



Police use of force and its video coverage: An experimental study of the impact of media source and content on public perceptions



Terance D. Miethe*, Olesya Venger, Joel D. Lieberman

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To explore the influence of media source, suspect's alleged criminal activity, and the rater's socio-demographic attributes on public ratings of video incidents of police use of force (PUF).

Methods: A national online sample of 581 adults viewed and evaluated four different PUF videos in a 3 × 3 experimental design. Study participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions involving differences in (1) media sources and (2) suspect's alleged criminal activity. The dependent variables included ratings of the credibility of the video's media source (i.e., trust in the source and accuracy of its video account) and the officer's conduct (i.e., excessive force, justifiable force). The independent and moderating variables included the experimental conditions, personal salience of PUF incidents, the rater's use of different media sources, and other socio-demographic attributes.

Results: Three major results were found in this study: (1) video accounts of PUF are rated as more trustworthy when the video is attributed to "national TV news" source than "social media" outlets, (2) ratings of excessive force are more likely in PUF incidents when they involve a more dangerous offender (i.e., an alleged murder vs. shoplifter), and (3) the impact of the individual's socio-demographic characteristics on these public perceptions are strongly moderated by the personal salience of PUF incidents to the rater and their pattern of daily usage of conventional and social media.

Conclusions: The visual content in short, video clips of PUF incidents strongly influences public attitudes about the officer's conduct as excessive and unjustifiable. However, by the timely release of the video images and framing them within their wider context, police departments may better demonstrate transparency and help overcome various cognitive biases that may underlie adverse public reactions to PUF incidents.

1. Introduction

The unprecedented growth in video technology and its widespread application has revolutionized visual documentation of human activity in the modern world. Portable video devices on cell phones and aerial drones, stationary cameras and closed-circuit television (CCTV), vehicle dash-cams, and body-worn cameras by police officers are some examples of this pervasive and evolving technology. Social media posts, video-sharing websites (e.g., YouTube), and traditional media outlets (e.g., television) provide the means for the mass distribution of a virtually unlimited supply of this video content. However, despite the power of visual images in affecting public perceptions, the perceived accuracy and credibility of a video recording of objects and events may vary widely due to the particular content and source of its message.

Over the last decade, video images of police use of physical force against citizens and crime suspects have become a common fixture of

multiple media sources (e.g., TV news reports, newspaper blogs, social media posts, etc.). This media dissemination of video footage of lethal and non-lethal police encounters has contributed to greater public scrutiny of police practices, changes in departmental policies on reasonable/justifiable force (e.g., increase use of non-lethal methods [e.g., tasers], de-escalation strategies, dash- and body-cams), and provides the visual backdrop for the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement (Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Fishman & Marvin, 2003; Fridell, 2017; Fridell & Brown, 2015; Police Executive Research Forum, 2015; Schroedel & Chin, 2017).

Despite the role of media in shaping attitudes about police and crime-related issues (see Callanan, 2011; Gauthier & Graziano, 2018), little empirical research exists on the extent to which public evaluations of incidents of police use of force (PUF) are influenced by differences in the basic elements of the media account (e.g., the source and content of the video message). Whether these media effects are moderated by basic

* Corresponding author at: Department of Criminal Justice, University of Nevada-Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5009, USA.
E-mail address: miethe@unlv.nevada.edu (T.D. Miethe).

characteristics of the evaluator (e.g., the person's perceived risks of being involved in a PUF incident, their general attitudes toward police, and primary media source for news/information) has also not been fully explored in past research.

Using an experimental design and a large national sample, the current study examines the impact of the media source and message content on public evaluations of video coverage of police use of force incidents. Three research questions underlie this study. First, are video accounts of PUF incidents viewed as (a) more trustworthy and (b) more accurate depictions of the incident when the video is attributed to one source (e.g., national TV news) than another (e.g. social media post)? Second, are the officer's actions in these videos evaluated as (a) less excessive and (b) more justified when the force is used against a more dangerous offender? Third, does the personal salience of PUF incidents to the evaluator and their pattern of daily usage of conventional and social media moderate the nature of the impact of the video's source, its content, and individuals' socio-demographic characteristics on their ratings of PUF incidents?

2. Literature review

Few topics in media studies have received more attention than theories and empirical research on media's impact on public attitudes and consumer behavior (for reviews, see Gross & Aday, 2003; Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003; Lueck, 2017; Webster, 1986). These reviews of past studies demonstrate media's influence across a variety of socio-political and economic contexts (Coary & Poor, 2016; Potter & Smith, 1999). The general impact of media's source, form, and message content and its specific influences on crime-related attitudes are summarized below.

2.1. Media sources

Public use of particular media sources has changed over time with the evolving technology (see Bock, Suran, & González, 2018). Over the last several decades and especially among young adults, internet sources and social media outlets have challenged and often replaced traditional textual media (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and visual media (e.g., television) as the primary source of news. Given this shift in modern news consumption (Heflin, 2010), the perceived credibility and trust in different media sources has resurfaced as a major concern in both public discourse and media studies (Williams, 2012). The growing “credibility gap” of modern U.S. media has been fueled by claims of “fake news” and the increasingly multi-dimensional ideological orientation of contemporary media outlets.

Several general observations about media sources, their credibility, and impact on consumer attitudes/behavior derive from previous studies. First, television programs and internet websites are currently the most popular news sources for U.S. adults (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017). Second, national surveys indicate that public trust in media sources has dropped substantially over the last three decades. For example, only about one-tenth of U.S. adults express a “great deal” of confidence in traditional media outlets (e.g., television, newspapers [the press]) and they have less positive views about social media (see AP-NORC, 2014; Gallup/Knight, 2018). Third, major differences across social groups exist in their primary media sources and beliefs about source credibility. For example, adults (aged under 30) and democrats are more frequent users of the internet and social media as their primary news source and each of these groups has a more positive view about these sources than their counterparts (Gallup/Knight, 2018; Grieco, 2017). Fourth, by using media sources that they also trust, media exposure often serves to reinforce preexisting attitudes rather than change them (Richard & Habibi, 2016; Tsafati & Cappella, 2003). These self-selection and affirmation processes may help explain why previous studies often find minimal effects of the media source and message content on respondent's attitudinal and behavioral change

(Lienemann & Siegel, 2018; Nan & Zhao, 2012).

2.2. Media form, message content, and crime-related attitudes

Similar to media sources, the primary media forms (e.g., visual, audio, textual forms) and the nature of message content (e.g., its length, framing, and persuasion strategies) have also experienced fundamental changes over time. Within this context, previous research has clearly demonstrated the precipitous rise in the use of visual media forms (e.g., videos, pictures, graphic images) and their advantages over textual/written forms as effective communication methods (Moulton, Turkay, & Kossly, 2017).

Because most citizens have only limited direct experiences with crime and police (Engel, 2005), public perceptions about crime are often shaped by media sources and their message. The media's impact on crime-related attitudes is primarily generated through its framing of the message and its content (e.g., the selection of particular experts for commentary, the emphasis on particular facts or case attributes). Depending on the audience salience of the particular media account, the magnitude of the observed media effects on public perceptions may vary widely. Previous research also indicates that the evaluator's demographic attributes (e.g., gender, race, age) and contextual factors (e.g., type of criminal activity involved, media form utilized) also influence public perceptions about the police and crime-related issues (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Lee & Thien, 2015; Ramasubramanian, 2011).

Of the various types of crime-related activities covered by media sources, incidents of police use of force (PUF) have become a major focus. This increased media attention to officer-involving shootings and other PUF incidents can be attributed to the confluence of several factors. First, the wider availability of portable video technology (e.g., video features on cell phones, body cameras, CCTV) has made it easier to capture visual images of incidents and distribute them to media outlets. Second, media reports with video footage of lethal police-citizen encounters involving Black males (e.g., Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray) have dramatically fueled public outrage and have sparked additional media coverage of these incidents and commentary about police policy and practices. The emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement is directly linked to the public dissemination of these video images across multiple media outlets (e.g., social media, internet, newspaper, television news) (Cox, 2017; Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016).

Although video coverage of incidents of police use of force is widely shown across media outlets, little empirical research has addressed whether public perceptions about these visual images vary by the media source, message content, and audience characteristics. Public perceptions of these incidents include evaluations of (1) the media source's credibility, (2) the accuracy of the video account, and (3) the officer's actions as excessive and justifiable.

Despite increasing public skepticism of all media sources, greater public trust in traditional media (e.g., television news, newspapers) than emergent media outlets (e.g., internet news, social media) is consistently found in previous research and national surveys (Gallup/Knight, 2018; Mehrabi, Hassan, & Ali, 2009; Tsafati, 2003; Williams, 2012). Previous research also indicates that the public uses the media sources they trust and, specifically, that people with less trust in traditional media have greater preference for social media and other non-mainstream news (Fletcher & Park, 2017). While the differential trust in media sources across user groups may vary across content areas (e.g., type of crime-related news) and its form (e.g., video and textual media), these context-specific effects on public perceptions about source credibility, accuracy of the media depiction, and the officer's conduct in the use of force incidents have not been explored in previous research.

2.3. Audience characteristics

The influence of audience characteristics on public views about police use of force and other crime-related content has been a major focus of previous research and theories on information processing. For example, Gerber and Jackson (2017) found that public views about the use of force were strongly related to individuals' beliefs about police legitimacy and measures of ideological orientation (e.g., beliefs supportive of right-wing authoritarianism). Previous research has also shown that various social groups (e.g., men, Whites, persons aged 50 or older, Republicans and self-identified conservatives, higher income residents, persons with higher fear/concern about crime) have attitudes that are less critical of police use of force and other police practices than their counterparts (see Brown, 2017; Ekins, 2016; Graziano, Shuck, & Martin, 2010; Gerber & Jackson 2017; Heen, Lieberman, & Miethe, 2017; Morin & Stepler, 2016).

Contrary to the evidence of these statistical main effects, theory and research on models of information processing suggest that the impact of these group differences on public evaluations of PUF incidents may be highly contextual. The primary contextual factors explored in the current study involve (1) the personal salience of PUF incidents to the evaluator and (2) their particular pattern of media usage (e.g., daily watchers of TV news, daily users of social media).

When PUF incidents initially come to public attention, they are often the product of videos attached to social media posts that have gone “viral,” or preliminary reports of police-citizen encounters. In these cases, the videos, which are disseminated over social media, often lack context. The same may be true when the videos are presented on traditional news outlets, during the early stages of covering an incident. For example, a citizen may start recording a PUF incident because it has already escalated to some degree, but, the events leading up to that escalated encounter may not be captured by the citizen. Only later, when body camera (or other surveillance) footage is reviewed, or a complete investigation done, is the full context presented to the public. In these cases, perceivers may make judgments about the excessiveness and justifiability of police conduct in situations where high ambiguity or uncertainty exists as to police motivations and actions. When confronted with ambiguous information, previous research on information processing indicates that observers are more reliant on confirmation biases (Ask & Granhag, 2005; Higgins & Bargh, 1987) based on gut-level reactions, highly salient personal experiences, and emotionally laden judgments (Epstein, 1994).

For example, Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST) predicts that individuals typically process information in an “experiential mode,” designed to operate, automatically, rapidly, and efficiently, and which is heavily intertwined with emotional reactions. According to CEST, the experiential mode is a default system. When the experiential mode is operative, individuals may display many of the well-known judgment errors identified by Tversky and Kahneman (1974), such as relying on the ease at which examples come to mind, or how well situations fit particular stereotypes. Media source identity may provide a heuristic for individuals to use in this mode, leading them to be more influenced by sources perceived to be of higher quality.

Conversely, individuals may also process information in a “rational mode,” that is highly analytic, detached from emotion, and which requires considerable cognitive effort. Individuals will adopt this mode if they have sufficient ability (e.g., not under time pressure, not distracted, not physically or mentally exhausted) and if they have a sufficient motivation to do so. The influence of personal biases is reduced in the rational mode, but the modes are not entirely independent, and individuals may be influenced by the relative contributions of both systems.¹

¹CEST is similar to other dual process models such as Chaiken's (1980) heuristic-systematic model or the central and peripheral processing modes

As a general rule, when information or stimuli have greater personal relevance, individuals are likely to process information in a more analytic and unbiased (rational mode) manner (Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). However, this is not necessarily the case when individuals are in ambiguous situations. For example, Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) found that cues related to source credibility had a strong impact on individuals presented with ambiguous information, despite the information having high personal importance to them.

Consequently, when viewing PUF videos that do not provide a context for police-citizen encounters, we expect individuals to rely heavily on their personal biases, including life experiences that may be systematically revealed in demographic factors. In addition, we expect source credibility to exert significant effects, even among individuals with high personal relevance. Indeed, under conditions of high personal relevance, individuals should be especially motivated to use any available cues to provide indications of the excessiveness and justifiability of police use of force.

3. The current study

The current study examines the impact of the media source and message content on public evaluations of video accounts of police use of force incidents. Three research questions (RQ) underlie this study:

RQ1: Are video accounts of police use of force (PUF) viewed as (a) more trustworthy and (b) more accurate depictions of the incidents when the video is attributed to one source (e.g., national TV news) than another (e.g. social media post)?

RQ2: Are the officer's actions in these videos evaluated as (a) less excessive and (b) more justifiable when the force is used against a more dangerous offender (e.g., suspected murderer vs. shoplifter)?

RQ3: Is the impact of the video's media source, message content, and individual's socio-demographic characteristics on these PUF evaluations moderated by personal salience (i.e., the level of personal worry about being involved in PUF incident) and the evaluator's primary media usage for daily news/information (e.g., national TV news, social media)?

The results of this study are discussed in terms of their implications for future research on media's impact on public attitudes about PUF incidents and police department's utilization of effective communication strategies to minimize the adverse public reactions to these incidents.

4. Methods

The research questions in this study are addressed through an experimental design involving a national online sample of U.S. adults. A description of the sample, the research design, and measures of the major variables is presented below.

4.1. Sample

The sample used in this study was generated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panels of survey participants.² Participants were

(footnote continued)

identified by Petty and Cacioppo (1981). However, those models are typically applied to persuasion research, and CEST is a broader information processing model, and focuses heavily on the role of personal experience. Consequently, we believe it is a more useful theoretical model for understanding how perceivers will react to PUF videos.

²Mechanical Turk (<https://www.mturk.com/mturk/>) is an online source owned by Amazon.com for data collection, providing over 500,000 eligible respondents for experimental and electronic survey research (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Previous research using this online source has found that their samples are “at least as representative of the U.S. population” and “at least as diverse and more representative of non-college populations” than other sources

recruited by a posting with the description “Police-Citizen Relations and Police Practices”. The sampling frame was stratified by participant’s primary media source (i.e., classified as social media or national TV network). Study participants used *Qualtrics* as the electronic platform to gain access and complete the survey instrument. The survey was distributed over a one-week period in March 2018. A total sample of 581 U.S. adults completed the survey.

Compared to U.S. census population estimates, the survey sample provided a reasonable approximation to the national distribution on the basis of respondent’s gender (e.g., 51% female in the U.S. population vs. 55% in the sample), race (e.g., 77% vs. 76% White; 13% vs. 13% Black), and household income (45% vs. 50% less than \$50,000). In contrast, the sample was over representative of adults in the 20–39 age groups (51% of sample vs. 37% in US adult population) and under represents adults aged 60 and older (11% vs. 28%). College graduates also accounted for a larger proportion of the sample (59%) than the U.S. population (40%). Sampling bias from online samples due to the “digital divide” are the likely source for this underrepresentation of older and less educated individuals (Compaine, 2001; Dewan & Riggins, 2005). However, given our focus on group comparisons, post-stratification weighting by age and education was not necessary to match the population and sample distributions (see Looseveldt & Sonck, 2008; Sakiyama, Miethe, Lieberman, Heen, & Tuttle, 2016).

4.2. Research design

The current study employs a 3 (Media Source) \times 3 (Suspect’s Alleged Crime) experimental design with repeated measures to examine the impact of these factors on public evaluations of four video clips of police-citizen encounters involving non-lethal force. Study participants were randomly assigned to one of these nine experimental conditions and a random ordering in the viewing of these four videos. The major elements of the research design include (a) the content of the video recordings and (b) the specific categories of the experimental and control conditions within this factorial design.

4.2.1. Video content

The video clips of police use of force were derived from an extensive search of internet material. This search focused on incidents of non-lethal force that were plausible (i.e., seemed to be “real life” incidents), occurred in public places in the daytime (i.e., times/places where the video recordings are clearer), and involved types of police-citizen encounters in which use of force are common (e.g., incidents of stop/frisk, resisting arrest, persons fleeing the police). Videos were also selected that varied in the suspect’s demographic profile to explore the impact of the suspect’s gender and race on public attitudes about PUF incidents. From the original set of 20 videos pretested for content clarity and having a similar visual perspective (i.e., a full side view of the incident from a 50–100 ft distance), four distinct videos of police use of force were selected for evaluation in the current study. The comparative content of these videos is summarized in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the four videos share many contextual elements and differ in other aspects. Their similarities include the video length (5 to 10 s long), number of officers involved (1 officer in each video), the officer’s race and gender (White male), time of day (daytime), and location (public area). They differ in the suspect’s gender (3 male, 1 female), race (2 unclear race, 1 Black, 1 White), type of force (2 pushed/thrown, 2 kicked), and the suspect’s actions (1 moving toward

and 3 fleeing officer). Based on the “force factor” continuum (Albert & Dunham, 1997; Jefferis, Butcher, & Hanley, 2011), these videos also vary widely in the suspect’s level of resistance (e.g., lowest in Video 2 [suspect knocked out from behind without a furtive move or physical struggle] and highest in Video 4 [suspect is fleeing, tackled, and struggles on ground with officer]). The selection of four video clips exhibiting patterns of both similarity and differences was considered advantageous for evaluating the robustness of the observed findings across these different contexts.

4.2.2. Experimental conditions

Study participants viewed four PUF video clips that varied in the description of their type of *media source* and the *suspect’s alleged crime*. The three categories of media source included (1) “national TV network” (representing a traditional media outlet), (2) “social media post” (representing an emergent media source), and (3) a control condition in which no media source was mentioned. The media sources were described in generic (i.e., national TV network; social media) rather than specific terms (e.g., “Fox News”; “Facebook”) to minimize the confounding effect of personal biases against specific sources.

The three categories of the suspect’s alleged crime included (1) “suspected shoplifter”, (2) “suspected murderer”, and (3) a control condition in which the recipient of the physical force was described only as the “person in the incident”. The particular labels of “shoplifter” and “murderer” were selected because they represent the extremes on a continuum of the suspect’s dangerousness or public threat.

To enhance the visual salience of the experimental conditions for study participants, textual references to the particular type of media source and alleged criminal activity were embedded at multiple locations within the video materials. Specifically, the name of the particular media source (i.e., national TV network, social media) was included as text headers (preceding the video and another in the video itself) and an additional source reference was contained within the brief introduction to the survey questions about the video (e.g., “based on this video from a [national TV network, social media post]...”). The particular type of alleged criminal activity was also included in the text header preceding the video and within the survey questions (e.g., “the [person, suspected shoplifter, suspected murderer] in this incident....”).

Within this 3 \times 3 factorial design, study participants were randomly assigned to one of these nine unique combinations of conditions for each of the four video clips they evaluated. To control for order effects in individual’s ratings of four videos, the viewing sequence for the four video clips was also randomized within and across study participants.

4.3. Measures of variables

The primary variables in this study involve measures of public attitudes about the video source and content, their media usage, general attitudes about police, and demographic characteristics. This set of variables was selected for inclusion in this study because they have been identified as important correlates of public attitudes about PUF incidents in past research. The classification, measurement, and univariate statistics for the various dependent variables, independent variables, moderating factors, and control variables are shown in Table 2 and summarized below.

4.3.1. Dependent variables

The dependent variables involve participant’s evaluations of the media source and message content within each video. The media source’s credibility was measured by the level of agreement with the following statements: (a) “I trust the media source that posted this video” and (b) “I trust the accuracy of the video account of this incident”. The two aspects of message content focused on the officer’s conduct and were measured by the level of agreement with the following statements: (a) “The amount of physical force used by the officer was excessive” and (b) “the officer’s physical force was justified”. All four of these survey items

(footnote continued)

(Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011, p. 5; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010, p. 414). Other studies have found that Mechanical Turk produces a sample with “specific attributes that are often within a 10% range of their corresponding values in the U.S. population” (Heen, Lieberman, & Miethe, 2014, p. 6).

Table 1
Main characteristics within video clips of police use of force

Characteristics	Video 1	Video 2	Video 3	Video 4
Length of video?	7 s	5 s	10 s	5 s
Suspect actions?	Stands up from sitting position and takes several steps toward officer.	Briskly walking away from officer on the sidewalk of busy street.	Jogging away from officer before getting on the ground.	Running away from officer and enters the foyer area of building.
Type of force used by officer?	Kicked in the stomach/groin	Pushed/slammed hard to ground	Kicked and hit with baton while on the ground	Grabbed and tackled to ground
Number of officers in incident?	1	1	1	1
Physical location?	Street outside a building	Street outside a business building	Field/yard in residential area	Street/building entry areas
Time of day?	Daytime	Daytime	Daytime	Daytime
Gender and race of officer?	White male	White male	White male	White male
Race and gender of suspect?	Male, unclear race/ethnicity	Female, unclear race/ethnicity	Black male	White male
Unique feature of video compared to other videos?	Male suspect made slight furtive move by walking at officer.	Female suspect	Black male suspect	White male suspect

were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly disagree). Several characteristics of these measures of source credibility and message content require further comment.

First, the item “trust in the media source” reflects a general evaluation of the media source’s credibility in and of itself (see Kohring & Matthes, 2017), whereas the item “trust the accuracy of the video” is more indicative of specific beliefs about the media source’s credibility in providing a factual depiction of the particular content. Despite the high average correlation between these two items across the four videos (average $r = 0.70$, $p < .05$), we considered them as separate measures of source credibility due to their conceptual differences and variability in these correlations among these videos (e.g., the correlations ranged from 0.64 to 0.75). This decision to use separate measures of source credibility is also supported by the fact that a person’s trust in a particular media source, in general, does not necessarily imply that they also trust the accuracy of the particular messages within this source.

Second, survey items about the officer’s conduct being “excessive” and “justifiable” are treated as separate evaluative dimensions. Despite their strong intercorrelation ($r = -0.51$, $p < .05$), the fact that an officer’s use of force may be considered “excessive” but “justified” (and other combinations of these two factors) is the primary rationale for treating these two items as separate measures of the officer’s conduct.

Third, sample respondents varied widely in their level of agreement with these aspects of the media source and message content. In particular, most respondents (59%) said they trusted the accuracy of the video account and many (41%) indicated trust in the video’s media source (see Table 2). In contrast, the vast majority of study participants (71%) agreed that the officer’s use of force was “excessive”, whereas only a small minority rated the officer’s actions as “justifiable” (17%).

4.3.2. Independent variables

The experimental and control conditions (i.e., media source and the suspect’s alleged crime) represent the major independent variables in this analysis. As mentioned previously, these two sets of independent variables were presented to participants within a 3×3 factorial design.

Manipulation checks within the survey instrument confirmed the successful inclusion of the experimental conditions. In particular, the overall proportion of study participants who correctly identified the particular media source was 80% (e.g., 77% for national TV, 80% for social media and 83% correctly identified that “no media source was stated”). The person’s suspected crime was correctly recognized in 83% of the cases (e.g., 74% successfully identified the suspect as a murderer, 82% as a shoplifter, and 88% correctly noted that the suspect’s crime was “not mentioned”). To control for this source of rater unreliability, a dummy variable (“Successful Recall” in Table 2) that contrasts video ratings with 100% recall accuracy (coded “1”) with those with < 100% accuracy (coded “0”) was included in all multivariate analyses.

4.3.3. Moderating and control variables

The personal salience of PUF incidents and daily usage of different media sources are the moderating variables in this study. Personal salience was measured by whether or not the respondent strongly agreed with the statement “I personally worry about police using physical force against me or a family member”. Daily usage of media sources was dummy coded for both TV news and social media (see Table 2). Personal salience may serve as a moderating factor because it is more likely to invoke “deep thinking” and more nuanced critical thought about the PUF context and making sense of it. The fact that “high salient” respondents spent over 1 min longer completing the study instrument than their “low salient” counterparts (M ’s = 11.8 vs. 10.5 min, $p < .001$) provide some evidence consistent with this argument. In contrast, the moderating effects of the rater’s daily usage of different media is linked to (1) how the delivery and substance of message content varies across media sources and (2) the differences in the socio-demographic attributes and unique experiences of their users that shape their interpretation of PUF incidents.

As shown in Table 2, demographic characteristics, general attitudes about police, and crime-related beliefs represent the control variables in this analysis. They include participants’ gender, age, race, educational attainment, political orientation, household income, level of trust in various media source (i.e., TV news, social media), a 5-item composite measure of police legitimacy (see Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Heen et al., 2017), and single-item measures of crime-related attitudes (i.e., beliefs about racial profiling).

5. Analytic methods and results

A series of multivariate analyses were conducted to examine the research questions underlying the current study. The sample sizes in these analyses represent the number of ratings of the four videos among the 581 respondents. The maximum sample size is 2324 ratings (i.e., 581 respondents \times 4 videos = 2324 ratings). The actual sample size for each analysis is somewhat smaller (n ’s = 2249 to 2255) due to missing data on the included variables in the estimated models.³ The results of these analyses are summarized below.

³ To assess the effects of sample size on significance tests in these analyses, a power analysis was conducted based on the model estimates and the observed sample size. For each of the estimated models in Table 3, the achieved power coefficient (1- β) averaged 0.99, far above the standard metric of 0.80 used in the literature (see Murphy, Myors, & Wolach, 2014). Thus, the sample sizes used in the current study are sufficient to detect statistically significant effects ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 2
Variables, coding, and univariate statistics

Variables (Names)	Coding	Mean (n of ratings)
I. Dependent variables		
1. Trust Media Source in PUF Video. (Trust Media Source)	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	M = 3.40 (2307) % Agree = 40.7%
2. Trust Accuracy of Video Account. (Accuracy Video Account)	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	M = 3.65 (2303) % Agree = 58.7%
3. Officer's PUF was Excessive. (Excessive Force)	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	M = 3.90 (2301) % Agree = 70.9%
4. Officer's PUF was Justified. (Justifiable Force)	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	M = 2.23 (2305) % Agree = 17.2%
II. Independent variables		
1. Media Source in PUF Video. (Reference Category) (Social Media) (National TV News)	0 = source not mentioned 1 = social media post 2 = national TV network	34.1% (521) 33.4% (510) 32.5% (497)
2. Alleged Crime of Person in Video (Reference Category) (Suspected Shoplifter) (Suspected Murder)	0 = source not mentioned 1 = suspected shoplifter 2 = suspected murderer	35.2% (538) 33.2% (507) 31.6% (483)
3. Video Content. (Video 1: Reference Category) (Video 2: Female Pushed) (Video 3: Black Male Kicked) (Video 4: White Male Tackled)	0 = male kicked in groin area 1 = female pushed hard to ground 2 = black male kicked/hit baton 3 = white male tackled in flee	22.3% (340) 25.0% (382) 26.5% (405) 26.2% (401)
III. Moderating variables		
1. Personally Worry about PUF (Reference Category) (Personal Salience)	0 = disagree/agree/unsure 1 = agree	85.6% (462) 14.4% (78)
2. TV Network News Use (Reference Category) (Daily Use-TV Network News)	0 = less than daily 1 = daily use	63.8% (346) 36.2% (196)
3. Social Media Use for News/Info (Reference Category) (Daily Use-Social Media)	0 = less than daily 1 = daily use	45.8% (248) 54.2% (293)
IV. Control variables		
1. Gender of Study Participant. (Reference Category) (Male)	0 = female, other 1 = male	55.0% (297) 45.0% (243)
2. Age of Study Participant. (Reference Category) (Age 19–29)	0 = 30 or older 1 = 19–29 years old	80.1% (434) 19.9% (108)
3. Race of Study Participant. (Reference Category) (Black) (White)	0 = other [e.g., Hispanic, Asian] 1 = black 2 = white	11.1% (60) 12.2% (66) 76.7% (415)
4. Educational Attainment. (Reference Category) (Some College/College Grad)	0 = high school grad or less 1 = some college or college grad	14.4% (78) 85.6% (463)
5. Political Party Affiliation. (Reference Category) (Republican Party Identity)	0 = other (e.g., democrat, none) 1 = republican	76.2% (413) 23.8% (129)
6. Household Income. (Reference Category) (Household Income > \$50 k)	0 ≤ \$50,000 1 = \$50,000 or more	49.4% (268) 50.6% (274)
7. Trust TV Network News (Reference Category) (Trust TV Network News)	0 = no (none/low trust) 1 = yes (moderate/high trust)	39.3% (212) 60.7% (328)
8. Trust Social Media (Reference Category) (Trust Social Media)	0 = no (none/low trust) 1 = yes (moderate/high trust)	69.3% (374) 30.7% (166)
9. Police Legitimacy (5-item scale) ^a (Police Legitimacy)	1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree	M = 3.52 (540) % Agree = 37.4%
10. Racial Profiling is Often Necessary (Reference Category) (Racial Profiling)	0 = disagree/unsure 1 = agree	80.9% (436) 19.1% (103)
11. Successful Recall of Experimental Conditions (Reference Category) (Successful Recall of Exp.Cond)	0 ≤ 100% accurate reliability 1 = 100% accurate reliability	34.3% (796) ^b 65.7% (1528)

^a Items in the police legitimacy scale include: (1) people's basic rights are well protected by police, (2) police can be trusted to make decisions that are right for your community, (3) you should accept police decisions even when you think they are wrong, (4) the police have the same sense of right and wrong that I do, and (5) I have great respect for the police. Scale reliability: alpha = 0.83.

^b Sample size based on the number of ratings of the 4 videos by the 581 study participants.

5.1. RQ1: Media source and evaluations of video incidents as trustworthy and accurate

Are video accounts of police use of force (PUF) viewed as (a) more trustworthy and (b) more accurate depictions of the incident when the video is attributed to one source (e.g., national TV news) than another (e.g. social media post)? To answer this research question, multiple regression models were estimated for each of these two measures of source credibility within the four video clips.⁴

As shown in Table 3, PUF videos linked to social media sources were considered significantly ($p < .05$) less trustworthy than the same videos attributed to national TV networks or an unknown source (i.e., the control condition in which the media source was not mentioned). No significant differences by the videos' media source were found on ratings of the perceived accuracy of the video account. Thus, the net effect of the particular media source on public ratings of its credibility are not uniform across different measures of this concept.

Among the moderating and control variables, ratings of source credibility in PUF incidents were strongly influenced by the individual's general use and trust of media sources, the salience of PUF incidents to them, and their personal attributes (see Table 3). For example, the video's alleged media source was considered a far more trustworthy and accurate account among raters who were daily TV users, had higher trust in TV and social media, Black, and viewed PUF incidents as more personally salient to them. Other attitudes (e.g. beliefs about police legitimacy and racial profiling) had significant net effects on one measure of source credibility but not the other. Several demographic attributes (e.g., gender, political party identity, income) had no discernable impact on both ratings of trust and accuracy of the video's media source.

5.2. RQ2: Suspect's alleged crime and perceptions of officer's conduct as excessive and justifiable

Are the officer's actions in videos of PUF incidents evaluated as (a) less excessive and (b) more justified when the force is used against more dangerous offenders (e.g., suspected murderer vs. shoplifter)? Multiple regression analyses also provided the answer this research question.

As shown in Table 3, public perceptions about excessive force were strongly influenced by the suspect's alleged crime. In particular, the officer's force was viewed as less excessive when the target was a "suspected murderer" rather than as a "person" (i.e., the control condition). There were no significant differences in these ratings of excessive force between "alleged shoplifters" and the control condition. In contrast, the suspect's alleged criminal behavior had no significant impact on public ratings of the justifiability of the officer's conduct. Thus, the net impact of the suspect's alleged crime varies across the different evaluative domains of the officer's conduct.

Among the other variables included in this study, the officer's conduct was viewed as significantly more excessive and less justifiable in some videos (videos 2 and 3) and among raters who viewed PUF incidents as more salient to them and daily TV news consumers. Persons with more positive attitudes toward the police (e.g., self-identified Republicans, those with higher scores on the police legitimacy scale, supporters of the necessity of racial profiling) also considered the officer's force to be significantly less excessive and more justifiable. The nature and magnitude of the impact of other factors (e.g., daily social media usage, gender, income, trust in media sources) varied across

⁴ An examination of the variance inflation factors (VIF) for each of the predictive variables in Table 3 revealed no evidence of serious multicollinearity. For each variable in these estimated models, the VIF values were < 2.0 , far lower than the standard thresholds of 4.0 and 10.0 for identifying serious multicollinearity (see O'Brien, 2007). Thus, tests of the statistical significance of each variable in these models are not adversely affected by multicollinearity among the predictor variables.

these different measures of officer's conduct (see Table 3).

5.3. RQ3: Moderating effects on perceptions of source credibility and officer's conduct

Is the impact of the video's media source, message content, and individual's socio-demographic characteristics on PUF evaluations moderated by personal salience (i.e., the level of personal worry about being involved in PUF incident) and the evaluator's primary media usage for daily news/information (e.g., national TV news, social media). To answer this research question, separate regression models were estimated for each level of the moderating variables and statistical tests of the equality of these observed effects across models were performed. Table 4 summarizes the significant moderating effects found in these analyses.

5.3.1. Personal salience

Personal salience had a significant net effect on ratings of both source credibility and the officer's conduct (see Table 3). However, the differential relevance of PUF incidents to raters may also provide distinct personal experiences and interpretative contexts that moderates the impact of media sources, alleged criminal activity, other aspects of the video content, and the individual's socio-demographic characteristics on these ratings.

As shown in Table 4, significant moderating effects of personal salience on PUF evaluations are found for many of the predictor variables. Several general patterns underlie these moderating effects. First, the effects of personal salience are most pronounced on ratings of source credibility (especially trust in the media source) than ratings of the officer's conduct. In particular, there are 4 variables (i.e., gender, education, income, trust in social media) for which their net impact on ratings of trust of the video's source is moderated by whether PUF incidents have "low" or "high" personal salience to the evaluator. Second, across all four dependent variables, the estimated regression coefficients for each predictor variable were larger for individuals in which PUF incidents had "high" personal salience (i.e., 83% [10/12] of the differences were larger in the "high" PUF salience group). This pattern of higher group differentiation among individuals for which PUF incidents are most personally relevant is consistent with the theoretical link between personal salience and more nuanced "deep thinking" in information processing.

5.3.2. Daily TV network news and social media usage

Traditional and emergent media sources vary widely in their form, content, audience, and underlying ideological orientation that (1) shape the construction of the media message and (2) may mitigate or enhance the impact of other factors in the interpretation of it. To explore these moderating effects within different media sources, sample respondents were differentiated by their level of usage of national TV network news and social media (i.e., $<$ daily vs. daily use).

As shown in Table 4, the type and level of rater's media usage has significant moderating effects on many of the predictors of PUF evaluations. However, the pattern of these media-specific effects is complex and inconsistent across the different evaluative domains of source credibility and officer's conduct. For example, moderating effects across levels of daily social media usage are more prevalent than found across levels of daily TV news viewing (18 vs. 11 significant differences, respectively, across the four dependent variables). Based on the group differences in daily TV news viewing, the strongest moderating effects were found on ratings of the trust in the video's source (i.e., 5 significant differences) and these conditional effects were least common in ratings of excessive force (i.e., only 1 significant difference). In contrast, multiple moderating effects by the level of social media usage were found across ratings of both source credibility and officer's conduct.

As reflected by their absence in Table 4, differences in the rater's usage of either TV news or social media did not significantly moderate the impact of the video's content on ratings of the officer's conduct as

Table 3
Regression models of public attitudes about trust in media sources, accuracy of video account, excessive force, and justifiable force in PUF incidents

Variables	Trust media source	Accuracy of video account	Excessive force	Justifiable force
	b ^a	b	b	b
Independent variables				
Intercept	2.89 *	3.37 *	3.87 *	1.81 *
Social media	-0.10 *	-0.05	0.02	-0.01
National TV news	.06 ^b	0.05	-0.01	0.02
Suspected shoplifter	0.03	-0.02	-0.02	-0.01
Suspected murder	0.01	-0.05	-0.16 *	-0.02
Video 2 (Female Pushed)	0.06	0.08	0.68 *	-0.64 *
Video 3 (Black Male Kicked)	0.12 *	0.12 *	0.70 *	-0.41 *
Video 4 (White Male Tackled)	0.04	0.03	-0.44 *	0.43 *
Moderating variables				
Personal salience of PUF	0.23 *	0.14 *	0.22 *	-0.23 *
Daily use-TV network news	0.16 *	0.16 *	0.16 *	-0.13 *
Daily use-social media	0.01	0.08 *	0.17 *	-0.06
Control variables				
Male	0.05	0.03	-0.18 *	0.03
Age 19–29	0.09	0.10 *	0.10 *	0.15 *
Black	0.20 *	0.19 *	0.09	-0.08
White	0.08	0.10	0.14	-0.09
Some college/college grad	-0.05	-0.10 *	-0.03	0.10
Republican political identity	0.03	0.01	-0.16 *	0.14 *
Household income > \$50 k	0.03	0.04	-0.15 *	0.04
Trust TV network news	0.33 *	0.24 *	0.11 *	-0.09
Trust social media	0.42 *	0.32 *	0.13 *	-0.03
Police legitimacy	-0.03	-0.06 *	-0.08 *	0.15 *
Racial profiling	0.11 *	0.05	-0.32 *	0.48 *
Successful recall of exp.cond.	< 0.01	0.05	-0.04	-0.01
R ^b =	0.12 *	0.08 *	0.24 *	0.22 *
N _{Ratings} ^c =	2255	2251	2249	2253

^a Unstandardized Partial Regression Coefficients; * = p < .05.

^b Differences between National TV News and Social Media: * = p < .05.

^c The sample sizes represent the number of ratings of the four videos among the 581 respondents. The discrepancy between the maximum sample size of 2324 (581 respondents × 4 videos = 2324) and the sample size in the table is due to missing data on the included variables in the estimated models.

excessive and justified. For these comparisons, the video's content (i.e., the description of the suspect as a “murderer”, the attributes/actions of the party's involved within each video) matters in PUF evaluations, but their strong impact is also invariant across groups with low and high frequency of media usage.

6. Discussion

The current study provides empirical findings about three research questions involving media sources, message content, and public ratings of videos of PUF incidents. First, PUF videos attributed to “national TV network news” were viewed as more trustworthy than the same videos linked to “social media” sources, but the alleged source of the video had no significant impact on its perceived accuracy. Second, the officer's actions were rated as less excessive when it was directed at an alleged murder suspect than other type of offenders, but ratings of justifiable force were not significant related to differences in the suspect's alleged crime. Third, the personal salience of PUF incidents to the raters and differences in their level of media usage had substantial moderating effects on the predictors of PUF evaluations. Explanations for these findings, their limitations, and implications for future research on media and crime are summarized below.

6.1. Media sources and their credibility

Consistent with previous research on media credibility, PUF videos linked to a traditional media outlet (i.e., national TV news networks) were rated as more trustworthy than those videos attributed to social media sources. The significant differences in these ratings by the video's media source remained even after controlling for the type of PUF incident depicted in the video, the rater's general pattern of media usage,

and their socio-demographic characteristics. Within the contemporary societal climate of claims about “fake news” and biased reporting, several aspects of the observed findings are noteworthy.

First, similar to other national survey evidence of media's “credibility gap” (Gallup/Knight, 2018), less than half (41%) of sample respondents in this study indicated that they trusted the video's media source (37% for social media and 48% for TV news). A higher proportion (59%) of study participants said they believed that the PUF videos provided an “accurate depiction of the incident” (57% among videos linked to social media and 64% for TV news sources). Although reflective of some general trust in media sources (especially TV news), these survey results also indicate a high level of public suspicion about the credibility of modern media sources and their message content.

Second, given the low public trust in media sources and widespread claims of “fake news”, it is surprising that the majority of sample respondents believed that these PUF videos actually provided an accurate account of the incidents (i.e., 59% believed in their accuracy). The presumed veracity of these media messages is noteworthy in the current study because the video clips were short in length (i.e., only 5 to 10 s long), non-audible, and largely void of any contextual information (except the experimental manipulations of the media source and suspect's alleged crime). Despite this limited information, however, the typical viewer of these short video clips viewed them as accurate depictions of these PUF incidents and were highly critical of the officer's conduct (i.e., vast majority believed the police actions were excessive and unjustified).

For those concerned about improving police-citizen relations, these findings are alarming because they indicate the persuasive power of even limited video images in shaping public attitudes about the accuracy of PUF incidents and the appropriateness of the officer's conduct in highly ambiguous contexts. With no ability to control the distribution

Table 4
Moderating effects of personal salience, daily TV usage, and daily social media use.¹

Moderating variables	Dependent variables							
	Trust media source		Accurate account		Excessive force		Justifiable force	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
1. Personal salience:								
Daily TV usage					−0.22 ⁺	0.25 ^{*,*}		
Male	0.12 ⁺	−0.44 ⁺	0.10 ⁺	−0.34 ⁺				
Age < 30 years old			0.04	0.44 ⁺				
> Some college	−0.01	−0.64 ⁺					0.12 ⁺	0.56 ⁺
Republican								
Income > \$50 k	< 0.01	0.27 ⁺	< 0.01	0.28 ⁺	−0.19 ⁺	0.10	0.08	−0.29 ⁺
Trust social media	0.36 [*]	0.76 [*]					0.42 ⁺	1.25 ⁺
Racial profiling								
2. Daily TV usage:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Personal salience					0.40 ⁺	−0.11		
Daily social media			0.19 ⁺	−0.12				
Trust in social media	0.49 ⁺	0.28 ⁺						
Age < 30 years old			0.16 ⁺	−0.14				
White	0.17 ⁺	−0.08					−0.30 ⁺	0.27 ⁺
> Some college	0.04	−0.25 ⁺					0.02	0.30 ⁺
Police legitimacy	0.03	−0.16 ⁺	−0.02	−0.14 ⁺				
Racial profiling	0.04	0.35 ⁺						
3. Daily social media:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Personal salience					0.45 ⁺	0.11		
Daily TV usage	0.21 ⁺	0.07	0.28 ⁺	0.02	0.12	0.22 ⁺	−0.06	−0.19 ⁺
Trust TV network			0.37 ⁺	0.12 ⁺	0.29 ⁺	−0.04		
Trust social media							0.22 ⁺	−0.07
Male			−0.07	0.12 ⁺	−0.04	−0.28 ⁺		
Age < 30 years old	−0.02	0.17 ⁺					0.04	0.20 ⁺
Black					−0.21 ⁺	0.25 ⁺		
White	0.21 ⁺	−0.10	0.28 ⁺	−0.14				
Income > \$50 k	−0.11 ⁺	0.16 ⁺	−0.08	0.16 ⁺				
> Some college			0.06	−0.19 ⁺				

¹ Table values are unstandardized partial regression coefficients for variables with significant (p < .05) moderating-specific effects for each dependent variable.
* = p < .05

or interpretation of the media message from these short, “viral” video clips (and the common presumption that PUF actions in them are often excessive and unjustified), the current findings suggest that police departments face a serious challenge in changing public attitudes about PUF incidents.

6.2. Suspect's attributes and assessments of the officer's use of force

Given differences in their perceived threat to public safety, it isn't surprising that PUF incidents involving alleged murderers elicit significantly lower ratings of excessive force than identical situations involving alleged shoplifters and suspects with an unknown criminal identity. However, it is important to note that this net effect of the suspect's alleged crime on ratings of excessive force is observed even after controlling for differences in the particular actions of the suspect and officer in the PUF videos and personal characteristics of the evaluator. For example, the PUF incident in Video #4 (i.e., officer tackles a fleeing male) generated the lowest ratings of excessive force, whereas the most excessive force was attributed to Videos #2 (i.e., woman pushed/slammed to the ground by officer approaching her from behind). Nevertheless, within each of these PUF videos, ratings of excessive force were far less prevalent when the incident involved alleged murderers.

Contrary to the pattern for excessive force, the suspect's alleged crime had no significant impact on ratings of the justifiability of the officer's actions. These findings support our initial decision to treat these two evaluative domains as separate measures of officer's conduct. Some of the unique and common factors associated with these public ratings of excessive and justifiable force are examined below.

First, rather than based on the person's alleged criminal status (as found with ratings of excessive force), public views about justifiable force appear to be more influenced by the specific actions of the

suspect. In particular, greater justifiability was assigned when the suspect resisted (e.g., “fleeing” police [Video 4]) or made a possible aggressive movement (e.g., walked abruptly toward the officer [Video 1]). In contrast, the officer's force was viewed as less justified when the suspect was more compliant (e.g., by stopping a foot pursuit and getting on the ground with hand's raised [Video 3]) or was less of a public threat (e.g., a slender-built woman who is not aggressively fleeing the police [Video 2]).

Given the strong effect of the video's content on ratings of the officer's conduct as both excessive and justified, future studies should employ research designs that are better able to isolate the particular elements of the video's content (e.g., type of resistance, suspect attributes, location of incident) influencing these rating of PUF incidents. The use of high-fidelity video simulations of PUF incidents that introduce different experimental elements under controlled conditions provide one method for exploring these questions (see James, Vila, & Klinger, 2014). Matched case-control studies of real-life PUF cases is an alternative approach for identifying specific incident characteristics that affect public evaluations of these incidents and their outcomes (Ridgeway, 2016).

Second, personal concerns about being involved in PUF incidents and views about police practices (e.g., beliefs about police legitimacy and racial profiling) are significant predictors of both evaluations of officer's conduct in PUF incidents. Greater personal relevance of PUF incidents is associated with significantly higher ratings of excessive force and lower justifiability, whereas persons with more supportive attitudes about police practices have more positive ratings on both measures of the officer's conduct. These findings of higher support for officer's actions among persons who have more pro-police views are consistent with the results of other studies of public attitudes about police use of force (Gerber & Jackson, 2017).

6.3. Moderating effects (Personal salience and media usage)

Based on cognitive theories of information processing (see Epstein, 1994), the personal salience of PUF incidents to the rater and their patterns of media usage were considered moderating factors that shape the nature and magnitude of the impact of the video's content and individual's socio-demographic characteristics on PUF evaluations. As shown in Table 4, significant moderating effects were found among many of the predictor variables in this study.

Among the predictor variables moderated by the personal salience of PUF incidents, the magnitude of group differences (e.g., male vs. female, < \$50k income vs. > \$50k) are far more pronounced among raters in which PUF incidents have high personal salience rather than low personal salience. This relationship between high salience and greater group differentiation is logically consistent with the link between salience and the more contemplative/central processing of media messages that have higher personal salience (i.e., when personally salient, raters expend more cognitive effort in their systematic interpretation and explanation of outcomes). However, the moderating effects of personal salience were limited to its impact on the socio-demographic predictors of PUF incidents. The strong net effects of the particular video content (i.e., differences between Videos #2 and #3 vs. Video #4) on public ratings of excessive and justifiable force were not moderating by differences in personal salience.

Contrary to the pattern of conditional effects for personal salience, the moderating effects of individual's media usage are far more idiosyncratic and inconsistent across public evaluations of source credibility and officer's conduct. For example, among daily social media users, younger raters and those with higher incomes had far greater trust in the video's media source than their counterparts, but these age and income differences were less dramatic and in an opposite direction among low social media users. In contrast, differences in daily TV news usage had relative fewer moderating effects on the predictors of the ratings of the accuracy of the video account and the officer's conduct as excessive and justifiable.

The lower number of moderating effects associated with individuals' frequency of TV news viewing may be explained by people's greater faith in this traditional form of media, regardless of whether they watch it frequently. In contrast, moderating effects are more extensive when differences in social media usage are examined. The wider presence of these moderating effects may reflect idiosyncratic differences between low and high social media users that help individuals process and interpret the information when conveyed by less established media sources.

This pattern of results is consistent with our basic premise that when individuals view PUF-related videos presented within an ambiguous context, they are forced to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty. In these situations, individuals will use any cues at their disposal, including relying on their own beliefs, based on life experiences, and other social cues (e.g., source credibility). Consequently, we see strong moderating effects of variables measuring individual differences, particularly under conditions of high personal salience.

CEST and other dual-processing models predict that if individuals have the ability and motivation to rationally and analytically scrutinize information, the moderating impact of the individual differences would be minimized. However, in the current study, it is ultimately impossible for perceivers to “deeply process” the information because little contextual information was provided. To more fully access the relevance of CEST and other theories, future research should explore reactions to the effects of viewing PUF videos on perceptions of officer behavior when more contextual information exists.

6.4. Implications

The results of this study indicate that a variety of factors influence citizens' perceptions of PUF incidents. The video content, the personal

salience of PUF incidents, individuals' trust and use of different news sources, beliefs about police legitimacy, and other audience characteristics all contribute to public perceptions of excessive and justifiable force. Despite enhanced policies to reduce PUF situations (e.g., de-escalation training, strategic deployment), police departments have only minimal control over the various factors influencing PUF evaluations in the current study. For example, police have no control over the public's use of different media sources or their beliefs about the personal salience of PUF incidents to them.

For minimizing adverse public reactions to PUF incidents, however, police departments may benefit from greater utilization of effective communication strategies to reframe the public discourse about these incidents (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). Pro-active communication is especially important in this context because of the high probative value of even the short, 10-s videos of PUF incidents used in the current study. From the perspective of the police department, the timely release of body-camera video and detailed accounts of the wider context of PUF incident may raise more questions about officer misconduct. However, these types of public disclosures increase transparency and may help minimize confirmation biases and other cognitive shortcuts that underlie people's interpretive processing of PUF incidents when limited information is available (see Ask & Granhag, 2005; Mears, Craig, Stewart, & Warren, 2018). By providing this information to media sources in a timely manner, police departments may also ultimately increase their level of public support by enhancing citizen's views about procedural fairness and police legitimacy (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Enhanced community policing efforts are a more direct way to facilitate positive interaction between police and citizens. In doing so, these encounters may create new “schemas” in citizens' minds for how encounters with police are likely to go. As noted earlier, individuals often process information in a default “experiential” processing mode (Epstein, 1994), where heuristics and other mental shortcuts guide decision-making. Among the heuristics commonly used, particularly in the context of ambiguous or uncertain situations, is the availability heuristic, where individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood of an event by the ease at which examples come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). If a viewer sees a PUF video and several exclusively negative interactions with the police come to mind, the person may attribute greater personal relevancy to the video. However, if positive police interactions easily come to mind, personal relevancy may be lower. Consequently, it would behoove police departments to increase the frequency of positive encounters with citizens because of (1) the direct positive benefits that result from improving police-citizen relations and (2), the benefit of effective communications against negative attributions that may emerge when PUF videos are disseminated in traditional media outlets and social media.

6.5. Limitations

There are several features of the current study that limit its substantive conclusions. First, video was the exclusive media form used in this study. Second, rather than identifying specific media sources (e.g., Facebook, Fox News, BBC) in the experimental conditions, generic labels were used in the video descriptors of emergent and traditional media sources (e.g., “social media posts”, “national TV network news”). Third, the four PUF videos used in this study had common and unique elements, restricting the ability to make direct comparisons between them. Although each of these design features were implemented to balance concerns about internal and external validity, future research using modifications of this design is necessary to assess the robustness of the current findings.

7. Conclusions

Increased public awareness of PUF incidents in contemporary

society is directly tied to advances in visual recording technology and the precipitous growth in multiple media sources to disseminate visual images of these police-citizen encounters. At the same time, concerns about “fake news” and the general credibility of different media sources may alter people’s views about these PUF incidents. Within this wider context, the current study was designed to answer some basic questions about how public views of video accounts of PUF incidents are influenced by the video’s alleged media source, its content, and personal attributes of the evaluator.

When examining public attitudes about PUF incidents, the dominant conclusion from this study is that “what matters” is the media source, the message content, and its salience to the evaluator. Public beliefs about the PUF incidents in this study are highly contextual. Greater understanding of the underlying causes of these differences and their implications for police-citizen relations in modern society are important topics for future inquiry.

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