#RodneyReed: A content and thematic analysis of a trending innocence campaign

by

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ABSTRACT

Having spent 23 years (and counting) on death row for a murder conviction which is believed to be wrongful, Rodney Reed's innocence campaign was shared on social media by celebrities, news organizations, and the public (Barajas, 2021), accruing over 2 million signatures in support (Bates, 2019), and resulting in a stay of execution. His campaign is one of many movements (e.g., #BLM, #MeToo) that have used social media to mobilize the public through information dissemination, opinion expression, and online activism (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). To better understand this viral campaign, we conducted a content and thematic analysis of 740 randomly sampled tweets that included "#RodneyReed" between February 13th, 2015, to November 15th, 2019. The major themes are discussed in the context of social media activism and wrongful conviction. The results focus on how individuals used Twitter to act on behalf of Rodney Reed through sharing facts, opinions, and activist actions.

Keywords: wrongful conviction; social media; activism; twitter; death row

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication. I have used standard referencing practices to acknowledge ideas, research techniques, or other materials that belong to others. Furthermore, I hereby certify that I am the sole source of the creative works and/or inventive knowledge described in this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ALS   Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis

BLM   Black Lives Matter

CJS   Criminal Justice System

NRE   National Registry of Exonerations

TX   Texas

#RodneyReed: A content and thematic analysis of a trending innocence campaign

Being stripped of your rights and freedoms and incarcerated for a crime you did not commit is one of the worst miscarriages of justice imaginable, however that is a reality for many who are wrongfully convicted[1]. Due to the nature of wrongful conviction, it is difficult to establish the rate at which this phenomenon occurs across Canada and the United States. Innocence Canada has been involved with 24 cases of wrongful conviction (Innocence Canada, 2021), while scholars talk of upward of 60 known cases that have occurred in Canada (Campbell, 2018; Erentzen, et al., 2021; Roach, 2012; Schuller, et al., 2021). In the United States, the Innocence Project has aided in the exoneration of 232 wrongfully convicted individuals using post-conviction DNA testing (Innocence Project, 2021), but the National Registry of Exonerations (NRE, 2022), which takes a more inclusive approach to cases, has recorded 2,813 cases of wrongful conviction in the United States occurring since 1989. These estimates likely reflect only a small portion of existing wrongful conviction cases, the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, with most wrongfully convicted individuals still unable to break through the surface, due to the myriad difficulties associated with proving one's innocence (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Roach, 2012). While a singular figure cannot capture the true rate at which wrongful conviction occurs across North America, criminal justice professionals (e.g., police, prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys) estimate on average, wrongful convictions represent about 1-3% of all convictions in the U.S. (Ramsey & Frank, 2007; Zalman et al., 2008), which would translate to over 10,000 cases of wrongful conviction in the U.S. each year (Zalman, 2012).

One sole cause cannot be attributed to the overwhelming occurrence of wrongful conviction across Canada and the United States. Miscarriages of justice occur due to a variety of

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis, wrongful conviction occurs when an individual who is factually innocent is convicted of a crime they did not commit (Chancellor, 2019; Tudor-Owen, et al., 2019).

reasons that can happen at any stage of the criminal justice process, from the initial investigation to courtroom procedures (NRE, 2022). Contributing factors include mistaken eyewitness identification, false confessions, false accusations, false/improper forensic evidence and science, police and/or prosecutorial misconduct, and false or misleading informant testimony (Gould & Leo, 2010; Innocence Project, 2022; NRE, 2022). These factors highlight the importance of how safeguards should be placed within the criminal justice system to protect individuals from being susceptible to wrongful conviction, including the implementation of new policies and procedures that are less likely to result in a wrongful conviction. For example, when looking at false confessions and police interrogation practices, research has found that information-gathering approaches are less likely to yield false confessions than accusatorial tactics (Meissner, et al., 2014, Snook, et al., 2014).

However, there are influences beyond these contributing factors that can influence miscarriages of justice as well. For instance, factors such as systemic racism and pejorative attitudes toward individuals with prior criminal convictions (Denver, et al., 2017; Roach & Ken, 2013; Sugie, et al., 2019) can result in more severe treatment of—and consequences for—marginalized individuals within the criminal justice system (Jochnowitz & Kendall, 2021; West & Meterko, 2015). These contributing factors showcase that while targeting problematic aspects of criminal justice procedures head on can help to decrease the likelihood of wrongful convictions, the presence of biases and misconduct (official misconduct is present in 57% of the documented exoneree cases in the NRE database) will continue to lead to wrongful convictions despite improving best practices (Joy, 2006). Moreover, even with the best of intentions, errors do sometimes occur. Thus, a focus on reducing wrongful convictions—while important—is

insufficient. Wrongful convictions will continue to occur and the needs of those ensnared by miscarriages of justice require further research and support.

One of these possible cases that has yet to be overturned involves Rodney Reed; an individual the Innocence Project is convinced is currently incarcerated for crimes he did not commit. Reed is a Black man on death row for a sexual assault and murder despite the grievous issues in the case against him, including untested DNA evidence on the murder weapon, an alternative suspect of interest, and inconsistencies within Rodney's story as he only later claimed to be having an affair with the engaged victim (Innocence Staff, 2019). In his case, significant social media attention was garnered by his innocence campaign, which was sparked by his imminent execution scheduled in November of 2019 (Bates, 2019). The campaign for Rodney Reed's innocence was shared on social media by celebrities, news organizations, criminal justice professionals, and the public (Barajas, 2021), and ultimately led to an indefinite stay of execution on November 15th, 2019.

This thesis explores how social media users interacted with Rodney Reed's innocence campaign with the aim of understanding the relationship between social media activism and wrongful conviction. It will begin by providing an overview of social media activism and online campaigns. There will be a discussion of both the pros and cons of social media activism, including an overview of research that argues for the importance of recognizing its' shortcomings. This section will also outline previous literature that showcases how users interact with campaigns online, contextualizing how activism takes form in a digital space. Following this, the final section will be a review of the existing literature on wrongful conviction in the media. It will summarize and draw attention to several studies that have examined social media activity surrounding wrongful conviction cases. Following this, it will apply the literature on

social media activism to wrongful conviction by thematically analyzing the Twitter posts under #RodneyReed. It will end with a summary of the results discussed within the context of social media and wrongful conviction research.

Social Media Activism

Social media has increasingly offered a digital platform for activism and information dissemination (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). While engaging in those practices, social media users are actively building and mobilizing social movements (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). Online platforms, for example, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook, have been used as a method of bolstering existing offline movements (Geis, 2017), for example, campaigns that focus on sexual assault awareness (e.g., #MeToo; Loney-Howes, et al., 2021), racial inequality (e.g., #BLM; Keib, et al., 2018), and cancer awareness (e.g., #Movember; Bravo & Hoffman-Geotz, 2015) have all trended on social media websites. These websites have become a hub for activism as they can be effectively used by these movements to promote their own messages and goals (Smith, et al., 2019; Xiong, et al., 2019). Specifically, users can participate in swift exchanges of information that happen in "real time" and transcend geographic borders. Beyond this, users can actively contribute to movements with their own discourse while also sharing relevant information to educate and mobilize others (Geis, 2017; Xiong, et al., 2019). These elements, coupled with the ability for movements to go "viral,"[2] are what draw sociopolitical activist efforts to social media (Lenoir, et al., 2017; Wang, et al., 2016).

There is support for the efficacy of using social media to share educational information (Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020). For example, in public health campaigns, users have shared

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[2] Something will go viral on the internet by gaining rapid popularity, it will gain fast and widespread attention from internet users on one or more platforms (Collins, n.d.).

resources to promote safe health practices (e.g., mask wearing during the Covid-19 pandemic; Sobawale, et al., 2020) and provide support related to serious health diagnoses (e.g., cancer; Thackery, et al., 2013). Lenoir, et al., (2017) conducted a thematic analysis of tweets utilizing the hashtag #smearforsmear, a campaign promoting cervical cancer awareness, and found that users posting with this hashtag were significantly more likely to promote educational content about cervical cancer in comparison to other types of posting (e.g., using the hashtag for self-promotion). Educating others through information sharing online can also take the form of sharing personal stories to spread awareness, such as disclosing victimization within the #MeToo movement (Li, et al., 2020; Modrek & Chakalov, 2019; Xiong, et al., 2019). These disclosures work to establish the gravity of the situation, while simultaneously mobilizing users to provide both social and emotional support for these victims of sexual assault (Schneider & Carpenter, 2020). Overall, social media movements hope to promote awareness, knowledge, and resources to users virtually, to influence users' supportive behaviours both online and offline (Leong, et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 2013).

Within social media literature, researchers have pointed to the important effects of opinion expression within activist movements (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013). Opinion and attitude expression can have a motivating influence on the current and future participation of individuals within a movement (Chen et al., 2015; Hong & Kim, 2021). Additionally, opinion expression over social media can act as a tool in affirming public support in a movement, increasing the belief in a cause and chances of engagement within that movement (David, 2022). In their 2013 study, Valenzuela demonstrated the vital role of opinion expression in political expression during Chilean demonstrations (e.g., joining a protest). They administered a survey to 737 Chilean citizens with the aim of measuring items such as protest behaviours, social media use, social

media activism, and opinion expression. The results of this study found that sharing opinions and attitudes over social media led to increased political expression, demonstrating the significant and effective role that opinion expression has within online activist causes (Valenzuela, 2013).

However, the efficacy of social media movements in achieving their activist goals, such as spreading awareness, has been questioned (Morozov, 2009; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). The #Movemeber movement is an example of a popular world-wide online campaign that could not maintain a unified focus on its goal of promoting prostate cancer awareness and education (Bravo & Hoffman-Geotz, 2017; Lenoir, et al., 2017). Rather, Bravo and Hoffman-Geotz (2015) found that across the globe, only a minority of posts focused on educating others about prostate cancer, spreading relevant health information, or promoting charitable initiatives, while the majority centered around mustaches and grooming.

Furthermore, research has pointed to 'slacktivism' as a potential risk to the efficacy of social media in creating meaningful and successful digital campaigns (Kwak, et al., 2018; Lim, 2013; Morozov, 2009). Specifically, slacktivism is a term that describes social media users who offer surface level participation, wherein individuals provide token gestures while failing to engage meaningfully within these movements both online and offline (Morozov, 2009). For instance, users might publicly support a cause by liking a page or sharing a post but are not motivated to escalate their participation in meaningful ways, such as through signing petitions or providing donations (Kristofferson, et al., 2014; Wilkins, et al., 2019). It is theorized that token participation can satisfy less motivated individuals' need to belong but leads more motivated individuals to falsely believe that real change is happening, when in fact offline activism efforts (e.g., protesting) have not improved (Hockin-Boyers & Clifford-Astbury, 2021; Morozov, 2009).

Although slacktivism can act as a barrier within online movements, there are those that argue that even minimal public engagement can have a mobilizing effect nonetheless (Foster, et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2019). For example, Lane and Dal Cin (2016) found that simply sharing posts and engaging with movements on a surface level can still lead to a mobilizing effect overall, as seen with the success of campaigns such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. This campaign promoted awareness for ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) by sharing videos of individuals having a bucket of ice water being poured over them (Trejos, 2017). Although many individuals simply completed the "challenge" without discussing or educating about ALS, the viral spread of these water bucket challenge videos led to over 700,000 new donors, resulting in 115 million U.S. dollars in donations (ALS Association, 2019; Lane & Dal Cin, 2016). These new donations demonstrate the important role that minimal participation can play, allowing the campaign to foster the attention needed to best serve the charity's cause.

The idea that slacktivist actions (e.g., liking or sharing a post without really engaging in its content) can lead to important change for an issue has led to the proposal that activism should be understood as a spectrum (Smith, et al., 2019). Importantly, slacktivist efforts can be vital to the overall success of a campaign; campaigns are bolstered by the actions taken in their name (i.e., sharing posts), and are reliant on the amount of social networking and resources that they can generate, which is dependent on the social media attention they receive (Geis, 2017; Savage, et al., 2007). Additionally, this view also posits that low effort / low risk / low engagement online activism can act as an antecedent to continued engagement, as users become familiar with a given movement and more motivated to increase their activism (Kwak, et al., 2018; Smith, et al., 2019). Furthermore, Valenzuela (2013) found that certain online activist actions (e.g., sharing opinion-based posts) were more likely to result in offline activist actions (e.g., protesting). Taken

together, previous literature in this area suggests that small actions within the digital sphere have the potential to lead to meaningful acts both online and offline (Lane & Dale Cin, 2016; Smith, et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2013; Wang & Chu, 2017).

Wrongful Conviction in the Media

In direct relevance to the present research, a number of specific wrongful conviction cases have recently garnered attention across various media platforms, including in news coverage, tv and film, and on social media platforms (Geis, 2017; Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). For instance, news organizations (e.g., CNN) provide factual updates surrounding sensationalized wrongful conviction cases (e.g., CNN Staff, 2016), but also publish pieces that aim to educate the public more generally on issues surrounding wrongful conviction (Andone, 2020). The stories of exonerees have also been told on screen, through crime documentaries, dramatizations, and fictionalized accounts. For example, when searching 'wrongful conviction' on Netflix Canada, over twenty titles appeared, as the streaming service has released several wrongful conviction centered television series and films, such as the Netflix originals: The Innocence Files, When They See Us, Making a Murderer, and Amanda Knox.

Individuals are also actively engaging with popular cases of wrongful conviction on social media platforms (Geis, 2017; Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). Amanda Knox is a US citizen who was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault and murder when she was abroad in Italy (CNN Staff, 2016). In the campaign for her innocence, social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, were used to spread awareness of her innocence, and to recruit new supporters internationally (Geis, 2017). Geis (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with social media users who were part of the campaign to understand how and why they utilized social media in this justice campaign. Just as other social justice movements (Lane & Dal Cin, 2016; Xiong, et

al., 2019), Geis (2017) found that users involved in this campaign used social media to mobilize supporters across the globe, share resources and details about the case, spread awareness about Amanda Knox's innocence, and fundraise. Additionally, participants reported feeling connected to Amanda Knox, felt empowered to help her campaign for innocence, and these attitudes were what pushed them to expand their activist efforts. While none of the participants claimed that the campaign was responsible for her exoneration, spreading the word of an exoneree's innocence is vital to the success of a miscarriage of justice campaign (Geis, 2017; Savage, et al., 2007).

Steven Avery was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault and attempted murder, his case was documented by Netflix in the show *Making a Murderer* (Innocence Project, 2022). Following his release, Steven Avery, and his nephew Brendan Dassey, were both convicted for the murder of Teresa Halbach, while this most recent conviction has not been overturned, it has been disputed as wrongful as well (France, 2016; Kennedy, 2018). In his case, social networking websites such as Reddit, were used to promote alternative explanations for the crime, as well as express users' thoughts and feelings surrounding his wrongful conviction (Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). Kennedy (2018) conducted a thematic analysis of 6005 Reddit posts on *Making a Murderer* and found that users engaged in information sharing about the case (e.g., by posting about the injustices caused by the criminal justice system) and social media activism (e.g., through signing petitions in support of Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey). Kennedy's findings (2018) not only support that wrongful conviction dialogue occurs on social media, but how these conversations were occurring. Importantly, Kennedy's research highlights the value of thematically analyzing social media posts to understand how the public interacts with wrongful conviction cases.

The Present Study

As previous research has found, social media can play an important role in the campaign for a wrongfully convicted individual's innocence (Geis, 2017; Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). Building upon the research of Kennedy (2018), the present study analyzed social media posts created during the innocence campaign for Rodney Reed. Due to the ubiquity of social media activism on Twitter in particular (Lindgren, 2019; Xiong, et al., 2019), the present study looked at Twitter posts that included the hashtag #RodneyReed, which was integral to this case of factual innocence and championed by the official Innocence Project twitter account.

Through an exploratory content analysis, the project explored how Twitter users are (or are not) contributing to the conversation surrounding Rodney Reed's innocence campaign. Firstly, I was interested in whether users were engaging in fact-sharing, opinion expression (e.g., if they do – or do not – personally believe he is innocent) or used the Twitter #RodneyReed hashtag to engage in and motivate social action. These three categories were deductively developed from social media literature with the aim of understanding what functions users' posts serve within this innocence campaign. Secondly, using inductive content analysis, I looked at what topics (e.g., race, the death penalty) were, and were not, driving the conversation surrounding Rodney Reed's case on Twitter; the themes that emerged from the data itself. Finally, I analyzed whether (and the extent to which) users meaningfully engaged in the information they were sharing (e.g., discussing accurate details of the case, expressing their attitudes towards the criminal justice system, explaining ways to become involved in the campaign) or took more of a slacktivism approach (e.g., engaging with the campaign on a superficial level). This research adds to the literature by investigating how social media users interact with an active case of factual innocence, and the extent to which the public engaged meaningfully with the case, such as turning their support into actual helping behaviours.

<center>**Method**</center>

Data Source

My data come from Twitter, a social media platform wherein individuals can freely share opinions, ideas, and information in real-time and across geographic boarders (Small, 2011; Twitter, 2021). Importantly, Twitter's pioneering introduction of hashtags on social media acts as a method by which individuals engage in digital activism, allowing users to raise awareness, discuss, share ideas, and congregate with other users under a singular hashtag (Lindgren, 2019; Xiong, et al., 2019). This increases the cohesion of a movement, as hashtags are publicly accessible and can easily be searched by all users, hashtags are integral to a movement's success within the Twitterverse and a key to going viral (Gleason, 2013; Isa & Himelboim, 2018; Xiong, et al., 2019). Thus, I analyzed posts using the Innocence Project's hashtag for their Rodney Reed campaign (#RodneyReed).

Tweets were randomly sampled from the total population of 157,181 tweets that included #RodneyReed. The population was defined from the Innocence Project's first tweet using #Rodney Reed, which was on February 13th, 2015, to Rodney Reed's most recent stay of execution[3], which occurred on November 15th, 2019. After receiving approval from Twitter and my university's REB, I used the Twitter API – accessed via Postman software – to collect randomly selected original posts (i.e., not retweets) from this population.

The Twitter API is an interface that can be accessed via Twitter's developer platform. This interface connects users with software that allows them to access, retrieve, and engage with Twitter data (Twitter, 2022; Tyson, 2022), such as the archived tweets that were the data source

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[3] On November 15th, 2019, Rodney Reed received an indefinite stay of execution. As of November 2022, he has not received a new execution date.

for this thesis. To retrieve the archived tweets via the API, I used Postman, which is a platform that aims to simplify user interactions with various APIs (Postman, 2022; Software Testing Help, 2022). Postman allows users to easily create requests within the parameters outlined by the API they are using in order to retrieve their desired responses (Software Testing Help, 2022). Specifically, I used Postman to access Twitter's archived tweets by searching for (or querying) original tweets posted on randomly selected dates during the timeline used for this project. To randomly select the dates, I used Google's random number generator to pick a random date for each month in the timeline. If the date that was randomly selected produced no tweets in my query, that was recorded, and another date for that month was randomly selected. Once I had sampled a day for each month, I sampled a second day per month, and then a third day for each month (etc.). Using this method, 506 random searches were conducted and a sample of 740 tweets was drawn.

Background of Case

In 1998, at the age of nineteen, Rodney Reed was convicted and sentenced to death for the sexual assault and murder of nineteen-year-old Stacey Stites. Rodney's DNA was found on the victim (Medino, 2021), however, Rodney claimed to have a consensual intimate relationship with Stacey Stites–and Stacey's friends and co-workers were aware that Stacey was having an affair with a Black man– which would account for the presence of his DNA (Innocence Staff, 2019). As Rodney originally denied knowing Stacey–possibly for fear of repercussions of a Black man sleeping with a White woman who had died–he may have looked guilty in the eyes of the police. Since his trial, witnesses have come forward to confirm Rodney's relationship with Stacey Stites (Innocence Staff, 2019), as well as expert witnesses that have scientifically discredited the DNA evidence linking Rodney to the crime (Innocence Staff, 2018).

Furthermore, Rodney Reed was tried by an all-white jury, and racial bias is a potential contributing factor in his conviction (Innocence Staff, 2019). Moreover, new evidence implicates a different suspect: Jimmy Fennell, the victim's fiancé (Osborn, 2021).

Jimmy Fennell was a police officer and an initial suspect, and witnesses claim that Stacey was worried about what would happen if Jimmy found out she was cheating on him (Yang, et al., 2020). Despite this, police dropped him as a suspect and focused on Rodney instead. Since Rodney Reed's conviction, Jimmy Fennell's alibi has been discredited as inconsistent due to new time of death estimates (Osborn, 2021). Furthermore, Jimmy Fennell was convicted of kidnapping and sexual assault in 2008 and served a ten-year sentence from his conviction (AP News, 2021; Osborn, 2021). In 2019, a witness who was in prison with Jimmy Fennell while he was serving his ten-year sentence attested that Jimmy had confessed to the murder of Stacey Stites while they were conversing in the prison yard (AP News, 2021; Medino, 2021).

Rodney Reed's case is still ongoing. Having spent 23 years, and counting, on death row for a murder conviction which is believed to be wrongful, Reed's execution was indefinitely stayed following the widespread attention his campaign received on social media. At the time of this writing (November 2022), Rodney Reed is still in prison. His execution was stayed indefinitely on Nov 15th, 2019, but the charges have not been dropped and a new trial has yet to be called.

Procedure

My thesis used a mixed methods qualitative content and thematic analyses. Content analysis is a qualitative technique that focuses on the systematic development of categories to describe and evaluate phenomena (Downe & Wamboldt, 1992; Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Due to limited past research on wrongful conviction and social media, this

project utilized a mixed approach, combining inductive and deductive methods. Excluding three

categories, an inductive approach was used wherein distinct themes are documented from the

data itself and later combined into general categories. For our three categories of fact, opinion,

and action, a deductive approach was used wherein pre-existing ideas or theories guide data

coding (Foreman & Damschroder, 2007).

A content analysis follows a three-step process, by which qualitative data is prepared,

organized, and reported (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). To prepare my data, each selected tweet (as well

as any randomly selected dates that did not return any tweets) were recorded into an excel file.

Within this excel file, the date that was randomly selected was recorded, as well as the number of

tweets and retweets that occurred on that date. On a separate sheet, the exact content of all

original tweets (not retweets) for each randomly selected day were recorded. This included the

tweet content and engagement levels (e.g., number of likes, retweets, replies, and quote tweets),

as well as the unique Tweet ID associated with each post. The content of the tweet, however, did

not include any attachments or media that users may have added to their tweets; the API only

displayed the text included in the original post. Unless the original tweets contained profanity,

the content of each post was left as is.

In the organization phase, I inductively coded the content of the sampled tweets to place

similar themes in mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Foreman

& Damschroder, 2007). Every tweet was scored for the presence or absence of each theme that

arose from the data. A single tweet could have multiple themes if different sentences or phrases

within a tweet mentioned different things. After collecting an initial sample of fifteen tweets, the

initial coding scheme was reviewed by a group of three researchers. Each tweet was reviewed

along with the categories that were scored for that post. During this review, the initial coding

scheme was reviewed, agreed upon, and documented into a coding dictionary. This coding dictionary was built upon further as coding continued, with new categories arising and/or older categories being revised. Specifically, categories were combined if later tweets tended to include content from both categories together or if distinctions between categories became less apparent over time, as well as broken apart into more specific subcategories if categories were too broad to capture the nature of new content. The third and final phase of this qualitative content analysis was the reporting phase in which tweets in each category and subcategory were totaled and frequencies were obtained using SPSS software.

During initial coding, three categories were developed deductively from the literature on social media activism (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013) as well, which I call: fact, opinion, and action. These three categories were used to identify the main function of each tweet, and to organize the data more broadly. Thus, these deductive categories are not mutually exclusive to our other themes, but instead a way of conceptualizing the entire data set. Within these deductive categories, the entire tweet was coded as belonging to one—and just one—of the three categories. If a post contained elements from multiple deductive categories, the post was categorized based on what the majority of the tweet was about. Thus, the same tweet could have multiple themes (i.e., inductive categories), but would only be represented by one of our organizing deductive categories (fact, opinion, or action).

For tweets that did not fit within our deductive and/or inductive categories, a separate "other" category was created. Seven tweets from our sample fell into the "other" category as they were unrelated to Rodney Reed's case (e.g., they were product promotion using popular hashtags). Any tweets written in a language other than English were excluded from our sample as we could not code them.

In addition to reporting the frequencies yielded by our content analysis, a thematic analysis was also used. A thematic analysis is a qualitative coding method that aims to detect and describe repeatedly occurring themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While a thematic analysis will follow a similar process to a content analysis, in that data is organized and coded to describe a phenomenon, it goes beyond by interpreting the themes and categories discovered in the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, et al., 2016). The process of a thematic analysis follows six-steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first two stages overlap with that of a content analysis, as they focus on data preparation (e.g., transcribing content) and generating a coding scheme. However, a departure is taken in the next three stages that focus heavily on the creation and establishment of themes. Specifically, within stages three to five, themes are created by combining similar codes (step three), themes are revised in order to ensure they accurately reflect the coding scheme and the data as a whole (step four), and then they are defined and named (step five; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further in step five, themes are refined in order to ensure that they are reflective of the story that the analysis tells (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016). Once these steps were completed, the thematic analysis converged once again with the content analysis as the final stage is to report the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this final stage, examples of each theme were collected from the data, related to relevant literature, and reported in the results section of this paper (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016).

Results

Summary of Results

The content and thematic analysis resulted in three main categories, ten themes, and fourteen subthemes. Via deductive analysis, the categories of fact, opinion, and action were

produced. The inductive analysis resulted in ten themes branching from the three main categories that were produced via deductive analysis. Further, within these themes, several subthemes emerged during analysis. See Table 1 for a summary of each category, theme, and subtheme.

Table 1

Summary of Categories, Themes, and Subthemes

Category	Theme	Subtheme	Example
Fact	News Sharing	Sharing Case Updates	*"#RodneyReed files new appeal, says scientific opinions were false…"*
		News of Social Protest	*"Students are spending the night outside to bring awareness to the #RodneyReed case"*
	Sharing Case Facts	Facts Supporting Rodney Reed's Innocence	*"In 2014, #RodneyReed's attorneys presented expert testimony that these untested evidence items likely contain DNA evidence that could prove Rodney's innocence. The prosecution did not argue against this fact, but instead claimed that the evidence was contaminated in storage"*
		Facts Suggesting Rodney Reed's Guilt	*"#RodneyReed's conviction is based on DNA testing of semen inside Ms. Stites' body…"*
	Labelling	How Rodney Reed is Labeled	*"#RodneyReed is an innocent man on Texas death row"*
		Who the Case is Attributed To	*"New evidence in #RodneyReed case points to victim's fiancé"*
Opinion	Death Penalty	Rodney Reed's Execution	*"Stop the execution of #RodneyReed"*
		Anti-Execution Beliefs	*"All executions are wrong"*
	Race		*"[Rodney Reed]'s innocent and is going to be executed due to a racist police department"*
	Criminal Justice Issues		*"Why does #Texas have such a hard time admitting it's mistakes? Seriously?? What do we have to do to get some #Justice in the south!"*

	Innocence		*"#RodneyReed is widely considered #innocent! And we have no doubt!"*
	Insulting/Fighting Other Users		*"... Like other #RodneyReed supporters, you seem to be unable to grasp the importance of context..."*
Action	Users' Personal Helping and Supportive Behaviours	General Support	*"We fight for #truth #justice #mercy everyday for #RodneyReed, an innocent man in #deathrow #Texas."*
		Specific Helping Behaviours	*"MONDAY, July 2nd is the day we're writing letters to the editor in our local areas"*
	Calls to Action	Call for Specific Actions	*"#RodneyReed is #innocent, and we will write until he's free! Please join us anytime! If you'd like a postcard kit, please send us your contact details, and we'll send one to you"*
		General Pleas for Support	*"Join us in standing against the execution of our beloved #RodneyReed. #RodneyReedisInnocent on Texas death row. Help our family #FreeRodneyReed!"*
	Calling Out Specific Users to Intervene	Calls for Influential Figures to Act	*"@KimKardashian Please can you look into the #RodneyReed case..."*
		Calls for Media Attention	*"@MTV @Unlocking_Truth you guys should cover #RodneyReed and his case in Bastrop Texas"*

Fact

Within the overarching category of facts, users engaged in sharing facts and promoting

informational resources. This category was deductively created as previous research has pointed

to information sharing and promoting educational sources as a proposed form of activism

(Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020). In this form of activism, social media users work to further

a cause by spreading relevant facts and resources that aim to educate the public about a

campaign's goal and primary message (e.g., promoting cervical cancer awareness through educational content; Lenoir, et al., 2017). Inspired by this line of research, the fact category was created, accounting for 50.14% of all tweets in this sample (N = 371). Content of tweets under this category are objective and focus on describing what is known or proven to be true. Furthermore, within this category emerged several themes including news sharing, sharing case facts, and labeling. These themes were further divided into more specific subthemes as well.

News Sharing

Tweets in this theme referred to, or engaged in, circulating coverage of the various milestones or current events related to Rodney Reed's case. For instance, users posted relevant headlines to this case, as well as sharing news related to key figures, updates, and press commentary surrounding Rodney Reed. Within the fact sharing category, 80.32 percent of the tweets (N = 298) fell into the theme of news sharing. However, within this theme, two subthemes emerged: providing case updates and sharing news of social protest inspired by Rodney Reed's injustice.

Case Updates. Of the sample collected, 74.83 percent of posts under the news sharing subtheme (N = 223) focused distributing case updates to other users under the #RodneyReed. The updates provided by users primarily came in two formats: providing general breaking news in Rodney Reed's case and providing in-depth live coverage of ongoing trials in his case.

Relevant to this category is disseminating the discovery of new evidence and the impacts it will have on Rodney Reed's case. For example, one user shared an update regarding the unearthing of new evidence: *"The new evidence #RodneyReed's attorneys say could set him free and point to another killer…"* Similarly, another user shared *"New evidence in #RodneyReed*

case points to victim's fiancé…" However, users did not only share when new evidence was discovered, but when existing evidence was challenged. One post exemplifies this as the user shared: *"… Forensic experts believe Stacey Stites died before midnight."* Another user similarly posted about the development that impacted the case timeline, as they tweeted: "*#Texas Attorneys introduce new evidence; #RodneyReed case Stites killed hrs before initially thought…"* Finally, posts also focused on sharing updates about discrediting existing forensic evidence within the case. One user shared an update that "*Reed filed a new appeal in Texas yesterday saying scientific evidence used at trial was false and has since changed…"* As well as another user who similarly posted *"#RodneyReed files new appeal, says scientific opinions were false…"* These posts act to educate and keep others up to date on the current state of key evidence in Rodney Reed's case. Moreover, these posts also showcase the headway being made within this innocence campaign as discovering new evidence and challenging evidence that led to Rodney Reed's wrongful conviction represents progress made in his fight for justice.

Also under this category, tweets were concerned with sharing major legal decisions that will impact the outcome of Rodney Reed's case. For example, users shared when there were setbacks in Rodney Reed's case, such as one user who wrote about a recent decision made: *"Denied request for DNA Testing to be reassessed in Rodney Reed Case…"* While another user similarly shared: *"Death row inmate from Central Texas #RodneyReed's appeal for DNA testing of additional evidence denied."* Other tweets focused on alerting users to positive updates in Rodney's case. One user shared this update in Rodney Reed's favour: *"…good news #RodneyReed of Texas granted a new trial."* While another user posted: *"…More Court Review Ordered for #BastropCounty #RodneyReed Murder Case…"* These tweets are among several used to alert followers of this case about significant decisions made in Rodney Reed's case. As

his case remains active, sharing these updates is important as new decisions can present new challenges, goals, and victories for this innocence campaign.

There were also tweets that focused on sharing minute-to-minute courtroom updates addressing Rodney Reed's active trials. These updates ranged from sharing linear updates about the trial to specific updates on court-related processes. An example of the sharing court timeline updates includes a post by one user who wrote: *"I'm back in Bastrop for the 4th and final day of the #RodneyReed hearing [...] Starts at 9."* Comparably, another user posted: *"#RodneyReed hearing: State moves for lunch break. Judge approves a recess until 1:30 pm."* Beyond linear, tweets under this subtheme disseminated updates on court-related processes. These tweets focused on sharing courtroom procedures that occur during Rodney Reed's various trials, such as witness testimonies and live trial decisions made by the Judge. The former is illustrated by a user who tweeted about the exchange between Rodney Reed's legal team and a witness on the stand: *"#rodneyreed hearing: q from defense, how many of the 275 witnesses did you interview? Garvie, \"just a few\", had to rely on investigators".* While another user posted about a witness being called to the stand: *"Prosecution calls first witness in #RodneyReed hearing, David Campos, one of the investigators into the Stites' murder in 1996."* Additionally, we saw users tweeting about trial decisions made by the Judges appointed to Rodney Reed's trials. This includes one user who highlighted in a post that *"#RodneyReed hearing: right when Davis was going into the conversation between him and Fennell, the state objects, judge sustained."* Another user likewise shared an impending decision in Rodney Reed's case: *"#RodneyReed hearing has now concluded - Judge Shaver said it will take 6 weeks to 2 months for him to make his recommendation to CCA."* These tweets illustrate how news sharing operated within Rodney

Reed's legal trial, showcasing that users concentrated on sharing detailed updates that covered a range of legal processes and decisions.

Providing other Twitter users with up-to-date and unfolding developments showcases the importance of social media's role in the mass distribution of news. Sharing these growing developments allows other users to be actively informed on Rodney Reed's case, supporting the proposed role of fact-sharing as a form of social media activism (Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020). News sharing also plays an important role within the Twitter landscape as individuals use this platform to access their daily news (Twitter News, 2022). Thus, within this context, it is understandable that news sharing would play a large role within #RodneyReed's innocence campaign. Further, as Twitter's the most used social media platform for news updates (Twitter News, 2022), it is fruitful for users to post Rodney Reed related news as it is what Twitter's audience expects and can help to reach a wider range of people that may be unaware of Rodney Reed's ongoing battle.

Social Protest. While they represent the minority of the news-sharing sample, 25.16 percent of tweets (N = 75) focused on sharing descriptions of events that occurred in support of Rodney Reed and protests. For example, one user shared about an event that occurred to raise awareness for Rodney Reed's innocence campaign: *"Students are spending the night outside to bring awareness to the #RodneyReed case."* Another post described a vigil that occurred in support of Rodney Reed: *"Student run overnight candle light vigil @UTAustin for #RodneyReed continues until 7am."* These posts focus on sharing community-run supportive events; they describe public showcases of support held on Rodney Reed's behalf. Twitter users also shared coverage of protests and rallies that occurred to fight for justice on Rodney Reed's behalf. Users described events of social protest that showcased community disapproval of Rodney Reed's

conviction, continued imprisonment, and ultimately his place on death row. For example, one user wrote: *"Supporters of #RodneyReed gather outside Bastrop County Law Enforcement Center saying they want justice for him"*. As well as another, who posted: *"On Valentine's Day, Protesters Call on Governor to Stop Execution of #RodneyReed"*. These tweets describing social protest did not focus on disseminating invitations to protest or showcase support, but rather descriptions of events that had already occurred.

Social media, and Twitter especially, has become a home for sharing news of protests (Bailo & Vromen, 2017; Luna, et al., 2019). It is possible that this form of news sharing is fueled by the accessibility and authenticity that Twitter offers, as social media platforms are not controlled by mainstream media companies and thus can focus on sharing accurate details about social protests (Brown, et al., 2018; Luna, et al., 2019). Moreover, Twitter and other social media platforms offer a wider reach to attract audiences and can promote these news stories without temporal or geographic limitations (Bailo & Vromen, 2017). Finally, sharing news of social protest may be acting as a form of social media activism, as users can mobilize others within a movement by promoting a campaign's unified message (e.g., wanting justice for Rodney Reed; Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020; Osmundsen, et al., 2021).

Sharing Case Facts

The second theme that emerged during analysis is known as sharing case facts and accounts for 33.42 percent of tweets within our fact category (N = 124). Tweets within this theme fell into two subthemes, the first focused on sharing facts supporting Rodney Reed's innocence and the second posted about facts that suggest Rodney Reed is guilty. Specifically, users were focused on discussing information pertinent to witness testimonies (e.g., individuals

who last saw the victim), relevant locations (e.g., where the victim was last seen), and other evidence related to the case. Moreover, when tweeting about relevant evidence, users discussed both the presence and absence of physical or forensic evidence within this case.

Facts Supporting Rodney Reed's Innocence. Under this subtheme, users focused on promoting case details that highlighted Rodney Reed's innocence (36.29% of tweets in this theme, N = 45). Specifically, individuals used this platform to point to gaps in the case against Rodney Reed, bolstering the argument for his factual innocence. This can be seen in quotes like the following:

> *Texas is trying to execute #RodneyReed even though several items from the crime scene, INCLUDING THE MURDER WEAPON, have not been tested for DNA. Rodney has maintained his innocence for 20 years, but prosecutors continue to block DNA testing that would prove his innocence.[4]*

Similarly, another user wrote: *"In 2014, #RodneyReed's attorneys presented expert testimony that these untested evidence items likely contain DNA evidence that could prove Rodney's innocence. The prosecution did not argue against this fact, but instead claimed that the evidence was contaminated in storage."* Tweets in this subtheme show how individuals are using Twitter to promote Rodney Reed's innocence using information dissemination. This is particularly important as it helps to promote the Innocence Project's message that Rodney Reed was wrongfully convicted and helps to point to the glaring issues within his case that support his innocence (e.g., untested DNA evidence). Importantly, using fact sharing that affirms the message of a social movement has been documented in past research (Lenoir, et al., 2017; Sobawale, et al., 2020; Thackery, et al., 2013). Educating others in this manner is vital within a

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[4] Emphasis was placed in the original tweet.

movement, as it can act as a way of promoting awareness for a cause and mobilizing others to act (Valenzuela, 2013).

Another interesting factor to note, however, is the presence of tweets that promote Rodney Reed's innocence by sharing case details that point to the guilt of another person. Specifically, there is one popular alternative suspect who is believed to have murdered Stacey Stites: her then fiancée and police officer Jimmy Fennell. Thus, within this category, there were users who shared facts under #RodneyReed showcasing Jimmy Fennell as involved with the crime, and even the true perpetrator. For example, one user shared: *"Stacey Stites talked about Rodney Reed to her friends and told them Jimmy would kill her if he found out about her \"friend,\" referring to Rodney Reed…"*. Other users also engaged in this form of fact sharing by pointing to case facts that place doubt on Jimmy Fennell's version of events. For example, one user wrote *"Important to point out Bayardo's 3 AM time of death (which he has retracted) was also based … on the timeline Jimmy Fennell had given them, which we now know to be false or misleading…"*. Interestingly, 12.09 percent of tweets (N = 15) within this theme mention facts suggesting the guilt of an alternative suspect, representing a common way of introducing an alternative suspect into this conversation.

Facts Suggesting Rodney Reed's Guilt. A secondary subtheme that emerged within this theme is that of sharing case details that suggest Rodney Reed is guilty and deserving of his conviction (17.74 percent of posts in this theme, N = 22). Under this category, users focused on broadcasting information that pointed to Rodney Reed's guilt by discussing evidence that had led to his original conviction. This is demonstrated by posts such as this one: *"#RodneyReed's conviction is based on DNA testing of semen inside Ms. Stites' body and saliva on her breasts…"* This post highlights the role that DNA evidence played in the original conviction; however, it is

noteworthy that Rodney Reed and his team do not deny the presence of his DNA but maintain that his DNA was found because of his consensual relationship with Stacey Stites (Innocence Staff, 2019). Another example of this includes:

> *The evidence established at trial is that #RodneyReed raped and strangled Stacey, transported her in the truck, dumped her by the side of the road and then abandoned the truck at the high school, near the train tracks and his mother's house.*

By focusing on evidence from the original trial, individuals utilized #RodneyReed to affirm his conviction and promote the idea that he is truly guilty. These posts go against the goal of his innocence campaign by promoting that his conviction was just rather than a miscarriage of justice that must be corrected.

Others aimed to accomplish a similar goal by discussing Rodney Reed's past as a way of endorsing the notion that he is guilty. While Rodney Reed has not been convicted of the accusations shared by these Twitter users, he was indicted for other sexual assaults prior to his conviction (Mccullough, 2021). Some users used these allegations as evidence of his guilt for the murder of Stacey Stites. This is exemplified by one user who wrote: "*#RodneyReed was indicted… The victims testified at the penalty phase of his trial, under oath…*" Another post also spoke to Rodney Reed's alleged involvement with another crime:

> *In Nov 1995-a woman was abducted and raped from Bastrop's Cedar Street, which is on Stites' route from her apartment in Giddings to her job at HEB. This was a cold case until the DNA match was made 18 months later. #RodneyReed seems to like getting his victims from this area.*

These tweets point to the value that individuals place on prior convictions in their evaluations of guilt. Prior convictions are especially important when individuals are judging the guilt of

somebody who was already convicted of a similar crime (see: Wissler, et al., 1985). Thus, these posts may be choosing to focus on establishing Rodney Reed as someone who has previously committed a sexual assault to increase the perception that he is guilty of the crime he was wrongfully convicted.

It is also interesting to note the context in which tweets supporting his guilt are being composed and shared online. Users shared their perspectives on tweeting, with one post noting that:

> *I want justice for a murdered 19-year-old woman, whose killer and his advocates have been pulling the wool over the eyes of the public for more years that she got to live on this earth. Her name is #StaceyStites. I advocate for her.*

 Likewise, another tweet shared that: *"It's a sad day when people would rather listen to the murderer then the victim's own mother…"* These tweets speak to the fact that the victim, Stacey Stites, has been largely left out of the conversation. They recognize the difficult position that a wrongful conviction may place on the original victims of the crime as it can be retraumatizing and result in social and psychological consequences (see: Williamson, et al., 2016).

Labeling

Labeling is the final theme within the fact category and accounts for 30.41 percent of tweets within the entire sample (N = 225). The labels that emerged from the data fell into two subthemes. The first is how Rodney Reed is being described/branded by users, and the second is who users within this subtheme are attributing to the case. This theme emerged inductively from the data when it was noticed that users were branding Rodney Reed's case within their tweets. However, it became of interest as labelling theory denotes that labels are powerful tools with the

ability to create long lasing social and psychological consequences (Barmaki, 2019; Bernburg, et al., 2006; Feng & Wang, 2018; Kroska & Harkness, 2006).

How Rodney Reed is Labeled. Within this subtheme, users who tweeted under this hashtag were found to use specific descriptors for Rodney Reed. Often, tweets would use labels in conjunction–or in place of–Rodney Reed's name to describe the case online. Specifically, 32.44 percent of label posts (N = 73) focused on the death penalty element of Rodney Reed's situation when speaking about the case. For instance, one user wrote *"... \"Death Row Stories\" documentary explores #RodneyReed's #deathpenalty case."* It is possible that this label is frequently used when speaking about this case as it can be used to communicate the graveness of Rodney Reed's case, stressing that his situation is life or death. Furthermore, the label of death row or death penalty was often used in combination with other terms. For example, 34.24 percent of user tweets (N = 25) included the term inmate or prisoner alongside the death row label. This is demonstrated in a tweet by this individual which reads: *"Death row inmate Rodney Reed maintains innocence weeks before execution."* As well as in this post: *"Death row inmate Rodney Reed's lawyers file lawsuit after denied request for DNA testing…"* These posts are intriguing because there were no tweets using prisoner or inmate as a label on its own. Another interesting label used in conjunction with death row/penalty is the inclusion of the state of Texas. For example, one user tweeted: *"Texas death row inmate loses appeal…"* While another user posted: "*Death row inmate from Central Texas #RodneyReed's appeal for DNA testing of additional evidence denied…"* In fact, within the death row label, 8.21 percent of user tweets (N = 6) used a combination of both the death penalty and Texas in their label. This may be due to Texas having the second highest execution rate of the 27 states that still have the death penalty within the United States (Death Penalty Information Centre, 2020).

Another important label that was discovered within the overall labeling theme focused on showcasing Rodney Reed's case as one of factual innocence (28.88% of label posts, N = 65). While Rodney Reed's conviction has not been overturned as of yet, we are including this label within the fact category as his case is currently in the process of being revisited with the help of the Innocence Project due to evidence suggesting his factual innocence (Innocence Staff, 2019). Furthermore, his innocence is recognized and supported by the viral plea to stop his execution due to doubt about his involvement in the murder of Stacey Stites. Namely, within this context, many users described Rodney Reed's case as "*… An innocent man is scheduled to be executed by Texas…*" or "*#RodneyReed is an innocent man on Texas death row*". Similarly, other users labeled the case as a wrongful conviction or miscarriage of justice. This is showcased by one user who shared: "*@WhoopiGoldberg can the ladies of the view look into the miscarriage of justice taking place in Bastrop County regarding the execution of #RodneyReed please?...*" As well as another user who shared *"We'd love the opportunity to share the wrongful conviction story of #RodneyReed w you. He's on #deathrow in #Texas w a looming execution date."* These individuals use Rodney Reed's innocence as a label, placing focus on the potential miscarriage of justice that would occur with his execution and that is actively occurring with his ongoing imprisonment.

A different label that came up within our data set was that of using race as a descriptor for Rodney Reed (14.67 percent of label posts, N = 33). Rodney Reed's race was used as a label in tweets such as this one: *"Except of course trying to get out of Texas Death Row alive if you're an innocent Black Man."* As well as another user who similarly wrote: *"Cop kills girlfriend for affair with black guy… Black guy ends up on TX Death Row."* While they do not explicitly accuse anyone or any system of racism, by labeling Rodney Reed as "Black", they call attention

to it as a noteworthy factor within the case. This is further highlighted when users not only label Rodney Reed's race, but the race of the victim (Stacey Stites) and alternative suspect (Jimmy Fennell). For example, one user wrote: *"Rodney Reed is a Black man convicted of killing a white woman in a Texas death penalty case."* As well as another user who highlighted: *"He's a black man on death row for a murder committed by a white man."* Using race as a descriptor for Rodney Reed, and other parties within the case, highlighted the element of racial bias within this case without explicitly naming it as a causal factor in his wrongful conviction. As discussed by prior sources, including the Innocence Project, Rodney Reed's case remains influenced by racial bias (Granger, 2021; Selby, 2021). However, these tweets do not go beyond labeling Rodney Reed's race; they do not discuss how racial bias and discrimination play into his case–or others. Unfortunately, while racial bias was present in Rodney Reed's case (see: Selby, 2021), only 17.39 percent of tweets that mention race discussed the idea of racial bias (N = 8). This is in contrast to 71.74 percent of tweets that mentioned race using it as a descriptor for Rodney Reed's case (N = 33).

This surprised us, as we expected race and racial bias to play a larger role in the conversation surrounding Rodney Reed and his miscarriage of justice. This effect was not limited to race, as the topics of the death penalty and Rodney Reed's innocence were also prominent as labels. While it was expected that these issues would be discussed within our sample of tweets due to the nature of Rodney Reed's situation, it was not anticipated that the majority of tweets would focus on attributing labels to the case without discussing the underlying issues in greater detail. For example, this can be similarly seen with individuals who label Rodney Reed's case as one of wrongful conviction, but do not share why or how it classifies as a case of factual innocence.

Even though these tweets mention underlying issues in a superficial way, the act of labeling Rodney Reed's case is representative of a powerful psychological process. Labeling theory suggests that labels applied to individuals can create identities that shape decision-making, as well as impact the social and psychological functioning of labeled individuals (Barmaki, 2019; Bernburg, et al., 2006; Feng & Wang, 2018; Kroska & Harkness, 2006). Overall, labels carry important weight that not only impacts the individual labeled, but how they are perceived (Barmaki, 2019). This is seen when individuals are labeled as a criminal as it can create a deviant identity which the labeled individual then subscribes to (Barmaki, 2019; Bernburg, et al., 2006). In the case of Rodney Reed, there may be a recognition amongst users about the importance of which labels to use when describing his case. For example, users did not label Rodney Reed exclusively as an inmate/prisoner, but rather as someone on death row/expecting the death penalty. It is possible that this decision is being made to distance Rodney Reed from criminal labeling and choosing to direct focus to his impending execution and wrongful conviction.

Who the Case is Attributed To. A secondary subtheme under this labeling theme focused on who users were attaching the case to (20% of label posts, N = 45). Specifically, under this subtheme users were observed as attributing a label of belonging to figures within this case. Users either attributed the case to Rodney Reed and his miscarriage of justice, while others attributed the case to Stacey Stites and her murder. Within this subtheme, 77.78 percent of users (N = 35) said that it was belonging to the accused (Rodney Reed), while 22.22 percent of users (N = 10) noted it was belonging to the victim (Stacey Stites). For example: *"I was interviewed by @ajam yesterday about the #RodneyReed case."* As well as another user who wrote: *"New evidence in #RodneyReed case points to victim's fiancé."* These tweets assign the case as

belonging to Rodney Reed, with his name attached to the ongoing situation, and not Stacey Stites (who was the murder victim). It is noteworthy that even when the case is attributed to the victim, the majority of tweets cite the case as belonging to Rodney Reed. Often, when users discussed it within the context of the former, tweets would follow a similar structure as to this one: *"Reed has steadfastly claimed #innocence of the murder of Stacey Stites."* As well as another user who wrote: *"#RodneyReed was wrongly convicted for the murder of Stacey Stites 23 years ago and sentenced to death."* These tweets stress that this case is about the murder of Stacey Stites, rather than Rodney Reed's wrongful conviction. Although seeing as the majority of tweets assigned the case to Rodney Reed, this furthers the issue that we noted previously in which the victim has largely been left out of most of the discussion surrounding this case. However, we also recognize that it is possible Stacey Stites has been lost within this conversation as it is occurring within the context of #RodneyReed, a hashtag popularized by innocence campaigns such as the Innocence Project with the goal of freeing Rodney Reed and overturning his conviction (Maul, 2020).

Opinion

Tweets from our sample were coded within the opinion category when the content of the tweet appeared subjective, such as a personal belief or judgement. This category was deductively created based on social media research that suggests that sharing opinions on activist matters can act as a form of advocation within a campaign (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013). Moreover, opinion expression within social media movements can have a motivating effect on others, showcasing the importance of sharing personal beliefs online (Hong & Kim, 2021; Valenzuela, 2013). In total, 21.22 percent of tweets (N = 157) were categorized within the opinion category. Within

this category, several themes emerged including the death penalty, race, innocence, insulting other users, and criminal justice issues.

Death Penalty

The first theme within our opinion category focused on tweets that shared beliefs and attitudes surrounding the death penalty and government-run executions: regarding Rodney Reed's case specifically, as well as these issues more generally. Overall, 21.66 percent of tweets (N = 34) within the opinion category belonged to the death penalty theme.

Rodney Reed's Execution. To begin, within the death penalty subtheme we saw users' express their opinion on whether Rodney Reed should be executed. Specifically, Twitter users used #RodneyReed to share their disapproval about implementing the death penalty for Rodney Reed's case. For example, one user against executing Rodney Reed shared: *"Stop the execution of #RodneyReed".* Other users likened going through with his execution to committing a crime: *"He deserves a stay of execution while the federal courts find the murderer of Stacey Stites! Do not murder this man",* and *"Don't murder an innocent man".* By sharing their opinions against Rodney Reed's execution, these users help to promote one of the core messages behind Rodney Reed's innocence campaign: stop his execution. These tweets share a unified message which has been theorized to be an important asset in accomplishing the goal of the activists' campaign (Bravo & Hoffman-Geotz, 2017, Lenoir, et al., 2017).

While these users expressed clear messages of disagreement with Rodney Reed's execution, there were also individuals who shared their agreement with Rodney Reed's sentence. For example, one user shared: *"Execute #RodneyReed !!!"*, and another went so far as to say:

"#RodneyReed is guilty as hell and deserves worse then DEATH BY LETHAL INJECTION"[5].

These tweets illustrate a strong pro-execution stance for Rodney Reed; however, they represent a minority of tweets collected within the sample, with only 0.09 percent of tweets (N = 3) under this subtheme agreeing with Rodney Reed's execution. Perhaps it is possible to see this minority as a sign of success for this social justice campaign in maintaining their message that Rodney Reed is innocent and does not deserve to be on death row. It may also be indicative that users are motivated to voice their belief that Rodney Reed is guilty due to the viral nature of this campaign. The widespread support Rodney Reed is receiving online (Bloom, 2019) may have alerted these users to act against his innocence campaign and ensure that the conviction is not reversed.

Anti-Execution Beliefs. Finally, under this theme users took to Twitter within the #RodneyReed to express their opinions surrounding the death penalty and execution in general. Namely, posts within this subtheme contained content that expressed disdain for capital punishment. For example, one user shared: *"All executions are wrong"* and another said: *"#Abolish the #DeathPenalty - #everywhere!"* Other users simply expressed similar abolitionist attitudes by sharing anti-execution hashtags within their tweets. For example, within this subtheme we saw users share tweets including *"#HaltAllExecutions"*, *"#EndTheDeathPenalty"*, *"#NoMoreDeathPenalty"*, and *"#AbolishTheDeathPenalty"*. These posts illustrate an understanding of Rodney Reed's case as one of many death penalty cases within the U.S. (Death Penalty Information Center, 2022), allowing users to take a stand not only against his execution but the use of the death penalty as a whole.

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[5] Emphasis was placed in the original tweet.

Race

As previously discussed within the fact category, when race was brought into the conversation it was often used as a label for the major players within the case (e.g., Rodney Reed is a black man; the victim and suspect are both white). However, tweets addressing race were not limited to labeling; they also expressed opinions about how race operated as a factor within Rodney Reed's case. A minority of tweets addressed this issue, with only 5 percent of posts (N = 8) within the opinion category commenting about race's influence within this case.

Mostly, users under the subtheme of race addressed the presence of racial bias within Rodney Reed's case. Posts were quick to bring up the influence of race within the various legal systems at work in Rodney Reed's conviction. Specifically, there were those who pointed out bias within the police department involved in Rodney Reed's investigation. For example, one user pointed out that: *"[Rodney Reed]'s innocent and is going to be executed due to a racist police department"*. However, criticisms of the legal system were also extended to the Texas criminal justice system as a whole. This was seen when one user shared: *"#Texas w/ long history of wrongful prosecution of POC, this is just another shameful 1 #WhoRTheCriminals"*. Additionally, users racial bias within the legal system by also pointing out the reality that Rodney Reed is one of many cases of this nature. Specifically, one user wrote about discriminatory actions that occurred within another death penalty case: *"#RodneyReed is not an isolated case. A #SouthCarolina prosecutor called #JohnnyBennett \"King Kong on a bad day\"..."* This idea was further stressed by another user who wrote: *"Bias against interracial relationships continues to infect #deathpenalty cases in the U.S. The case of #RodneyReed, who was convicted and sentenced to death… is one example"*. These tweets represent a blatant call out of racial bias within the Rodney Reed case and the criminal justice system as a whole.

As previously discussed within the theme of "labeling", users were quick to point out the race of those involved within Rodney Reed's investigation, trial, and ultimate conviction. While pointing out the race of the parties involved (e.g., Rodney Reed being a person of colour, the victim and suspect being white) may imply a criticism, these tweets (as discussed) did not venture beyond the explicit facts of the case, nor include a specific and outward criticism or accusation of racial bias. For example, users pointed out that during Rodney Reed's original trial the jury was made up of all white members, such as evidenced by the following tweet: *"#RodneyReed was convicted by an all-white jury".* While another user similarly shared: *"[Rodney Reed] sentenced to death by all-white jury in 'Jim Crow Trial' in #Texas".* These tweets do not include specific accusations of racial bias by users, they are simply placing labels on important figures within the Rodney Reed case and thus are representative of the fact-sharing and labeling perspective discussed earlier. As previously discussed, these tweets made up the majority of race-based tweets, while opinion-based tweets discussing racial bias only represent 17.39 percent of tweets discussing race (N = 8).

Criminal Justice Issues

Another theme within the general opinion category includes posts by users who criticize the criminal justice system and issues present within it as related to the case of Rodney Reed. This theme applies to tweets that share opinions related to the criminal justice system but does not focus on systemic issues that may affect how it operates (e.g., racial bias). This theme accounted for 19.11 percent of overall opinion posts (N = 30). These tweets included various topics such as criticisms of the legal system as well as the need for change and justice system reform.

Within this opinion subtheme, individual users posted their thoughts about the criminal justice system, specifically supplying criticisms about the legal system as they applied to Rodney Reed's case and the injustices he faced. For example, users took to Twitter to post about their disdain for the current justice system, with one individual simply using a hashtag at the end of their tweet to express their opinion: *"What the f*** does it take to actually get a wrongful conviction overturned in Texas?! ... #YourJudicialSystemIsAJoke"*. Another post shared a similar sentiment, highlighting the imperfections of the justice system as it stands: *"I want to tell you about 2 of the people whose lives are on the line in TX, because they show us how broken the system is…"* These unfavourable opinions are echoed by a third user who wrote: *"#RodneyReed is on Texas' deathrow for a murder committed by a white cop. In Texas it's not about justice, it's about never admitting the Texas legal system is horribly broken"*. Another user tweeted: "*Why does #Texas have such a hard time admitting it's mistakes? Seriously?? What do we have to do to get some #Justice in the south!"* These tweets highlight a shared negative view of the criminal justice system–due, at least in part, to Rodney Reed's case–with some going so far as to suggest that the criminal justice system fails to deliver on its promises of delivering justice to the guilty and protecting the innocent.

These tweets not only showcase negative perceptions of the criminal justice system held by users under this hashtag, but also demonstrates how knowledge of wrongful convictions can lower faith in the criminal justice system as a whole (Huff, et al., 1996; Ricciardelli, et al., 2009). Specifically, this has been proposed to occur as becoming aware of miscarriages of justice, such as wrongful convictions, opens the door for individuals to see flaws within various sectors of the criminal justice system (Norris et al., 2020; Williamson, et al., 2021).

Innocence

Within this theme, users tweeted about their opinions regarding whether they thought Rodney Reed was innocent or guilty, as well as the reasoning behind their beliefs. 21.02 percent of tweets (N = 33) were categorized as belonging to this specific theme, with 72.73 percent suggesting he is innocent (N = 24) and 27.27 percent suggesting he is guilty (N = 9). Under this hashtag, many Twitter users expressed their belief that Rodney Reed is innocent of the crime for which he was convicted. For example, one user shared: *"#RodneyReed is widely considered #innocent! And we have no doubt!"* Similarly, another post said: "*... I stand by my opinion and the facts that #RodneyReed is innocent..."* However, beyond using this platform to agree that he is innocent, these users frequently expressed their view that Rodney Reed should be exonerated. For instance, one user said: *"it is long past time for this innocent man [Rodney Reed] to go home"*. Another post shared a similar opinion, stating that: *"...this man should be released... #freetheinnocent #freerodneyreed"*. As you can see, these tweets not only share the belief that Rodney Reed is innocent, but that he should be released from prison.

These posts are demonstrative of how Twitter users can interact with a case of wrongful conviction by sharing their beliefs and spreading the word of an individual's presumed innocence. This showcases how opinion sharing can be utilized as a form of activism (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013). Previous research has stressed the importance of opinion expression within social justice and political campaigns, specifically by proposing that sharing beliefs, attitudes, and opinions can mobilize further discussion, information sharing, and continued participation within a movement (Hong & kim, 2021; Valenzuela, 2013). Within this context, expressing belief in Rodney Reed's innocence not only affirms the campaign's message, but may mobilize

others to share their views on this case, possibly engaging people in the movement who would not otherwise have known about Rodney Reed, and even to take action because of them.

It is important to note that not everybody under this hashtag believed that Rodney Reed is innocent. One user shared their belief that Rodney Reed was rightfully convicted by stating *"…All of the DNA was from #RodneyReed. #Guilty"*. Another post went further, suggesting that Rodney Reed is not only guilty, but dangerous as well: *"… Yes, I personally believe Reed is a sexual predator and danger to society if he is released"*. Other users expressed their reasoning behind their beliefs in Rodney Reed's guilt, such as this user who wrote *"…even if Reed and Stacey had an affair, Reed is as likely to have killed her for saying "'No' to sex"*. As well as another post which shared a similar sentiment by stating that: *"… just because he wore gloves and didn't leave his fingerprints in the truck, doesn't mean he didn't do it…"* While most of the posts in this subtheme help to support Rodney Reed's innocence campaign, these guilt-based tweets obviously go against their main messaging. Instead, these tweets are illustrative that Twitter users can interact with hashtags as they please, that while #RodneyReed is utilized by innocence campaigns in his name, they do not have control over the content posted by other users under this hashtag. This highlights a potential weakness of social media campaigns, related to concerns regarding the efficacy of online movements and their ability to maintain a unified focus (Lenoir, et al., 2017; Bravo & Hoffman-Geotz, 2017).

Insulting/Fighting Other Users

This is the final theme within the opinion category and accounts for 3.11 percent of posts within the sample (N = 23). Within this theme, individuals used #RodneyReed to interact negatively with others, such as insulting other users or using expletive language towards others.

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This theme is categorized under the opinion category as the users are focused on arguing over their opinions and expressing dissent to those who disagree with them. In these posts, users went beyond presenting their point of view to commenting–if not outright attacking–the character of users with different views.

The posts in this category were not limited to anti- or pro- Rodney Reed attitudes but were expressed by both sides–solely against users who held the opposite opinion. Those in this category who believed that Rodney Reed was guilty directed their posts to negatively interact with users who were in support of stopping Rodney Reed's execution and believed that Rodney Reed was innocent. This included making comments that were targeted at specific users, such as one post which had a user sarcastically remarking at another:

> *"@XilishX @MastaOfMp3s @AbbyMay32996956 @PeacefulStreets Another*
> *#RodneyReed bully. People don't like me. I'm so sad. Really? Someone once said, "It's*
> *better to be thought a fool, than to open ones mouth and remove all doubt." That is the*
> *perfect caveat for social media".*

While posts within this theme were directly targeted at specific users, some posts also included negative generalizations towards Rodney Reed supporters: *"… Like other #RodneyReed supporters, you seem to be unable to grasp the importance of context…"* These tweets using #RodneyReed demonstrate that while he has backing from the Innocence Project and other public figures, there is not unanimous belief in his innocence, support for his execution to be stayed, and/or support for his conviction to be overturned.

Negative commentary and reactions under this hashtag were not limited to those who held anti-Rodney Reed attitudes, as those who were in support of overturning his death sentence also engaged in disputes over social media. Once again, just as the tweets discussed earlier, users

in support of Rodney Reed also mentioned specific users in their posts. For example, one post targeted politician Nikki Haley by saying: *"@thehill #RodneyReed thinks otherwise @NikkiHaley. Shame on you for this comparison"*. Similarly, another post sarcastically remarked to another user: *"@Alani_Robinson We neither want or need you BYE! Oh btw if I can give some advice don't go to Texas"*. As occurred among the anti-Rodney Reed users, these pro-Rodney Reed users are demonstrating a negative reaction that goes beyond the criticism of a dissenting opinion to attacking the individual who expressed the opinion.

These posts would qualify as forms of electronic aggression which is characterized by harassment, mistreatment, and intimidation that occurs digitally across various platforms (e.g., social media platforms, instant messaging; Pyzalski, 2012). The posts within this theme range from shaming users online to the use of insulting language and could all be characterized as forms of electronic aggression. Research on the prevalence of online aggression, harassment, and cyberbullying has focused on youth and young adult populations, however, they are illustrative of a more general and prevalent online phenomenon (Pyzalski, 2012; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; David-Ferdon & Feldman Hertz, 2007).

Action

Our third and final overarching category was named action. This category was created deductively, inspired by previous research that has shown that acts can be taken both online (e.g., liking and sharing posts) and offline (e.g., attending supportive events) within an activist campaign to help promote their causes (Kristofferson, et al., 2014; Wilkins, et al., 2019). Action tweets consist of posts in which a user is describing an active behaviour that they themselves have engaged in. It is an important distinction to note that action tweets do not describe the

behaviour of others as witnessed by the original poster, but an action taken by the author of the tweet themselves. Another noteworthy inclusion is that users who described actions they would be taking or engaging in the future were also categorized under the action category. Of the sample we collected, 28.56 percent of tweets (N = 212) were categorized into the action category. While coding, several themes emerged under this category, including users' personal helping and supportive behaviours, calls to action, and calling out specific users to intervene.

Users' Personal Helping and Supportive Behaviours.

The posts collected within our first theme encompass supporting Rodney Reed and his movements through differing supportive actions. 33.49 percent of tweets (N = 71) within the overall action category were labeled as users' personal helping and supportive behaviours. Within this theme, users posted in two ways by either tweeting about their general support or by tweeting about specific helping behaviours they did.

General Support. Within this subtheme, users posted about being active within Rodney Reed's movement without attaching specific actions to their tweets. They shared about how they were presently engaged in supporting Rodney Reed and his innocence campaign. For example, one user spoke about how: *"We fight for #truth #justice #mercy everyday for #RodneyReed, an innocent man in #deathrow #Texas."* While another user shared a similar sentiment by posting: *"We in Central #Texas r fighting 4 #LarryJackson & #RodneyReed!"* Although these users are not speaking to specific actions taken, such as petition signing or protesting, they are posting about actively representing and supporting Rodney Reed. Previous research has argued that tweets such as these are representative of the online oriented activist actions. Importantly, within slacktivism research these tweets are potentially indicative of surface level involvement from

users tweeting using this hashtag (Morozov, 2009). While we cannot speak to the intention behind these tweets, it is important to note that this form of activism may go beyond what slacktivisit scholars have initially theorized (Foster, et al., 2019; Smith, et al., 2019). Though these tweets are simple showcases of support without specific offline actions, they are still noteworthy as public declarations of active support within the movement are representative of an overall belief in Rodney Reed's innocence and fight for justice.

Specific Helping Behaviours. Within this subtheme, users also posted about helping behaviours they were engaged in, such as petition signing. For example, one user simply shared this after signing a petition to help Rodney Reed: *"#RodneyReed @WassupWitItPod #SIGNED"*. While other users who signed the Innocence Project's petition shared on social media that they had signed the petition with the pre-written message by Innocence: *"Ask Texas Not to Execute #RodneyReed! #deathpenalty http://t.co/RfeVpAYzOX via @innocence"*. However, these actions were not limited to petition signing, with other users engaging in other helping behaviours that aimed to contact others important to the movement. For example, one user engaged in a letter-writing campaign and shared: *"MONDAY, July 2nd is the day we're writing letters to the editor in our local areas"*. While another user similarly shared that they had participated in a phoning campaign: *"I called Goertz's office and spoke w/ Barbara. She took down my msg and transferred me to his voicemail. In my voicemail, I ask Goertz to meet with Mama & me regarding #RodneyReed"*. Other actions that users participated in and posted about in aid of Rodney included protesting and attending supportive events in his honour. While it cannot be said for certain that those posting about their actions were inspired by this social media campaign, it is important to note that activist actions being taken and posted about within this Twitter hashtag go beyond what have been deemed low investment actions limited to the online

sphere (Foster, et al., 2019; et al., 2019). These actions demonstrate the potential of online social movements to result, or at the very least promote, higher level and offline activist actions as theorized by previous research (Kwak, et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019).

Additionally, within this subtheme, users specific helping behaviours extended to sharing praise with others involved in the movement. Users tweeted with #RodneyReed to praise other users for their activist actions and general support. Within these posts, we saw users bolstering Rodney Reed's innocence campaign by ensuring the recognition of other users' supportive actions and overall involvement. For example, one user tweeted: *"@theappeal Thank you so much for bringing attention to #RodneyReed"*. In a similar vein, we saw another user tweet their praises by saying: *"Thankful for my beautiful friends who are signing #RodneyReed's petition"*. While praising others may not seem like helping behaviours, they are illustrative of how praise and acknowledgment of activist actions (both online and offline) can help to promote Rodney Reed's movement and further momentum within it.

Calls to Action

The second theme within the action category was named calls to action and 31.60 percent of action posts (N = 67). Tweets specifically focused on calling on others and sharing details about supportive actions they can take within this movement, such as sharing petitions and protest details. Additionally, tweets within this category took a more general approach to motivate others to participate under this hashtag by asking others for non-specific help, such as calling others to action using general pleas for help (e.g., asking users to join the fight for justice).

Calls for Specific Actions. 71.64 percent of posts (N = 48) within this theme called on

others to act on behalf of Rodney Reed and his innocence campaign through many outlets. In this

subtheme, users engaged by asking others to sign and share petitions in support of stopping

Rodney's execution. For example, one user shared: *"We're asking everyone to sign*

@innocence's petition to stand against Bastrop County DA Bryan Goertz's motion to execute my

brother #RodneyReed on 11/20/2019 for a murder committed by #JimmyFennell.

#RodneyReedIsInnocent!" Similarly, another individual wrote: *"Can everyone PLEASE sign*

this!? #RodneyReed @innocence". Beyond petitions, users also encouraged others to participate

by asking them to read educational resources about Rodney's case: *"To get up to speed on*

#RodneyReed case, read @chronic_jordan, who's covered the case for 10+ years." Similarly,

users promoted these educational resources: *"Excellent resource to help you stop the execution*

of Rodney Reed. #RodneyReed #Participate #Educate #advocate". Furthermore, users asked

others to participate in physical events that aimed to support Rodney Reed. This included sharing

details about a supportive event and asking others to come: *"Join @helenprejean at 2 PM today*

for an event in support of #rodneyreed, Friends Meeting of Austin". As well as other in person

events such as protests: "*November 19, 2019 - #Berlin - #USEmbassy - 5 pm #protest Stop the*

execution of #RodneyReed!" These calls to action range in their effort, showcasing the

importance of both offline and online activist actions within an innocence campaign.

Additionally, users called others to act by asking them to get into contact with important

figures that could aid Rodney Reed and his innocence campaign. This included asking others to

participate in letter writing campaigns, as one user shared: *"Print out, fill in and send the*

clemency letter for #RodneyReed to #Governor Abbott and the #Texas #Parole #Board". While

another user similarly posted: *"#RodneyReed is #innocent, and we will write until he's free!*

Please join us anytime! If you'd like a postcard kit, please send us your contact details, and we'll send one to you". Furthermore, this included asking other users to contact political figures. For example, one user asked others to: *"@GovAbbott needs to see that people from all over the U.S.; around the world support #RodneyReed. Let's all send tweets to him".* As well as another user who similarly stressed the importance of getting into contact with the Texas governor: *"Texans, contact Governor Abbott and the #Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles to stop #RodneyReed's execution".* While these actions differ in that they stress calling on others, they still focus on asking users to get involved with the recognition that there are important figures that can be influential in Rodney Reed's fight for justice.

General Pleas for Support. Finally, calls to action also took on a second subtheme with general pleas for support (28.35%; N =19). Specifically, we saw other users asking others under the #RodneyReed to help within the movement without attaching a specific action to it. This includes a tweet from one user who asked: *"#RodneyReed Is an #Innocent man and is currently on #Deathrow in #Texas. Help @FreeRodneyReed #exoner8 him".* As well as another user who wrote: *"Join us in standing against the execution of our beloved #RodneyReed. #RodneyReedisInnocent on Texas death row. Help our family #FreeRodneyReed!".* These general pleas are noteworthy as they showcase a recognition that action is needed within the movement. They highlight the importance of getting others involved to help Rodney Reed through placing attention on this case. This general plea for help by users is understandable as previous research found that high levels of involvement are vital to the success of an innocence campaign (Geis, 2017; Savage, et al., 2007).

Calling Out Specific Users to Intervene

Also within the action category is the theme of calling out particular individuals to intervene. In this category, tweets were focused on requesting that specific influential figures intervene within Rodney Reed's case. Of the action tweets, 18.40 percent of tweets belonged to this theme (N = 39). Users in this theme engaged with a variety of influential figures from different spheres, including traditional celebrities (e.g., Kim Kardashian, Shaun King, etc.) and political figures (e.g., Governor Greg Abbot, Barack Obama, etc.), as well as tweeted media companies and productions for case coverage (e.g., MTV).

Calls for Influential Figures to Act. In this subtheme we saw users reach out to influential figures to pay attention to the case, highlighting the graveness of Rodney Reed's situation. For example, one user tweeted: *"@KimKardashian Please can you look into the #RodneyReed case…"* Another user similarly reached out to an influential figure to call their attention to Rodney Reed's case and his imminent execution: *"@andersoncooper please look into the #RodneyReed case from Bastrop Texas and see the miscarriage of justice that took place."* Another post highlighted Rodney Reed's case by sharing details of it with a celebrity:

> *@shaunking the angry cop, the fiancé, promised to kill Stacey if he'd found out she was*
> *cheating but guess who is rotting on death row...Recently #RodneyReed's last appeal was*
> *denied without testing the DNA! Now the state is trying to set up an execution date for*
> *November 20!*

While these tweets do not ask these influential people to engage in helping behaviour, they do strive to bring the case to their attention specifically.

Beyond this, users also took the opportunity to ask influential figures to get involved with Rodney Reed's case over Twitter. Specifically, one user reached out and wrote: *"@KimKardashian pls save or help save #rodneyreed he is innocent..."* Others reached out to

multiple influential figures at once as seen in this post: *"@KimKardashian @Oprah @reaDonaldTrump I'm in South Africa but this has really hit me hard. I cannot sleep when I think about this man. Can you do something please* 🙏🙏 *..."*. These tweets illustrate a plea for influential figures to use their platforms to help Rodney Reed. Previous research has spoken to the idea of online low-cost actions as a form of activism (Smith, et al., 2019); perhaps calls for influential figures to intervene can be understood as an extension of known online activist actions (e.g., liking or sharing a post). Furthermore, these tweets may speak to an understanding that catching the attention of users with bigger online platforms (e.g., Kim Kardashian has 72.3 million Twitter followers, Oprah has 43.2 million Twitter followers, etc.) can bring this case to a wider audience, allowing for substantially greater attention brought to Rodney Reed and his innocence campaign.

Importantly, Twitter users also reached out to specific political figures to intervene in Rodney Reed's case. The Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, was implored most frequently to use his power to help Rodney Reed, and most importantly, to stop his execution. For example, we saw one user write: *"@GovAbbott An innocent man is scheduled to be executed by Texas on Nov. 20 despite mounting evidence of his innocence. Stop the murder of #RodneyReed. Allow time for his appeal"*. Similarly, another user reached out to the governor with this tweet: *"I'm from Louisiana, and I'm calling on @GovAbbott to stop #RodneyReed's Execution"*. The Texas Governor also had users appeal to him by asking for other forms of involvement within Rodney Reed's case, specifically focused on proving Rodney Reed's innocence through legal intervention. One user spoke to the Governor about the need for a new trial amidst the potential bias within the original investigation and trial: *"@GregAbbott_TX give #RodneyReed a new trial. #CorruptCops #CorruptInvestigation #freeRodneyReed"*. Another specifically wrote about

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the need to address untested DNA evidence: *"Texas, #RightTheWrong by testing DNA in #RodneyReed case as was ordered by Appeals Court, @innocence @GregAbbott_TX!"* These examples offer recognition that Governor Abbott can intervene in Rodney Reed's case in significant ways as he can stop the execution and/or help Rodney Reed overturn his conviction by pushing for legal intervention. It is possible that this recognition is true of all the users who tweeted at influential figures as beyond recognizing their large platforms, they may have access to resources and connections that can help to influence the outcome of Rodney Reed's case (e.g., Kim Kardashian's involvement within the legal system, wrongful conviction, and criminal justice reform; Harris, 2020). Importantly, this may explain why this is the predominant way that celebrities and other influential figures were brought into the conversation within #RodneyReed.

Interestingly, there were two posts that used insulting language to call influential users to support Rodney Reed's innocence campaign. One post directed at a social media influencer stated: *"@TheOfficerTatum You're on Twitter acting like a damn baffoon talking about a chicken sandwich when you could be using your platform to help #RodneyReed who has 12 days to live"*. While the other post used a similar strategy by stating: *"@larryelder Put the liquor down and use your platform to help #RodneyReed who only has 12 days to live"*. These posts uniquely illustrate how a Rodney Reed supporter is using shame and insults to motivate these influential figures to act and use their large platforms. This user may be tapping into a self-serving motivation to appear active within a social movement by using token tasks and low effort helping behaviours, like publicly posting their support on Twitter (Morozov, 2009; Thimsen, 2022), but in a negative and aggressive manner.

Calls for Media Attention. Within this second subtheme Twitter users under #RodneyReed reached out to media companies about his case and innocence campaign. Users

targeted broadcasting networks, TV shows, and podcasts that focused on tackling true crime cases to cover Rodney Reed's case. For example, one user tweeted: *"@MTV @Unlocking_Truth you guys should cover #RodneyReed and his case in Bastrop Texas".* Another user had a similar ask of a popular wrongful conviction show: *"@MakingAMurderer ever thought about #Season2 covering the #RodneyReed Case. Similar thing happened to black man in Bastrop Co. w/ dirty cops".* As well as this user who shared the same thought: *"@MakingAMurderer should do this for #RodneyReed here in Texas".* These tweets similarly share a recognition that these forms of popularized media may be helpful in calling attention to Rodney Reed's case. This is especially highlighted by one user who wrote: *"TV interview could help #DeathRow prisoner #RodneyReed #CNN #DeathRowStories…"* As well as another who stressed the importance of media coverage for this case: *"It's about time someone picked up the case of #RodneyReed this man should be released! Never seen so much Corruption where's the #news coverage on this poor man educate and support!"* Once again, these tweets may demonstrate another form of online low-cost activist actions (Morzov, 2009) in which users engage in helping behaviours by using their platforms to garner the involvement of those with bigger platforms (e.g., media companies) in order to bring Rodney Reed's case to the attention of a wider audience.

General Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the ways in which Twitter users interacted with the viral innocence campaign of Rodney Reed. Specifically, through our exploratory content analysis, this project aimed to understand how users were engaging under #RodneyReed, whether they were sharing facts and educational information, posting about their opinions on the case, or even posting about their engagement in helping and supportive

behaviours. The results of this content analysis suggest that users under this hashtag engaged with this case on all three of these levels across a variety of different topics. Importantly, these results lend credence to the perspective that social media activism can occur in a variety of ways, that it is not limited to active helping behaviours (e.g., petition signing, donating, protesting) but can occur through simply posting about an issue (e.g., Rodney Reed's wrongful conviction) as it can still lead to important change, bolstered public engagement, and promote offline activist action (Kwak, et al., 2018; Smith, et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2013).

Overall, the majority of posts (50.14%, N = 371) within this sample engaged in fact and information sharing. Within this category, we saw users engage with the campaign by sharing news, case related facts, and through labeling the case with informative descriptors. Notably, however, was that the majority of posts under this category (40.27% of the sample, N = 298) focused on sharing news and current events related to Rodney Reed's case. While we expected news sharing to occur, we did not anticipate it to be one of the main themes in the data! Research has stressed opinion expression and activist action (more than fact sharing) as integral within offline and online activism (Valenzuela, 2013). Possibly, the large role that this theme played within this sample can be attributed to the characteristics of Twitter, as 55% of individuals prefer to access their news on Twitter than other social media platforms (Twitter News, 2022). Specifically, it has been reported that up to 85% of users access news daily on Twitter (e.g., read, watch, listen), while 83% of Twitter users post about the news and current events (Twitter News, 2022). Importantly, within the first half of 2022, there were 10.4 billion tweets globally that focused on sharing news and current events (Twitter News, 2022). Within this context, it is unsurprising that news sharing made up the majority of the tweets within the fact sharing category. Furthermore, as most tweets are from the fact category, this supports information

dissemination as a form of activism (Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020). Importantly, fact

sharing not only promotes a cause through engagement (e.g., sharing news about Rodney Reed),

but can help promote a campaign's message (e.g., Rodney Reed's innocence) through

disseminating relevant and educational information (e.g., promoting facts that showcase Rodney

Reed's innocence; Leong, et al., 2016; Li, et al., 2020).

Within the opinion category, posts contained users' subjective and personal beliefs or

judgments. We saw users sharing their thoughts on various topics, such as the criminal justice

system, racial bias, innocence, and the death penalty. Importantly, the opinion category

represented the least number of posts within our sample (21.22%; N = 157). This was

unexpected for a number of reasons. Firstly, Rodney Reed's case included several elements that

was expected to generate discussion amongst users, such as the presence of racial bias within the

case, attitudes towards the death penalty, and potential criticisms of the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, within the context of previous social media research, opinion expression has been

found to be a powerful motivator to act within a movement (Hong & Kim, 2021; Valenzuela,

2013). However, it is possible that posting about one's opinion is not the only form of opinion

expression over Twitter. Specifically, users may be utilizing Twitter's other functions,

expressing their opinions on Rodney Reed's case by liking tweets they agree with or retweeting

posts that express thoughts they hold (Hong & Kim, 2021).

The action category accounted for 28.56% of posts within our sample (N = 212),

representing the second largest category within the study. Users posted about their engagement

with Rodney Reed's innocence campaign by posting about active behaviours they had taken or

would take, including tweeting about their personal helping and supportive behaviours, as well

as calling others to action. For instance, various users tweeted at influential figures in hopes that

they would get involved—such as asking Governor Abbot to stay the execution and let the case be further reviewed (e.g., analyze untested DNA evidence on the murder weapon). These tweets are in line with previous research on social media that suggest that online activism can promote meaningful action within an activist campaign (Lane & Dale Cin, 2016; Smith, et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2013; Wang & Chu, 2017). Importantly, posts within the sample described actions that ranged in effort, from smaller low-cost online actions (e.g., signing a petition, sharing educational resources) to higher-cost offline actions (e.g., running letter writing campaigns, attending supportive events). This lends credence to the idea that social media activism can be understood as a spectrum, with low-cost actions (e.g., slacktivism) as a motivator for further meaningful helping behaviours (e.g., Valenzuela, 2013). Furthermore, these actions, and calls to action, may have worked to inspire others to get involved within Rodney Reed's campaign, acting as a potential contributing factor to its success.

While this study was an exploratory analysis of Twitter users' interactions with a case of wrongful conviction, there were several themes that we anticipated to see predominantly that did not emerge in the way we expected. Similar to how users discussed race in these tweets, wrongful conviction was used as a label or descriptor (surface level interaction) rather than a larger and complex issue in need of unpackaging or greater discussion (deeper interaction). It was surprising (to us at least) that wrongful conviction and race were not larger themes driving the conversations about the campaign.

On the other hand, there were unanticipated themes that arose during coding. For example, one theme that I did not expect to see within the data was that of individuals insulting other users. As this hashtag was promoted by the Innocence Project—a reputable organization that investigates factually innocent individuals who are incarcerated—to see users insulting one

another and promoting anti-Rodney Reed rhetoric was not something we anticipated. However, it is possible that these users purposefully chose this hashtag due to the viral nature of Rodney Reed's case and felt threatened at the idea of his execution being stayed and conviction being overturned.

Although public support was essential to this campaign, there was also a recognition among some users that more was needed to influence the outcome of Rodney Reed's case (Fernandez & Oppel Jr., 2019; Johnson, 2019). Indeed, although his execution was stayed in 2019, Rodney Reed was still in prison in December 2022 when I submitted my thesis. Granted, the stay of execution was essential to give innocence advocates the chance to exonerate Rodney Reed, but the social media campaign itself seems to have died out once the stay of execution—and not the exoneration—was obtained. As a big impetus of this innocence campaign was to "free" Rodney Reed (e.g., as encapsulated by the #FreeRodneyReed that frequently appeared in the tweets), this suggests that this particular social media campaign (1) was not successful, (2) was not able to maintain public interest once the death penalty narrative was no longer relevant, and/or (3) was not able to facilitate the exoneration process. Future research may wish to investigate the effectiveness of social media campaigns for exonerees, and if they might be more effective at different points in the process or with more specific goals (e.g., public pressure to stay an execution or to allow further DNA testing).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study used a sample of social media posts taken from one hashtag of one innocence campaign on a singular platform. Due to these limitations, it is possible that specific characteristics of Rodney Reed's case (e.g., race, death row status, idiosyncratic details) were responsible for the reactions observed in this study, and social media campaigns for different

exonerees under different circumstances might lead to quite different findings. Similarly, this study only examined tweets that were posted leading up to Rodney Reed's execution. It is possible that an expanded timeline that included tweets following his stay of execution would have produced different themes or changed the frequency of the themes we did see emerge. For example, the death penalty was a prevailing theme within our sampled timeline, however, it is possible that once the threat of execution was removed from Rodney Reed's case, the prevalence of execution related tweets would decrease. Perhaps, without the threat of execution, different themes would emerge entirely, such as a greater focus on the occurrence of wrongful conviction and what factors led to Rodney Reed's miscarriage of justice. Future research should look to other cases of wrongful conviction to examine whether user discussions are driven by similar themes (testing the generalizability of these findings), or if differing cases result in unique conversations amongst social media users (suggesting that the details of a case, or idiosyncrasies due to the individuals involved, may drive public reactions more than factual innocence per se). Furthermore, it may be important to examine cases of wrongful conviction (or suspected wrongful conviction) where there is no threat of execution, as the concrete threat of an upcoming day of execution for a potentially innocent man may have a greater motivating effect to get involved than other similar cases without the death penalty.

It is also important to acknowledge sampling as a limitation within this study. It was not feasible to code all 157,181 tweets using #RodneyReed for this master's thesis. Thus, we used a random sample of 740 tweets, equally weighted across each month of the Innocence Project's campaign until the final stay of execution. Moreover, research in this area could focus on expanding the sample to include users across different social media platforms to gain a better understanding of social media activism across various platforms.

Limitations due to the Postman platform, which we used to access the tweets for this research, removed all contextual information related to the tweets, and only provided the textual content of the tweet itself. In other words, Postman excluded any external links, media attachments, quote tweets, and replies. As this information was not accessible as we collected our sample, we were not able to analyze it. Future research may wish to explore this additional information. Such research might help to expand our understanding of not only how individual users are posting about a case of wrongful conviction, but how they are interacting with other users on this topic.

This study also did not collect any demographic data about the users that were posting under #RodneyReed. Just as the Postman platform did not allow for the collection of any contextual information surrounding each tweet, it also did not yield any relevant demographic information about the original poster. Previous research has found that Twitter users are not a representative sample of the general population (Fish, 2021). Demographic data suggests that Twitter users are predominately males, under the age of 50, and U.S. citizens (Fish, 2021; Mislove, et al., 2022; Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). Without access to the demographics of the users in our sample, we cannot analyze whether certain demographics were more or less supportive, or even if certain demographics were more likely to engage in action vs. opinion posts. This is an area future research may wish to explore.

Finally, we used archival data from the Twitter API and not an experimental manipulation, and thus we cannot make causal conclusions. However, the benefits of using this rich archival data are numerous, as the API offers an incredible scope of information to researchers, representing over 91% of public data (Mislove, et al., 2022). This access allows us

to observe real-time and archival posts by users posting under #RodneyReed, which is valuable as Twitter acts as a hub for social media activism (Lindgren, 2019; Xiong, at al., 2019).

Conclusion

This project extends the findings of previous research that has been conducted on the relationship between social media and wrongful conviction (Geis, 2017; Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). In line with the results of this study, individuals have been found to use social media to mobilize other users within an innocence campaign, share important resources, spread awareness and details about the miscarriage of justice, and engage in activist actions (Geis, 2017; Kennedy, 2018). Although users did not frequently discuss the broader issues of wrongful conviction or racial bias, keeping the focus on the specifics of the case and framing it to attract individuals with pre-existing negative sentiment toward the death penalty may have resonated with more Twitter users—even users in countries that do not implement capital punishment. Perhaps future innocence campaigns would benefit from embedding the wrongful conviction case into other strong, pre-existing attitudes of the public.

In addition, this research demonstrates the importance of using qualitative methods (content and thematic analysis) in understanding how individuals interact with wrongful conviction cases online (Kennedy, 2018; Stratton, 2018). The present study successfully used qualitative methods to analyze archival data to understand how the public interacted with a case of factual innocence online. This is significant not only because social media continues to grow as a tool within innocence campaigns (e.g., the Innocence Project, Justice for Julius Jones), but because of how common practice social media usage is, with 72% of Americans reporting using at least one form of social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Pew Research Centre, 2021).

Overall, the use of qualitative methods allows for the analyzing of authentic interactions between social media users and innocence campaigns and should be employed in future research within this area. As cases of wrongful conviction continue to grow (3,269 cases in the U.S. alone; NRE, 2022), it would be fruitful for future research to examine social media conversations surrounding different innocence campaigns to glean a better understanding of the relationship between wrongful conviction and social media activism.

Regardless of how users were interacting with #RodneyReed, his innocence campaign resulted in his indefinite stay of execution. While social media users may have interacted with his campaign in both superficial and meaningful ways, it is their joint public support that was essential in stopping Rodney Reed's execution. His campaign, and the Twitter users that rallied around it, showcase how public outcry and pressure created from trending social media campaigns may influence the decisions of elected government officials (Fernandez & Oppel Jr., 2019; Johnson, 2019). Assembling public support is vital, as it helps an innocence campaign spread their message and garner attention for the wrongfully convicted, allowing these campaigns to become a catalyst for change (Savage, et al., 2007). Furthermore, this campaign-- and the positive reaction from Twitter users included in this sample--suggests that the public recognizes that miscarriages of justice do happen, and that under certain circumstances, they are willing to rally around wrongfully convicted individuals to fight for them. Given the success of Rodney Reed's innocence campaign (his indefinite stay of execution), future research is important to further our understanding of what factors are effective at motivating public involvement and bolstering support for the wrongfully convicted, and perhaps which factors or approaches are not.

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