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Visual Framing Effects of News Coverage of Police Use of Deadly Force on Intergroup Relationships

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Abstract

The study examines the effects of visual framing in news coverage of law enforcement use of lethal force. In a 2X2 online experiment, participants read one of four versions of a news story that included visual racial cues (images depicting a Black vs. a White victim) and a delinquent/normative frame -- depicting the victim wearing attire that signifies either normative or delinquent behavior (regalia vs. a hooded sweatshirt). Both race and delinquency framing influenced the readers' stereotype endorsement and feelings towards Blacks. However, judgement of the police officer's behavior solely depended on the victim's race. These findings demonstrate the importance of imagery accompanying news reporting on social issues in activating and intensifying White-centered intergroup biases. Implications for responsible journalistic practices are discussed.

Keywords: News, Stereotyping, Framing, Visual framing, Police brutality

Visual Framing Effects of News Coverage of Police Use of Deadly Force on Intergroup Relationships

Approximately 1,000 Americans are killed by law enforcement every year (Washington Post database, 2021) with people of color, particularly Black males, implicated disproportionately. Blacks constitute 13% of the U.S. population, yet they account for 28% of the fatalities in encounters with police (Menifield, et al., 2019). Black men have a 1 in 1000 lifetime risk of being killed by law enforcement, rendering it one of the leading causes of death among young Black men in the U.S. (Edwards et al., 2019). The intensive media coverage of multiple instances of law enforcement officials killing unarmed Black men galvanized the public discourse on systemic racism and its toll on the Black community. High profile cases of excessive use of force and police brutality against young Blacks, including police killing of Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri, 2014), Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland, 2015), and George Floyd (Minneapolis, Minnesota 2020) gave rise to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement, set off nation-wide street protests, and fueled spontaneous social media campaigns.

However, White Americans were divided in their perception of race, social justice, and police brutality. For instance, following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the Pew Research Center (2014) reported that 47% of Whites felt that race received too much attention in the case and 52% of the respondents said that they have confidence in the outcomes of the investigation of the incident. Moreover, while a third (32%) of Whites maintained that the police officer's use of deadly was adequate, 33% believed this was an excessive measure, and the rest 35% remained undecided. This schism is situated within a more general ambivalence that Americans harbor towards intergroup relationships. For instance, over the past decade, Whites consistently expressed lukewarm feelings towards Blacks, rating their sentiments towards Blacks

around 65-68% on a 100-point feeling thermometer scale (Pew, 2019). Not surprisingly, therefore, the social movement BLM was met with opposition from social media activists using slogans such as All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, and White Lives Matter. In efforts to circumscribe BLM's challenge to the status quo, these counter-movements propagated color blind, pro-institutional ideology (Langford & Speight, 2015).

Media coverage of police use of deadly force is likely to serve as an important factor contributing to the public's divided response to instances of police killing of Black men and their attitudes towards Blacks overall. For instance, studies have found that exposure to images from a funeral of a Black victim of police shooting mobilized individuals to take action to support the BLM movement (Casas & Williams, 2018). However, exposure to news overall also was found to foster support for police and promote endorsement of unfavorable stereotypes of Blacks (Dixon, 2008; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

Thus, it is important to explore *how* journalists cover the altercation with law enforcement, and identify specific characteristics of news reporting that elicit different public reactions (Fridkin et al., 2017). Both the general public and the academic community raised concerns regarding the nature of media coverage of these events and its potential effect on justifying systemic racism and fostering disharmonies between racial groups (e.g., Freelon, et al., 2016). To advance the understanding of these processes, the current study is specifically set to examine the effects of media visual representation of victims of police use of deadly force on news consumers' perceptions of and attitudes towards Blacks overall and their support for police violence in particular.

News Framing

For over a century, objectivity, namely, “value-free reporting” (Schudson, 2001, p. 158) has been considered to be a pillar of journalism ethics, upholding that events can and should be reported without “commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way” (p. 150). Specifically, from early stages of professional socialization, journalists internalize the ideal of fairness, balance, and impartiality – striving to convey facts without privileging any particular point of view or swaying the public opinion (Williams, et al., 2018). Some scholars and media practitioners, however, deemed these ideals to be unattainable (Brüggemann, 2014). According to this perspective, reporting is never a sterile reflection of facts but it is inherently an *interpretation* of reality. As Goffman (1986) points out, reality is processed, organized, and appraised for its meaning by applying frames. Like a picture frame, these psychological frames organize messages by including some aspects of the issue and excluding others, directing attention to particular components, and guiding the message recipient’s interpretation of the message (Bateson, 1972/2005). In the context of news, the subject of the news reporting is constructed through the frames of the journalists and editors, and thus the journalists’ biases cannot be divorced from their reporting (Brüggemann, 2014).

Broadly speaking, news frames can be considered along two dimensions (Druckman, 2004). First, **valence frames** refer to messages that convey the exact same information but direct the audience members’ attention to different aspects of the same argument (e.g., focus on the risk vs. the potential gain in making a decision under similar sets of probabilities). Second, **issue framing** involves discussing a given topic through a different set of considerations, thus encouraging the message recipient to employ different arguments altogether when forming an opinion on the issue (e.g., discussing a rally as a free speech vs. a public safety issue). Thus, even when “accounts are based on the same set of underlying facts [...] by selective omission, choice

of words, and varying credibility ascribed to the primary source, each conveys a radically different impression of what actually happened” (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006, p. 281).

Visual framing. While traditionally framing research focused predominantly on textual elements, imagery undeniably constitutes a powerful framing device since individuals automatically process and intuitively decode even inconspicuous visual cues (Geise & Baden, 2015). As with verbal frames, it is important to consider both the issue and the valence levels of visual framing. First, images can tackle the issue from different perspectives inviting news consumers to process the verbal information referencing a different set of considerations. For instance, the same news story about a military conflict accompanied by photographs that frame the story as either human-interest or a political frame produces distinct patterns of responses to the story (Brantner, et al., 2011).

Next, valence framing refers to *how* the visual message is constructed through various visual semiotic codes. These include, for example, the camera angle, composition, and presence of specific visual symbols. These visual cues are embedded in the audience’s schemas. Upon encountering them, the incoming visual information interacts with the message recipients’ preexisting knowledge structures and the visual cues are decoded in a way that attenuates the overall perception of the issue (Geise & Baden, 2015). For example, relative size, direction of the gaze, and colors are embedded in schemas organizing evaluations of properties such as value (good/bad), and threat.

Of course, visual and textual frames do not operate in isolation from each other. However, the potential of imagery to elicit strong emotional reactions renders visual frames as particularly important. Visual messages alone tend to have a greater framing effect than merely text (Powell, et al., 2015). When visual and verbal frames appear in conjunction (as is the case in

most news stories), visual frames dominate the effect of verbal messages in guiding audiences' behavioral intentions. This power of visual frames (alone or coupled with text) is carried out through emotional responses elicited by the image (Powell, et al., 2015).

The social context and implications for news frames. Journalists and editors frame news by selecting sources that will be given a voice in the reporting, choosing words and metaphors to convey the information, and determining which images will accompany the text. Thus, from a normative theory perspective, establishing frames appears to be a matter of a series of personal choices situated within various institutional and logistics constraints, professional norms, and industry conventions (Price, et al., 1997). However, collectively, these individual level choices position media as a “framing institution” (Yazdiha, 2020, p. 503). From this standpoint, the media content is a product of existing societal power structure. As such, news frames reinforce inequality and reproduce hegemonic narratives by inferring causality, attributing blame, and pointing at solutions in a manner that maintains the status-quo (Martine & De Maeyer, 2019). In other words, while journalists are not necessarily consciously making ideological framing decisions, they tend to privilege White-dominant frames that justify systemic racism, legitimize discrimination, and favors policies that promote violence and punitive actions against minorities (Lane et al., 2020).

Framing African Americans in the News

Research has consistently revealed that news' racial frames depict Black Americans as a social threat while portraying Whites as victims and heroes. For instance, content analyses of news in various media markets in the U.S. found that Blacks were overrepresented as crime perpetrators compared to both their White counterparts and real-world statistics of arrests. Whites, on the other hand, were overrepresented in the news as victims of homicide and are

underrepresented as crime perpetrators (e.g., Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Gilliam et al., 1996). Encouragingly, the most recent data suggest that this trend begins to hinder with Blacks presented proportionally in their roles as crime suspects, law enforcement, and victims (Dixon, 2017). However, Whites continued to be overrepresented as victims and police officers (Dixon, 2017). The representations differ not only numerically but also qualitatively. For example, television news tended to incorporate significantly more sound-bites from the defense lawyers of White versus Black alleged crime perpetrator (Entman, 1992). Thereby, news framed White crime suspects more sympathetically than their Black counterparts.

Likewise, visual cues are used to establish anti-Black valance frames building on negative stereotypes of this social group. For example, content analysis showed that television news tended to depict Black suspects being physically restrained (Entman, 1992; 1994), thereby implying that they are particularly dangerous or deserve greater scrutiny. Similarly, news coverage of Hurricane Katrina portrayed Blacks as passive victims of their own procrastination while photographs of Whites propagate the image of Whites as active and as rescuers (Kahle et al., 2007).

Imagery can also be used for issue-framing by racially framing an otherwise non-racial news story. Specifically, juxtaposing racial cues and imagery with race-neutral text colors the verbal message as a race-related issue. For example, news stories concerning poverty and disorder were more likely to feature images of Blacks engaging in no purposeful activities, thus tapping into racial stereotypes of Blacks' poor work ethic and violence (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Similarly, news coverage of a person allegedly intentionally spreading AIDS in Dallas repeatedly broadcasted footage of Blacks dancing in a nightclub in a way that resonated with racial stereotypes of hyper-sexuality and Blacks as posing a sexual threat (Bird, 1996).

Framing police use of deadly force against African Americans. Law enforcement use of lethal force is legal in the U.S. when employed as a last resort in response to an immediate threat to the police officer or another person. Thus, not surprisingly, the discourse of fatal encounters with the police centers the question to what extent the victim of the shooting indeed posed such a threat. Racial stereotypes and intergroup relationships are likely to play into this risk assessment process. Provided the effect of media on the public's understanding of what happened during the altercation with the police and given the media's power to activate racial stereotypes, it is imperative to consider the nature of news coverage of these events.

Content analyses of news revealed various linguistic and visual frames that broadly fall into two categories. First, linguistic choices were used to underplay the gravity of the event by using euphemisms such as "fatally wounded" in lieu of more charged words like "killed" (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Stone & Socia, 2019). Second, victim-blaming and victim-vilification frames justified the law enforcement agent's decision to use deadly force. One study found that over 90% of newspaper reports of 85 unique instances of police killing in the late 1990s used such frames (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). These news stories typically painted the police officers as reactive, acting in self-defense in response to an imminent threat, implying that law enforcement's actions were legal. The reporting heavily relied on official sources that were predominantly quoted to endorse of the official, pro status quo narrative.

The second framing strategy for justifying the shooting involved depicting the victim as socially delinquent and thus deserving being shot. One way in which delinquency was constructed is by citing the victim's past criminal record (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). Using it as a justification for the shooting is problematic not only because it is not relevant to the shooting decision, but also because police officers are rarely aware of the victim's criminal past at the

time of the altercation. Nonetheless, this mentioning implies that the victim was not innocent and thus deserved to be shot. Another example of semantic markers of the police officer's innocence and blaming the victim can be found in the Fox News's coverage of Michael Brown's death. In the discussion of the events that lead to his death, the reporter referred to the 28-year-old police officer as a "young man" while the 18-year old victim was stated to be "a man who committed a robbery" (Fridkin et al., 2017).

One visual cue that was singled out as a marker of delinquency justifying police violence was the hoodie. The hip-hop fashion embraced by Black youth, including Afro hair styles and hooded sweatshirts came to signify opposition to the White mainstream culture and White norms (Hungerford, 2015). It constitutes an emblem of the inner city, low socio-economic class, violence, and crime (Bell, 2012). It stands for a reason, therefore, that the victim wearing a hoodie was incorporated as part of a stereotypical, anti-Black frame that dominated the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage of Black Lives Matter and the Trayvon Martin's shooting (Lane et al., 2020) Arguably, this emphasis on the victim's attire triggered delinquency schemas and painted the encounter as more threatening, therefore justifying the shooter's use of lethal force.

To summarize, news can racially frame a topic by featuring an image that reveals the race of the person that was shot by the police. Moreover, journalists' linguistic and visual choices construct valance frames that can result in strikingly different representations of the event by framing the victim as either delinquent or innocent. Consequently, what may appear to be the seemingly "impartial" coverage reporting subtly reproduces a White racial frame, painting the Black victim as the one to blame for his own death. It is, therefore, important to consider the

consequences of such depictions on news consumers' perceptions of this social issue and on intergroup relationships (e.g., stereotypes) more broadly.

Framing Effects on Intergroup Relationships and Perceptions of Social Issues

Race-frames are built by using racially-coded linguistic cues (e.g. using the words “inner city”, “disadvantaged teenagers”) or through visual signifiers of race, by including an image of the perpetrator (Domke, 2001; Gilliam et al., 1996). Ample research has examined the consequences of such visual and verbal race frames. Collectively, these studies reveal that inclusion of racial cues in otherwise non-race related stories activates audiences' prior racial stereotypes leading to effects that extend beyond perceptions of the individuals depicted in the particular news story. Rather, racial frames can influence the audiences' attitudes towards the social group as a whole and their support for the social issue itself.

Valence frames can be introduced through subtle linguistic variations such as using words that imply general, stable traits (e.g., “violent”) versus concrete situational actions (e.g., “hit”). These wording choices then guide the readers' perception of the depicted social group and the corresponding social policies (Mastro, et al., 2014). Similarly, visual valence frames incorporate visual signifiers of what is culturally associated with “good” and “bad”, as subtle as such as the camera angle (McCain et al., 1997) or the background color in a photograph (Von Sikorski, 2018). As subtle as these cues may appear, they bias the media users' judgment of the issue and influence their attitudes towards the social policy. In particular, news consumers become more inclined to endorse measures that are punitive towards the stereotyped social groups.

For example, Gilliam et al. (1996) found that placing a photograph of a Black perpetrator in a news crime report activated racial stereotypes, which in turn enhanced concern for the issue and reliance on racial considerations when making policy-making decisions. Specifically, such racial undertones lead to greater support for punitive (as opposed to social) policies that target the stigmatized social group. Moreover, as racial frames activate pre-existing racial stereotypes, they also heighten news consumers' reliance on their political identity in forming their attitudes. In other words, racial frames can have a polarizing effect by making individuals express even greater support for policies politically aligned with their political ideology (Domke, 2001).

In a more recent experiment, Abraham and Appiah (2006) presented participants with news articles about three-strikes laws (harsher sentencing to repeating felons) and school vouchers (educational funding mechanism affording families with more educational choices). Although the stories made no references to race, accompanying the story with pictures of Blacks attenuated the readers' perceptions of the extent to which this racial group is impacted by the policy, and activated racial stereotypes. Similarly, Tukachinsky, et al. (2011) found that racial imagery embedded in a news story about affordability of healthcare biased people's perception of the impacted population and influencing their stance of the policy. An exception of the effect of racial visual framing was found in a study on Hurricane Katrina where photographs depicting either Black or White victims did not impact news readers' attribution of responsibility to the devastation (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010).

Effects of framing of police brutality. Few studies have examined the effect of news frames specifically in the context of police violence. Fridkin, et al. (2017) found that verbal frames that specifically highlighted the race of the victim did not swing public opinion. Rather, use of a law and order frame that emphasizes the due process and the role of law enforcement in

protecting the social order was associated with greater support for the officer. Conversely, framing that emphasized the police officer's violent actions lead to greater support for the victim.

Contrary to Fridkin's study that examined the effect of verbal framing of race, Smith and Merolla considered the interactive effects of visual racial frames and verbal valence frames on media users' perceptions of the police-citizen altercation. In an experiment, Smith and Merolla (2019) altered the race of the victim pictured in a photograph alongside a news story and manipulated the verbal justification frame (specifically, either mentioning or omitting the victim's past criminal record). Study participants deemed violence against the victim as more justified when the victim was Black and when he was said to have had a criminal record. Building on Smith and Merolla's (2019) findings, the current study explores the potentially interactive role of issue (race) and valance (delinquency) frames. However, uniquely, this study examines the effects of visual framing of both types of frames.

The Current Study

As discussed above, racial frames can activate social stereotypes and promote a particular interpretation of the event depicted in the news. Although the bulk of research on framing focuses on verbal messages, imagery constitutes an important component of frames that can be a factor contributing to audiences' understanding of the events. The current study investigates how visual framing operates in assigning meaning to specific aspects of an issue, thus influencing the meaning news consumers derive from it. Specifically, the study examines the independent and joint effects of visual racial cues and delinquency cues on intergroup relationships (perceptions of and feelings towards Blacks) and justification of the law enforcement's use of deadly force.

Although patterns of framing of Blacks in general and police brutality against Blacks in particular have been well documented (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000; Fridkin et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2020) much less is known about the consequences of these frames for intergroup relationships. Studies consistently demonstrate that overall exposure to news fosters racial stereotypes, makes police brutality more acceptable, and promotes support for punitive social policies (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). However, these studies do not consider how specific news frames, especially visual frames, contribute to stereotyping and interpretation of the social events depicted in the news. To address this gap, this study extends the scant research on effects of delinquency framing (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010) from verbal to visual frames. Moreover, beyond the potential for theoretical contribution, the current study offers empirical examination of socially significant questions that the American society grapples with today.

The public engagement with the issue of visual framing is evident for example, from a digital activism sparked by several highly publicized instances of police killing Black men. Social media campaigns spontaneously initiated by citizens – not only criticized law enforcement’s maltreatment of people of color but also identified biases in media coverage of fatal encounters with the police (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Fews, 2017; Freelon, et al., 2016; Jackson, 2016). In particular, interviews and analysis of tweets reveal that social media users objected the tendency of traditional media to feature images of Black victims that depict them as delinquent (Freelon et al., 2016).

Digital activism has been censured by some scholars for its potential to displace real action by offering a false sense of accomplishment through engaging in easy, symbolic gestures in the virtual realms (“slaktivism”) (for review, see Zulli, 2020). However, contrary to this criticism, digital activism was found to have a meaningful impact by mobilizing individuals and

spreading the BLM movement (Zulli, 2020). In what Blevins et al. (2019) praised as one of the most prominent, personalized forms of activism on Twitter, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign called to attention biases in media's visual representation of individuals killed by the police. When depicting a Black person killed by law enforcement, media typically select photographs that portray the victim as threatening and delinquent, thereby implying that the law enforcement's actions were justified and not excessive. As the argument goes, each person can be found pictured in both sympathetic and unflattering manner, but media systematically prefer to publish negative images when the victim is Black. This racial bias in visual representation of the victim of police violence propagates prejudice and ultimately swings public opinion in defense of law enforcement.

To illustrate their point, the digital activists posted two side-by-side pictures of themselves, one depicting them as normative (e.g., at graduation or in a professional setting) and a photograph in which they engage in socially scrutinized behaviors such consuming alcohol or making gang hand gestures (Few, 2017). The posts suggested that if the victim of police brutality was White, the media would choose the normative photograph, however, if the victim was Black, the delinquent image would be used instead. In so doing, social media created a democratic space for advancing alternative frames that challenge the hegemonic, White-centered frames that dominate the mainstream media (Foucault Welles & Jackson, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019).

Inspired by the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, the current study is interested in understanding the social impact of the competing visual frames offered by digital activists. While past research (e.g., Few, 2017; Foucault Welles & Jackson, 2019; Jackson, 2016) analyzed their content and speculated about its significance, their actual psychological effect on news consumers has not been empirically established. The current study, therefore, asks: To what

extent does the choice of imagery of the victim of police use of deadly force indeed attenuates readers' perceptions of the situation depicted in the news and how does it affect attitudes towards Blacks overall, impacting intergroup relationships more broadly? In particular, the study seeks to examine the extent to which visual framing activates racial stereotypes and biases interpretation of the lethal encounter.

As in prior research on racial framing (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010), we examine the effect of the victim's race, comparing between news stories featuring a photograph of either a White or a Black victim, on the endorsement of racial stereotypes and justification of the police officer's actions. Furthermore, the effect of visual framing of the victim's delinquency is explored. Unlike Smith and Merolla's (2019) that examined verbal frames of delinquency by mentioning the victim's past, the present study explores the effects of visual cues on perceived legitimacy of using deadly force. In so doing, the current study tests activist's speculative claims that visual framing can shift the public opinion (e.g., Fews, 2017; Jackson, 2016). Moreover, the study is concerned with how visual framing of the victim can have broader implications for intergroup attitudes, contributing to the intergroup relationships overall.

Specifically, the following hypotheses are posed:

- H1: Exposure to a news story about police use of deadly force featuring an image of a Black (versus White) victim will be lead to (a) more negative perception of African Americans and (b) greater justification of the police officer's actions.
- H2: Exposure to a news story about police use of deadly force featuring an image that frames the Black victim as delinquent (versus normative) will lead to (a) more negative perception of African Americans and (b) greater justification of the police officer's actions.

Method

An on-line 2 (victim's race: White/Black) X 2 (delinquency: normative/delinquent) experiment has been used to test the above hypotheses. The study has been approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board. All the participants in the study read the same fictitious online news story on police use of deadly force. However, the image accompanying the news report was manipulated such that readers were randomly assigned to see an image of either a White or Black victim who is visually framed as either normative or delinquent. Following exposure to the news story, participants were asked to report their perceptions of and feelings towards Blacks in general, and indicate the extent to which they believed that the law enforcement use of deadly force was legitimate.

Participants

Participants in the study have been recruited through Amazon Mturk. Data have been screened to eliminate bots by using CAPTCHA. Given the nature of the study examining an intergroup dynamic, 18 African American/Black participants were excluded from the study. To ensure data quality two measures have been taken. First, unbeknownst to them, the survey platform has recorded the amount of time they have spent on the page displaying the stimulus. Data were screened for outliers. Participants who spent less than five seconds or more than four minutes on the page have been removed from the dataset. Additionally, an attention check question asking participants to select a particular response option has been embedded in one of the batteries of questions. The final dataset consisted of 152 participants (51.3% women), aged 23-79 (The mean $M = 41.25$ years, $SD = 13.54$). Most (75.7%) were European White and the rest were Asian or Pacific Islander (10.5%), Latinx/Hispanic (5.3%), Native American (2.6%), Middle Eastern (1.3%), and the rest identified as "other" (4.6%).

Manipulation of Independent Variable

To manipulate image framing, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four versions of a news article created for the purpose of the study. The story briefly conveys that a man has been shot and killed during a police stop. The text of the article in all conditions was identical, including the details of the event, names of the victim and the police officers' names, the layout of the article, and the story itself. The only differences were the images of the victim—varying the race of the victim and delinquency cues. The police officer's ethnicity and race have not been stated in the story. A manipulation check ensured that participants in the study correctly identified the victim's race and assumed that the police officer was White.

Visual framing of delinquency. The stimuli for the study have been developed based on past research and theory on the cultural association between hip-hop culture and delinquency, and validated through a pilot test study. Specifically, regalia and a hoodie were chosen as visual framing manipulations of delinquency. As discussed earlier, hoodies, as part of the hip-hop fashion became a visual symbol of dangerous masculinity that poses a threat to the social order, and thus justifies law enforcement violence (Civle & Obhi, 2017). In fact, wearing a hoodie has been used as a victim delinquency frame to justify Martin's killing. As the conservative television commentator, Geraldo Rivera (2012), has claimed in his social media post: "a hoodie is like a sign: shoot or stop & frisk me". Indeed, studies have found that this garment activates delinquency schemas. Researchers' observation of interactions between police officers and citizens has found that over and beyond the demographic characteristics and the demeanor of the suspect, the citizen's hip hop fashion attire significantly increased the likelihood of the interaction to result in a citation compared to a less serious outcome (Dabney, et al., 2017). Provided how engrained the negative connotation of the hoodie is in mainstream culture, it is not

surprising that wearing a hoodie was used in another experiments to manipulate the subject's delinquency (Civile & Obhi, 2017).

In contrast to the hoodie, a graduation gown was used in this study to signify educational attainment, since it is deemed as a socially desirable behavior and an antithesis to the “thug” and “criminal” delinquent connotations of the hip-hop fashion. In fact, as noted earlier, the hoodie and regalia are such iconic signifiers of normalcy and delinquency that many #IfTheyGunMeDown activists used these particular visuals in their pairings of normal/delinquent media representations (e.g., Few, 2017).

To manipulate race and delinquency, the same Black and White young men posed for two mid-shot pictures. In the normative version, the man was photographed facing the camera, slightly smiling, wearing a graduation regalia. In the delinquent condition, the camera angle pointed slightly upwards (a low-angle shot), the man's face was hostile and he was dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head.

Pilot test. A pilot study was used to ensure that validity of the manipulation. The pilot study participants ($N=62$) were randomly assigned to view one of the images and rate the man pictured in the photograph on a semantic differential ranging from “normative” to “delinquent”. Participants in the pilot rated the images of the men wearing the hoodie as significantly more delinquent ($M=4.13$, $SD=.88$) than the men in regalia ($M=1.84$, $Sd=1.50$) revealing a large manipulation effect size ($t(60)=-7.37$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=1.86$). Importantly, however, race did not have an effect on the judgment of delinquency. Both the White and the Black men were rated almost identically ($M_{\text{White}}=2.91$, $Sd=1.57$ vs, $M_{\text{Black}}=3.00$, $Sd=1.80$, $t(60)=-.22$, $p=.83$, Cohen's $d=.05$). In other words, both men in each delinquency condition were perceived similarly to each other, suggesting that there is no confound between race and delinquency

manipulation (i.e., the delinquency manipulation is the only significant factor driving evaluation of the delinquency frame). Additionally, all of the participants correctly identified the race/ethnicity of the man in the photograph when asked to do so at the end of the pilot test. This set of analyses suggests that both the racial and the delinquency frame manipulations have been successful, producing, statistically speaking, large and significant effect sizes.

Dependent Variables' Measures

After carefully reading through the news article, viewers were asked to complete a brief questionnaire that referred to the information they read. Only the series of questions that passed our reliability assessment were used in our analysis and interpretation of results. Leaving us with the following three measures to analyze—justification of the incident, level of racism towards African Americans, and negative stereotypes towards African Americans.

Justification of the law enforcement actions. To measure the justification of the incident, we asked a series of on a 7-point Likert scale (1 being strongly agree the action taken was justified, 7 being strongly disagree the action taken was justified) which were adapted from Jones' (2020) and Smith and Merolla's (2019) measures. Participants reported to what extent they believed if “the officer was too forceful” (reverse coded), “the officers' actions were appropriate”, “the officer acted to protect himself from a threat”, “the officer's actions were unjustified” (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$, $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.01$).

Negative evaluation of African Americans. To measure the level of negative perceptions of African Americans, participants were asked to rate their perceptions of African Americans in general on three 7-point semantic differentials: good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, and peaceful /violent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$, $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.61$).

Attitudes towards African Americans. A single item feeling thermometer measure that is widely used as a valid indicator of attitudes towards social groups was employed (e.g., American National Election Studies, 2018). Participants were asked to indicate on 100-point-scale how they feel about African Americans with 0 degrees being very cold or unfavorable feeling, and 100 degrees being very warm or favorable feeling ($M=72.40$, $SD=26.28$).

Political leaning. Although political ideology is not one of the test variables in the study, it is an important factor to control for. To this end, a commonly used continuous measure of political leaning has been employed (e.g., McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Participants were asked to identify their political stance on a five-point scale that ranged from “very liberal” to “very conservative” ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.12$).

Analytical Approach

To test the hypothesis a series of ANCOVAs was performed comparing between levels of attitudes towards and evaluations of African Americans, and justification of the police officer’s actions during the altercation. Victim’s race and visual delinquent framing were included as two fixed factors and an interaction between them. Participants’ age and political leaning were used as covariates and sex and race/ethnicity (European White vs. other racial and ethnic groups) were included as random factors. Post-hoc Bonferroni test has been used for examining specific contrasts between individual conditions.

Results

The hypotheses postulate that exposure to a Black victim news story, particularly when the victim is visually framed as delinquent, will result in more negative perceptions of and

feelings towards African Americans and greater justification of law enforcement use of lethal force. Figure 1 depicts the estimated means by condition.

There were no main effects of race and delinquency manipulations on negative evaluations of African Americans ($F(1,141) = .26, p = .61, \eta^2 = .002$, $F(1,141) = 2.25, p = .11, \eta^2 = .02$ respectively) and feelings towards them ($F(1,141) = 2.91, p = .09, \eta^2 = .002$, $F(1,141) = 2.83, p = .09, \eta^2 = .02$ respectively). However, for evaluation of African Americans, victim's race and delinquency framing had a significant interaction $F(1,141) = 5.41, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Specifically, those who read a news story featuring a Black normative victim reported significantly less negative evaluations of African Americans compared to those who saw a Black delinquent victim image ($p < .05$). There was a marginally significant interactive effect of victim's race and framing on feelings towards African Americans feeling thermometer, $F(3,100) = 3.42, p = .06, \eta^2 = .02$. The feeling thermometer scores for a Black victim that was framed as normative were the highest compared to all other groups, however the contrasts did not reach significance (compared to Black delinquent: $p = .07$, White normative: $p = .09$, White delinquent: $p = .08$).

The race of the victim had a strong effect on support for police use of lethal force ($F(1,141) = 12.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$), however delinquency did not have a main or interactive effect ($F(1,141) = .10, p = .76, \eta^2 = .001$ and $F(1,141) = 2.27, p = .13, \eta^2 = .02$, respectively).

Discussion

The current study investigated the effect of visual framing of race and delinquency on news readers' perceptions of a deadly altercation with law enforcement and the ensuing changes to intergroup relationships. The results of the study partially support the hypotheses and are generally consistent with the theoretical premise guiding the investigation. Exposure to a news story about a Black person killed by a police officer promoted a more positive view of Blacks and fostered warmer feelings when the victim was framed as normative, whereas delinquent framing of a Black victim resulted in a more stereotypical, negative view of Blacks. These findings can be interpreted on both a psychological and a societal level. On a micro, psychological level, they resonate with the notion of media exemplars. Exposure to both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical media depictions of a racial minority group member prime audiences to weight these characteristics more heavily when forming their overall perception of the social group represented by the exemplar (e.g., Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011; Ramasubramanian, 2011; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2007). On a macro, societal level, this pattern results in a vicious cycle: Presumably drawing on their (and their target audiences') psychological frames of race, reporters and editors use hip-hop fashion references as a visual signifier of delinquency. In turn, featuring these cues in a news story about a deadly altercation with the police reinforces and intensifies this connotation in the public's mind. That is to say, the pervasive media imagery that couples Black youth fashion with police violence continues to reproduce the stigma attached to Black culture and marks young Black men as a socially undesirable element.

Additionally, the study finds that racial visual framing attenuated readers' perceptions of the situation in a way that is consistent with past research (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Domke, 2001; Smith & Merolla, 2019). The results echo past findings that revealed that the public holds

police to a different standard depending on the race of the suspect that police officers interact with. Interestingly, however, the media users' positive attitudes toward Blacks when the victim is normative did not translate into a more critical stance against the police officer. Overall, unlike Smith and Merolla's study (2019), which found that valence framing impacts justification of police actions, this study found that readers regarded the police officer's behavior more acceptable when the victim was Black regardless of the visual delinquency frame.

In the reckoning of Martin's death, some media outlets have attempted to paint his killing in race-neutral terms, claiming that the shooter did not engage in racial profiling but rather profiled the hoodie. In other words, the victim's actions (choosing attire that signifies social delinquency) were supposedly to blame for the shooting (Nguyen, 2015). However, in this study, although delinquency framing impacted stereotyping and intergroup feelings, ultimately, it was the victim's race that was used to justify the police officer's deadly actions. While these findings did not support our hypothesis, they did uncover a troubling tendency to see the use of deadly force against a Black man, no matter how "normative" the victim may appear, as more understandable than shooting a White person. This finding suggests that the public victim-blaming discourse around the victim's attire is, as a matter of fact, used to disguise outright racial profiling.

From a theoretical standpoint, it is curious that the study participants appear to divorce stereotyping from justification of the shooting. However, it is possible that the effect of visual delinquency framing on perceptions of the altercation was obscured by a moderating variable. Experimental research specifically aims to demonstrate the effect of discrete message components in isolation from each other. Yet in actuality, multiple message features exercise their influence in tandem. While the current study specifically focused on visual frames, news messages are

composed of intertwined visual and verbal elements. Future research could look into the interplay of these multiple components. Conceivably, visual and verbal signifiers of delinquency have an additive effect on shooting justification (Powell, et al., 2015).

Another possible moderator that could obscure the effect of delinquency framing is past exposure to news coverage of police violence against Black men. The stimulus materials used in the current study to connote delinquency have been pilot tested to ensure that they do indeed manipulate news consumers' perception of the subject as more threatening and less normative. However, repeated media exposure (that presumably propagates the image of hip-hop culture as dangerous and threatening) chronically activates the notions of delinquency, race, and punitive measures. In turn, repeated activation strengthens the associations between these nodes and makes them more easily triggered in subsequent media exposure situations. Several studies have found, for example, that exposure to racial frames has a stronger effect on heavy news consumers (e.g., Dixon, 2006; Dixon & Azocar, 2007).

Unfortunately, we did not include a measure of past news exposure in this study. Even if we had, the study was not designed to test a four-way interaction between political leaning, past news exposure, and race and delinquency frames – an analysis that would require a much larger sample size with a sufficient number of individuals in each cell. In the current study, political ideology served as a control variable in all the analyses, and it was significantly associated with negative stereotypes ($F(1,141)=6.22, p < .05$), marginally associated with justification of the shooting ($F(1,141)=3.74, p = .056$) but not significantly related to the feeling thermometer ($F(1,141)=2.73, p = .10$). However, a bivariate analysis of the relationship between political ideology and these outcomes across all experimental conditions without controlling for other demographics reveals an effect on stereotypes and justification (both at $p < .01$). Participants that

identified themselves as liberal or highly liberal scored lower on stereotyping ($M=2.41$, $Sd=1.33$) and justification of the shooting ($M=3.30$, $Sd=1.09$) compared to conservative/highly conservative respondents ($M=3.26$, $Sd= 1.81$ and 3.84 , $Sd=1.10$ respectively). A similar, marginally significant trend, was found with respect to the feeling thermometer ($p = .06$). It is, therefore, worth investigating whether a combination of preexisting schemas (e.g., initial stereotype endorsement levels or political ideology) and chronic activation of the delinquency and race schema (i.e., prior media exposure) would moderate the effect of racial and delinquency frames examined in the current study.

Implications for Socially Responsible Journalism

The implications of this study's findings for socially responsible journalistic practices are complex. At first glance, it appears that journalists should be careful to avoid racially tainting race-neutral stories. Even when the races of the individuals in a story are not directly identified, racial imagery shapes people's perceptions of the event being covered. However, while this recommendation is important for fair news coverage of social issues unrelated to race, such as poverty and healthcare, this may not be the case for reporting on police brutality. Although there is a pressing need to address racial disparities in wealth distribution and access to health services, when the news story is about welfare and the healthcare systems overall, framing these issues as racial has a detrimental effect on public support for policy remedies (e.g., Domke, 2001; Tukachinsky et al., 2011). Conversely, it is arguable that police use of deadly force is an inherently racial issue. Thus, a color-blind approach could compromise efforts to promote awareness of and public discourse on systemic racism.

Moreover, when reporting on a particular instance of police use of deadly force, if a journalist wishes to include any imagery of the parties involved in the story, they will have no

choice but to incorporate racial cues. However, while journalists cannot choose the race of people pictured in association with a particular event, they do have a choice of *which* images to use. For example, CNN coverage of a Cincinnati police officer killing Samuel DuBose, an unarmed Black man, featured a mug shot of the victim, although it was utterly unrelated to the shooting (Cincinnati Enquirer, 2015). This choice can be very consequential for intergroup relationships, as suggested by the results of this study. The answer to the question of how news organizations can be more socially responsible in this process comes from a more citizen-generated, collaborative model of journalism. Robinson and Culver (2019) argued that in a quest for objectivity, journalists gravitate toward sources that represent the elites – those who are more educated and hold credentials, establishment officials, and other figures that represent the White, male, privileged perspective. Journalists admit that it is difficult for them to find new sources, particularly sources that represent diverse perspectives of people of color. Consequently, journalists fall back on the same roster of sources, limiting the range of voices they represent in their reporting. Thus, Robinson and Culver (2019) have urged journalists to build trust and nurture meaningful partnerships with their communities, offering community members an opportunity to contribute their authentic voices to news reporting. In the case of police violence, for example, this could be done by including the victim's family in the process of constructing the visual frame of the person killed by law enforcement. The study results also highlight the need for journalists and editors to constantly question their decision-making processes and remain mindful of possible implicit and explicit biases in their choice of imagery. On a systemic level, it can be beneficial to diversify newsrooms, thus naturally expanding the diversity of perspectives incorporated in the frame-building process, increasing cultural sensitivity, and providing news

organizations with access to community-based sources that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study makes an important contribution to the understanding of framing effects of imagery on perceptions of events depicted in news stories and attitudes toward corresponding racial groups. However, unfortunately, the study did not include a measure of support for social policies that could be impacted by these beliefs. It would be valuable to replicate the current study's results and extend them by examining whether perceptions of police officers' actions and attitudes toward Blacks (that were attenuated by the visual frames) then translate into support for defunding police, racial bias training in law enforcement, or harsher punitive actions against police violence.

Moreover, while it is extremely important to understand how the general public perceives police violence against "outgroups" (in this case, Blacks), it is also imperative to learn more about how individuals process, respond to, and cope with media representations of mistreatment of their own group. Relatively fewer studies are focused on such ingroup-representation effects. However, such representations can have profound effects on how individuals relate to their group, and possibly to the dominant racial group (e.g., Tukachinsky, et al., 2017). A replication of the current study using a sample of Black media users could offer important insights into how news coverage of pressing social issues facilitates intergroup relationships from an ethnic minority's perspective.

It is also imperative to replicate the study using other stimuli. Like many experimental studies in the field, the current investigation is limited to one particular set of stimuli. Although these manipulation materials were rigorously pilot tested to ensure that they would elicit the

intended appraisals of delinquency/normalcy, it is important to generalize the results of the study to other images to ensure that the findings are not idiosyncratic to this particular operationalization. For example, other, non-stereotypically Black markers of delinquency (e.g., drinking) could be compared to stereotype-consistent ones (e.g., violence).

Finally, data for this project were collected prior to the massive social protests that swamped the nation following the highly publicized incident of police brutality that resulted in the death of George Floyd. News reporters expressed cautioned optimism that these protests might be more impactful than the ones that preceded them, involving more support among Whites (Harmon & Tavernise, 2020) and leading to tangible policy changes (Noor, 2020). It would be interesting to see to what extent these events left a measurable impact on the public's sensitivity to more news involving police violence against Blacks. Thus, while the current study builds on the existing literature on framing, adding further nuance to the understanding of the importance of visual frames in news coverage, it also points to a need for further exploration of these timely and socially significant questions.

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Figure 1

Estimated means of (a) evaluation of African Americans, (b) feeling of warmth towards African Americans, and (c) justification of law enforcement use of lethal force.



