are described in more detail in the next section.

In the third phase, we assigned individual comments to one of the two broad themes and related subthemes. In this last phase, the first author coded all 302 comments. However, each comment underwent multiple rounds of coding until substantial agreement on all the themes was achieved between two coders ($\alpha = .84$). The results of our analyses are presented in the following sections with verbatim text to illustrate the sorts of codes that exemplified each category. The original spelling and formatting of all comments presented below were preserved to retain the users' language and voice. Details of the videos are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of Facebook Live Videos.

Title of video	Reporter/News Organization	Date posted	No. views	No. comments	No. comments analyzed
Impromptu protest breaks out in downtown Baton Rouge	Scottie Hunter WAFB	July 10, 2016	54,000	2,582	56
Alton Sterling rally continues along Airline	Scottie Hunter WAFB	July 9, 2016	54,000	1,763	64
Tensions on the rise at Alton Sterling rally	Scottie Hunter WAFB	July 8, 2016	24,000	1,394	16
#Breaking protest continue outside Baton Rouge Police headquarters	Brett Buffington	July 8, 2016	47,000	2,018	34
#BREAKING protest outside Baton Rouge Police Headquarters	Brett Buffington	July 8, 2016	28,000	1,491	35
The #AltonSterling protest outside of Baton Rouge police headquarters diminished	The Advocate	July 8, 2016	208,000	16,691	97

Findings

RQ1 asked how, if at all, Facebook Live comments reflect offline racial divisions and stereotypes during racial justice protests, and RQ2 asked what dominant themes characterize online reactions to civilian arrests during racial justice protests. The Facebook Live comments we analyzed point to the way users frame highly controversial events into preexisting ideological alignments and express divergent opinions on these matters. In this section, we discuss how online comments echoed the sentiments of a community deeply fractured over appeals for authoritarian order and the achievement of social justice.

Authoritarian Theme

The first theme that emerged from the discourse surrounding Sterling's killing was characterized by speech coupling the political ideologies of authoritarian and patriarchal discipline while downplaying the achievement of social justice. Users often sided with law enforcement officers on the scene and used the law-and-order rhetoric to defend police use of military equipment to control civil unrest. Conversations frequently lauded police militarization and connected individual protesters to criminality, vandalism, and terrorism. Dismissal of racial justice was also exemplified by comments lauding the presence of law enforcement officers during the protests to restore order as well as adversarial comments among Facebook Live viewers. Together, these comments can be classified as appeals for authoritarian order, reinforcing the importance of policing to restore social control in a civil society.

"Ha Finally Got Arrested": Comments Against Protesters

Authoritarian comments praised discipline and included negative and, at times, offensive characterizations of individual protesters and activists—most of whom belong to the Baton Rouge African American community. In many instances, users used rhetorical devices, such as racially charged language, racist tropes, and in-group/out-group identification to express animosity toward the protests and protesters being arrested in real-time on their screens. Some users perpetuated mainstream stereotypes and racial biases through blatant references to protesters as violent pariahs, hoodlums, and vandals through comments like, "I hope this guy gets arrested just for being an idiot"; "Just another excuse to act like an animal"; and "That's right take his ass to jail." Some users did not approve of fellow citizens resorting to public manifestations against police brutality and racism and exhibited a highly adverse tone that ranged from rudeness to racial epithets. Users often employed debasing traits, such as deceit and immorality, to derogate individual protesters while relying on racist tropes and slurs, such as "moon crickets" and "thugs," patriarchal insults and misogyny (e.g., "crack whore," "dum bitch," and "hooker").

"Lock Them All Up": Racial Dismissal Comments

The authoritarian theme encompassed comments dismissing the fight against racism and inequality among African American Baton Rouge residents and their allies through comments like "Embarrassment for Louisiana." Conflation of protests aimed at police violence with terrorist activity portrays just how deep and intense intergroup conflict became among online users in some cases. What likely amounts to constitutionally protected First Amendment activity was characterized as lawlessness and anarchy by a

significant number of commenters. Some users further trivialized the protests by suggesting that their primary purpose was to attract media attention rather than to achieve social change. For instance, a commenter solicited local reporters to stop recording the protests by writing, "Get the media out of the area no coverage no protest." Another commenter more pointedly wrote, "A lot of these people are looking for an excuse to get on TV." These comments implied that the protesters were looking for their moment of fame and were not concerned about the goals of the protests.

These comments signaled a rejection of the underlying racial justice motivations of community activists and profound antipathy for the local African American community. Some users even compared the protests to horror movies, writing for example, "Just eating jellybeans & watching this sick show. Almost as bad as *Saw* . . ." Others were clearly bothered by the chaos caused by the protests and demanded their immediate end through comments like "At 12 midnight, they need to bring in the dogs and water cannons and send them home," and "Arrest everyone that shows up tomorrow to put an end to this!" Comments like, "Go home. Half these people must not work and probably have kids at home that need to be tended to. Just ridiculous" and "Start dropping job applications from airplanes and they will disperse" contained negative racial stereotypes used to cast African American protesters as dishonest, unemployed, lazy, or dependent on the government.

Other typologies of comments in this category included inflammatory comments countering the Black Lives Matter movement and discarding the racial justice aims of the protests (e.g., "NAACP–NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CAUCASIAN PEOPLE. White Lives Matter!" and "All lives matter"). When aggregated, these comments suggest that a significant subset of Facebook Live commenters approved of state-sanctioned violence to quell protest and dissent. More importantly, their appeals to authoritarian order were refracted through the lens of racial stereotyping.

"Prayers for These Officers": Police Solidarity Comments

Police solidarity comments reflected an overwhelming appreciation and support for law enforcement officers and their use of militarized tactics to constrain protesters' civil liberties. These comments seemed to legitimize racist policing practices targeting Blacks through surveillance, beatings, and arrests for reinforcing a racialized social hierarchy. Some users casted police officers as victims and, in many cases, blended praise of top-down, patriarchal authority with religious (specifically Christian) overtones. Comments like "God Bless cops having to babysit this bunch of mentally ill people" and "I love the men and women in blue. I can't imagine our city without. You all. To the good officers out there serving and protecting, thank you, you are in my prayers" simultaneously conveyed a sense of gratitude, respect, and sympathy toward law enforcement officers while also communicating users' indifference and animosity toward protesters during tense times. Terms such as "babysit" and "mentally ill people" specifically reflect the commenter's assessment that the police brought responsibility, order, and sanity to the protest environment.

This category also comprised references in stark opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, including "So proud of my blue family." Practices of police solidarity like "That is the job of law enforcement. Blue Lives Matter" seemed to justify the use of authoritarian practices as procedurally and

morally necessary to maintain law and order and, more generally, to repress and undermine the social justice fight of Black individuals.

"Oh Shut Up": Hostile Voices

This subtheme included explicit references to specific users, often reflecting anger, frustration, and resentment. Comments like "Katera needs to go back to school and learn something useful instead of sitting on her butt collecting food stamps and thinking making fun of people is funny" and "Brandy I wish somebody get your ass quiet" exemplified public attacks on other users, sometimes through the use of racist stereotypes and racially charged language. Comments like "I'm sorry, if you voice your racist option, please learn how to spell" highlighted profound antagonism toward other users engaged in the overall conversations. In other cases, these comments conveyed a sense of detachment from the chaos that erupted in the aftermath of Sterling's killing and called for righteous violence and militaristic discipline.

Social Justice Theme

The second prominent theme of the Facebook Live discourse focused on the advancement of racial justice as a broad social movement. Users commented in ways that seemed to support the interests and welfare of protesters and against police officers. This theme also included calls for peace through religious and ideological overtones.

"No Justice No Peace": Racial Justice Comments

The social justice theme included enthusiastic comments in reaction to the images of protesting crowds and words of encouragement toward members of the local African American community. Comments like "Selfish people still don't get, the passion is genuine, racism is over it has lost its sting, people are no longer afraid" enhanced the disadvantaged position of Black protesters and comments like "It never been a race so u guys need to stop making it one all we doing is asking for equal rights" communicated a sense of solidarity and support for the fight against racial inequality and patriarchal institutions. Comments like "It's not worth the escalation you guys. Try again tomorrow with a clearer head [☺] You have an American right to protest but tonight just isn't the night" expressed deep concerns toward members of the African American community, who have historically been oppressed and denied political and socioeconomic power, especially in the Southern United States.

Other typologies of comments in the racial justice category included explicit support for the Black Lives Matter movement. These comments were very common and elevated the fight for social justice and equality using the Twitter hashtag that gained popularity during unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown was shot by a police officer in 2014. Repeated use of "BLACK LIVES MATTER!!!" and comments like "This is against police brutality not against the police . . . Know the difference . . . #BlackLivesMatter" aimed at clarifying the aims of the protests while urging change and the need for collective action against police brutality and other matters related to social justice.

"God Protect Us From the Police": Police Antipathy Comments

In stark contrast to the comments supporting law enforcement, many users criticized the role of police generally as an institution sustaining race, class, and gender hierarchies. Comments like "Officers can't force them to leave!! If they do they will be stepping all over their 1st amendment rights!!" and "He just said most did NOT break the rules! They(')re just a(rr)esting people who refuse to leave" expressed disdain and criticized the role of police. Comments like "Cops arrest ppl because they feel like it, not because they are serving or protecting" suggested that police officers often overestimate the threat posed by African Americans, highlighting the power imbalance between authority and minorities, especially in the American South. In many ways, these comments appeared to criticize the strained relationship between the African American community and law enforcement. Comments like "BRPD Budget will be through the roof! Attack them pockets. They been getting away with free kills" and "Be careful . . . you know what happens behind cop vans" expressed explicitly and implicitly users' worries of police misconduct and brutality, respectively. In fact, the latter of these comments mentioning police vans likely refers pointedly to the death of Freddie Gray, a Black Baltimore resident who died in the back of a van while in police custody following a 2015 arrest for possession of a knife (Hermann & Woodrow Cox, 2015). These comments signaled to readers that the aftermath of Sterling's shooting might similarly end in further tragedy for arrested protesters.

"All of the Haters in the Comments Search Your Hearts We Are All Humans": Peaceful Calls

The social justice theme also included comments that alluded to calls for peace and rejection of confrontational tones, such as "There is just too much hatred, anger and killings in the world . . . Why??!" and "Protest peacefully . . . your voice won't be heard like this." Many of these comments reflected appeals to higher authority and even the divine (e.g., "Praying for peace"). Comments like "It(')s sad the energy you all take to make ignorant comments" and "I don't think I've seen one comment by people that actually respect or at least want to understand why they're out there. Smh" indicated how users disliked the negative tone of the overall online conversation occurring on Facebook. Hopeful comments often displayed a religious component like in "Help us Lord!" while others combined elements of patriotism and Christianity, as in the familiar "God bless America." Although it is somewhat outside the scope of this study, prayerful appeals for God to intervene and other invocations of the practice of prayer revealed how users both signaled and lived out religious adherence in their discourses around the protests. Religion, it seems, was deployed as a means of identifying transgressive behaviors by others or providing personal refuge depending on the context and the speaker's positionality.

Table 2 provides detailed information about frequencies of each theme discussed above.

Table 2. Frequency of Themes.

Themes	Comments totals by category	Percentage of total sample
Authoritarian comments	153	50.7%
Against protesters	39	
Racial dismissal	56	
Police solidarity	27	
Hostile voices	31	
Social justice comments	77	25.5%
Racial justice	30	
Police antipathy	25	
Peaceful calls	22	
Background noise	72	23.8%

Note: Percentages shown are out of the total sample of 302 comments.

Discussion

This study investigates how Facebook users reacted to live-streamed videos of racial justice protests in the immediate aftermath of a high-profile shooting by police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We sought to uncover meanings by categorizing 302 unfiltered comments that appeared underneath six Facebook Live videos at the very moment an arrest was being made. Overall, our findings highlight the critical space that race occupies in American consciousness (Campbell, LeDuff, Jenkins, & Brown, 2012; Walsh, 2007) and extend that criticality to the digital public sphere created in part by emergent audiovisual technologies such as Facebook Live.

Even though digital platforms have radically changed the way Americans engage in public matters, our findings suggest that offline racism and racial hostility are widely echoed in online spaces and often intensify during crises. Users' rhetoric reflected individual and collective emotions that lie at the heart of civil unrest, including a lack of sympathy (and empathy), disdain, and even hope for violence against the opposite group. Racial stereotypes, coupled with authoritarian appeals for law and order, were used to demean Black protesters and Black commenters. Across the divide, Black commenters were, naturally, hypercognizant of the risks that Black protesters faced during protests where armed police were present and actively arrested demonstrators. These elements portray a digital public sphere that, much like its physical counterpart in Baton Rouge, is deeply fractured by issues of race, violence, and justice in policing.

Spontaneous communication reflected in the live comments accentuated the existing divisions between different groups of people and the perpetuation of misunderstandings in digital spaces. Online users reacted in very different ways to live-streamed arrests by police. Much like the political public sphere on the American right, commenters brought their preferred notions of authority into the site, sometimes religious, sometimes at the hands of the state and state-sanctioned violence. References to the Black Lives Matter movement and its rhetorical opposition (i.e., All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter) indicated that users drew on race as a heuristic to identify in-group members and to evoke group-based emotional responses.

The Facebook Live utility, like Facebook itself and many of its competitors, is useful to study the voices of its users and how they bring their preferred power structures to bear in extemporaneous digital conflict. Like in real space, users are able to take sharp positions in the aftermath of a tragedy and voice their disapproval with social and political developments, such as injustice and unfairness of established authorities (Papacharissi, 2015). This characteristic makes Facebook Live ideal to study online public discourse around societal power structures and institutional racism, especially as tensions continue to escalate in light of recent Black Lives Matter protests. Using Facebook Live as a means of social struggle ignites discourse signaling outrage and reflects many of the deep divisions that give rise to the protests themselves, including racism, classism, and police wrongdoings. Facebook Live provides an opportunity for scholars to examine whether context collapse may be problematic as users witness episodes of racism and police brutality on their screens and express impromptu reactions in a shared online space.

Communication, of course, is not a static process and can transmit divergence while exacerbating existing group differences in previously unimaginable ways. Some users clearly felt bitter and, therefore, exhibited strong antipathies and despise toward the protests, the police, or even other users taking part in the overall conversation. Examples of comments from the two main themes mirrored offline opposition and exacerbated social stigmas, often through repeated use of stereotypes and language typical of so-called Internet trolls (Phillips, 2015). Yet, amid this cloud of racially charged language, some users called for racial harmony and increased understanding of both the fight for racial justice and the role of police officers.

It is challenging to evaluate the intentionality of online users and to decode seemingly racialized commentary. However, through an iterative, qualitative approach, we found considerable evidence to suggest that the extemporaneous dialogues surrounding live images of civil unrest and subsequent arrests rapidly devolved into bitter racial divisions. Our evidence, based exclusively on commenters who opted into the online conversation, reveals that racism emerges forcefully among and between strangers in the digital public sphere when the dominant group (police in our study) is met with attempts by the subordinate group (i.e., the African American community) to question the dominant group's authority and use of its power. Despite many instances of compassion and sympathy exemplified in open calls for peace, hostility, and blameworthiness, rooted in race, often obscured the overall conversation. This shows that context collapse may be problematic as users belonging to opposite groups tend to accentuate racial divisions over solidarity, integration, and group enculturation. The implications of this reveal an opportunity to further explore intergroup dynamics in the digital public sphere.

To our knowledge, this study is among the first to examine spontaneous reactions on Facebook Live to offline protests. Our findings reveal how controversial events involving issues of race bring out polarity via social media and render online distant witnessing morally compelling, urging users to take a stance on events happening elsewhere. We found that users self-sorted into opposing factions (for and against racial justice and for and against law enforcement) before opportunities for dialogue took shape in any meaningful way. Intergroup conflict resulting from Sterling's killing represents a case to illustrate how people tend to cluster around extreme positions (e.g., use of force versus calls for peace) in the immediate aftermath of a shocking event, thus reinforcing divisions existing in the offline world.

Facebook is one of many social media utilities that allows interaction among users, and it is, in many ways, structurally and demographically different from its competitors. How Facebook is built algorithmically, how it serves ads and other content, and ultimately, the users it attracts all affect the discourse that happens through its Live utility. It is plausible that, given these differences, Facebook Live comments might constitute a distinct digital public sphere that is qualitatively different from other platforms (e.g., Twitter) or that deliberation on intergroup conflict may function differently in other online spaces. The design features of other platforms might yield more constructive discourse with fewer instances of stigma, racism, or hatred than we documented in this study. A fruitful area for future work should consider incorporating online comments that appeared on other social media platforms and investigate potential similarities and differences within subgroups. Moving forward, a broader study encompassing multiple platforms could better capture the full extent of users' reactions to civil unrest and test whether platforms' designs or demographics seem to matter for those findings.

Despite possible limitations inherent to our choice to limit the data corpus only to comments posted at the time an arrest was live-streamed, this study revealed some important dimensions of intergroup conflict dynamics and offered insights into online audiovisual communication, leaving room for future research possibilities. Although our data provided a snapshot of one specific case, Facebook Live offers a unique opportunity to explore how users engage in online distant witnessing and how their identities are expressed extemporaneously through new forms of video-mediated intimacy.

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